

ART REVIEW

Printing layers of beauty

UA students learn how woodcuts, ink transform paper into works of art

By Dorothy Shinn

Beacon Journal art and architecture critic

Last week, University of Akron Myers School of Art printmaking students got an extraordinary treat: being able to work with master printmaker Karen Kunc and publish an edition of her color prints.

They were inking her 21-by-29-inch carved plywood blocks and matching the marks on the back of the delicate paper with the marks on the board, so the print was always properly aligned throughout the multiple iterations of plate and ink.

Kunc's work can be seen at the school's Emily Davis Gallery through March 1.

But UA students have received a much more intimate appreciation of her work. They were mastering the many steps of making a multicolored print, each of which is crucial:

- Inking the rollers so that only the right amount of ink adheres to each area of Kunc's birch plywood blocks - too much and it's goopy and doesn't make a crisp impression or reveal the fine grain of the wood, too little and there are soft spots and gaps.

- Handling Kunc's favored tissue-thin mulberry paper so that in one smooth and graceful movement, it's picked up, turned facedown toward the woodblock plate and tipped to the top where the guide marks are located, then carefully, smoothly laid onto the plate.

- Carefully taping each edge of the paper to the plate so it doesn't move when going through the press.

- Printing the image by sandwiching the plate between the felt mat and the Plexiglas top board so just the right amount of pressure is brought to bear by the rollers of the press - too much and the paper will be pressed into the empty spaces, too little and the impression will be uneven.

- Lifting the paper from the plate in one smooth motion, laying it on a stack of drying prints, cleaning the Plexiglas, and starting all over again.

Tacked on the wall outside the printmaking studio are the various stages of this particular print, mute testament of the rigor and discipline to which the students have learned to adhere.

Color printing is all about rigor and discipline, but it's also layering - how to make one layer work with another to make a cohesive whole.

Of course, it can be much more complex than that, and Kunc's work is an object lesson in just how complex that process can be.

When they are finished, Kunc and her assistants - printmaking, drawing and painting students and faculty - will have made a multicolored reduction relief print in an edition of 20.

They will, of course, have printed more than that, and they'll choose the 20 best prints. It's all part of the process.

It sounds daunting, but to people who like to challenge themselves with details, who revel in complexity, who love solving puzzles and combining several disciplines, methodologies and techniques into one coherent whole - and who work well with others - it's nirvana.

Kunc, who was a Myers Artist in Residence Feb. 4-8, is one of the most prolific and influential artists in contemporary printmaking, and no wonder.

She is a professor of art at the

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, where she teaches printmaking, papermaking and book arts, and her works are in public and private collections at home and abroad, including the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, among others.

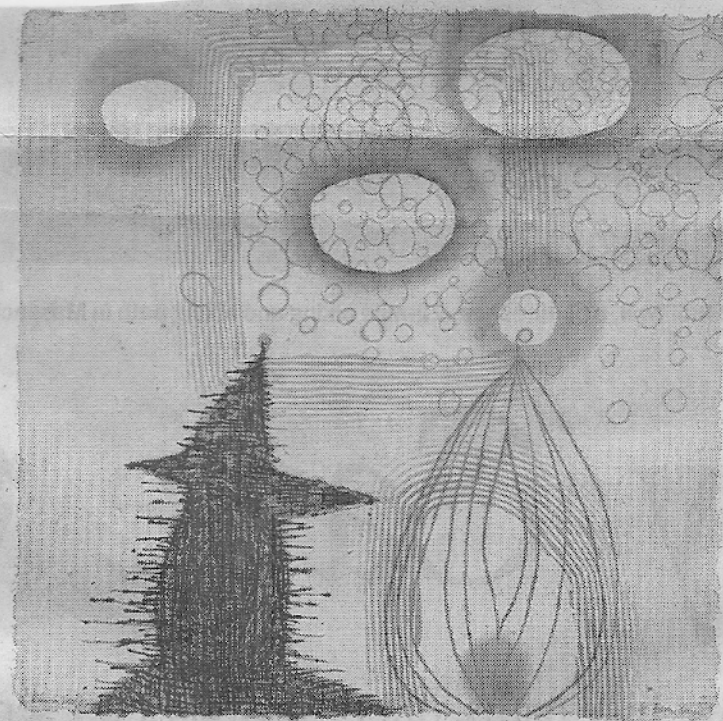
She has been a visiting artist at more than 100 institutions around the globe. And she draws her influences from a variety of sources, but largely from what she finds around her and through her ever-quickenening and wide-ranging imagination.

She has perfected a means of printing images that flow, not only in their own design, but within the structure of the paper on which they're printed, so that her work is often not quadratic - neither square nor rectangular, as are most of the prints we're used to seeing - but can look like flowing water, as in *Starry Wave* (2005), the first image in her exhibit at the Emily Davis Gallery.

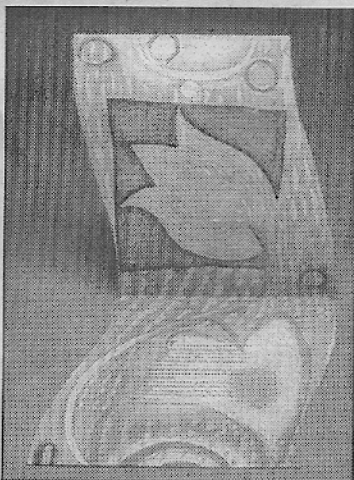
They can also look like telescoped images, thrusting out and shrinking as they shoot forward onto ever-diminishing paper supports, as in the woodcuts *Prayer Flags* (2005) and *Lover's Knot* (2005).

Kunc's prints are exhibited without frames so the viewer is able to see every detail. "I show them unframed as often as I can, actually," Kunc said. "The surfaces are so beautiful, and it's not hidden behind a framing structure."

The printmaker combines several techniques in some of her images, adding embossing and etched images to the already multilayered woodblock imagery. And in one notable series, she has added beeswax to the mix, so that the mulberry paper becomes



Blown Seeds (2003) is an etching and woodcut by Karen Kunc.



Karen Kunc uses a complex process to create her prints. This one is called **Offering Time**.

translucent, allowing the layers of patterns to show through more strongly.

Rich with texture

Although her compositions can often seem spare, they aren't minimalist by any means. There's so much detail, so much texture and surface, that viewers find themselves moving ever closer until they are totally immersed in the images.

"There's a lot of minimalism still out there, and a lot of cold art," Kunc said while walking through her show. "I can't make cold art. There's energy and movement and light." And, did I mention, complexity?

"I'm certainly not perfect," Kunc said, grinning. "I'm even using a process that doesn't let you be that perfect."

But it does alert viewers to the fine details of Kunc's prints and attune themselves to very minute differences.

Kunc pointed out one woodcut, *Luminous Wonders*, (2006) in which the outer edge of a series of concentric ovals has a tiny notch taken out of the leading edge. It's irregularities like this that she relishes, a sensibility that's close to Japanese Tea Taste, which dotes on unique details and irregularities on which participants meditate and

Details

Show: Karen Kunc: Prints.

When: Opens Thursday, runs through March 4. Hours: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mondays through Saturdays, until 9 p.m. Wednesdays and Thursdays.

Where: Emily Davis Gallery, University of Akron, 150 E. Exchange St., Akron.

Information: 330-972-5951.

comment.

Kunc's works also encourage meditation. When you first walk into the gallery, the images seem small and scattered, hardly large enough to fill up the wall space on which they're hung. However, by the time a visitor has looked at a couple of these masterfully printed images, the overall size is no longer a consideration.

Kunc plays with a variety of techniques to draw us into her work. She often combines ink that's embedded into the paper with ink that sits on top of the paper, so that there's both interior and surface patterning and texture, both deep and shallow space, all combined on one sheet of paper.

She also specializes in creating gorgeous artist's books, sometimes for an existing written work, sometimes created separately, with Kunc then spending months looking for a work that goes with her images.

Such was the case with *Evocations*, which she created in 2004.

"I actually had all the images and the printing done and needed a text for it," Kunc said. "I searched and searched and searched until I found this."

The text is a translation of a poem by a Sufi master named Hafez, the supreme lyric poet of the Persian language in the 14th century. And it fits perfectly.

Much the same can be said of Kunc's images, which are often pieced together from sundry parts, yet in the end, the fit is more than right; they are - despite the planned and unplanned imperfections - perfect.

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