

# Karen Kunc: Sensory Source

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Karen Kunc: Sensory Source  
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In spring's upheaval, when green sprouts shoot up between the composting leaves of seasons past, it seems fitting to welcome the regenerative art of Karen Kunc, the Nebraska-based printmaker whose work celebrates nature and its cycles of wonder. Kunc, who is regarded internationally as an inspired experimenter and consummate practitioner of an admittedly archaic art form, was bestowed recently in Kansas City, Missouri, with the Printmaker Emeritus Award from the Southern Graphics Council, a true honor among her peers; a companion exhibition surveying her work was on view at the Leedy Voulkos Art Center. Further north in Omaha, the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts offered a sharply focused show of the artist's recent endeavors with the horizontal format in *Karen Kunc: Sensory Source*.

Kunc's particular passion has been for the art of the color reduction woodcut. It is a risky method in which a block is cut, inked, printed and cut again, until the composition is achieved. There is no turning back and little chance to edit in a way that is inherent in more traditional printmaking, where color and image are layered through the superimposition of separate blocks. Hers is a process pregnant with metaphor — of creation through erosion, of compositions that blossom to life.

That Kunc finds inspiration in the natural world is evident in every artwork. Over the course of her career, she has invented a vast array of ciphers, marks, and symbols that stylize the earth we see — trees, rivers, fences and furrows — and suggest the forces we can't — current, gale, gravity and growth. Whether her prints coalesce as bold statements or subdued evocations, Kunc finds a way to express the magic and manipulation that are a part of our cultural relationship to nature.

Kunc's woodcuts have always displayed a purposeful tension between inherent properties of this medium and a desire to push the object beyond a reading as woodcut to one of print or, more simply, artwork. She exploits the grain and texture, the rough cut marks and gouges of woodcut vocabulary, yet counterbalances them with soft edges and bleeds of color that evolve from her inking techniques. Though the paper support is essential to her expression, she often tries to escape the "tyranny of the

rectangle" by printing on shaped paper, giving the works an enhanced object quality and greater emphasis on relationships between edges and internal forms.

In the Bemis exhibition, another dichotomy becomes clear — between the independent artwork and the historical framework of the woodcut as a vehicle for narrative exposition. (Bemis drives this point home further by twinning Kunc's show with that of additive printmaker Endi Poskovic, whose vivid, graphic woodcuts construct purposeful ambiguities between image and language.) The show's fourteen prints are all horizontal, some in a more conventional 2:1 aspect ratio. Many are made as narrow panoramas, however, that stretch beyond the wide-screen or letterboxing formats that are quietly transforming our daily viewing habits. They can be taken in as single compositions, but their scope and detail test our peripheral vision and need to be examined closely and read in segments as their imagery unfolds. Her shaped images or papers (or both) in stepped progression encourage this type of engagement. We are also reminded that Kunc has long been producing artist's books with a strong sculptural presence, whether made of carved, inked blocks or accordion-folded papers. In these new prints, she translates onto the wall the experience of the books — of an intimate relationship with the viewer marked by time.

This expansive sensibility is inherent in the many ambitious prints in the show. In a work such as the sunny *Treasure Trove*, a terraced form creates an extended vista under which is secreted a cache of linear and biomorphic shapes that appear to morph and divide — life within structure. It can be construed as an aerial view of earth and water or a stratified cross-section of geologic and biological activity. Its warm colors and pulsating areas of feathered and striated ink add to the sense of developing growth.

Both *Prayer Flags* and *Inner Sanctum* offer blocks of imagery that telescope in size from left to right. *Prayer Flags* is the most literal of these, showing in alternating squares of red and green the outlined image of a twig. As the title indicates, Kunc references Tibetan prayer flags — colored cloths imprinted with symbolic Buddhist designs, prayers and invocations; hung outdoors, they

are thought to carry their wishes off in the breeze. The varied twigs function as a kind of ecological sign language; given our complicated relationship with nature, a wish to the winds is the least signal we might send. *Inner Sanctum* is dominated more by geometric shapes and linear patterns. In a late fall palette of subdued tones, rectangles of black and white create a tapestry landscape designed, perhaps, by platted land, plowed fields, garden patches, homesteads and outbuildings, windows and doorways. Here, each section exists as a self-sufficient unit and functions dynamically as a cumulative view.

Kunc's cyclical flirtations with other print media are also in evidence in this show. She has approached etching, lithography, screenprinting and intaglio before, sometimes as a solitary medium, sometimes in a mix. Each provides a unique kind of line and surface quality as well as the luxury of a reusable matrix, which her reductive approach does not. In works such as *Wand*, Kunc adds etching to woodcut to create fine linear motifs and mottled background textures, and polishes it off with screenprinting to enhance the effect of white dots floating across the surface. Characteristic of her seamless approach to mixed media, it is difficult to discern where one technique ends and the next begins. *Galaxy Wide*, however, is entirely etching in which a certain nervous precision of line and effects of ink help radiate tension across the surface. On the right side of the composition, a spiraling galaxy of matter and energy is reinforced by crisp, embossed edges created by the deep bite of the copper plate. Counterbalanced by the sunny red orb on the left, this little cosmos seems safe from falling into the black hole at its center — at least for now.

Just as reading into Kunc's ciphered world of nature is key to appreciating her art, it is equally important to step back and enjoy the artist's gift for abstract expression. Her compositions reveal an elegant cohesion of opposites: of the organic and synthetic, stasis and motion, robustness and delicacy, deliberation and improvisation. They are visually complex and conceptually enlivening and always offer some new surprises. Whether your view of earth is fly-over or drive-through, you may never see it quite the same way again. •