

KRIS WILTON

## Rethinking the Contemporary Print

When is a print more than just a print? When it's a Catherine Kernan. Kernan's works on paper—large, painterly, multilayered representations of trees and water, abstracted yet not abstract—defy not only expectations but also easy categorization, occupying a space somewhere between print, watercolor, and action art.

The Somerville-based artist prints each work in layers, using multiple plates or blocks—sometimes in a straightforward manner, sometimes by rotating or reversing them, and sometimes to create a “ghost,” an image that results when a plate has already been used and only a trace of ink remains.

“You don't immediately think ‘print,’” says Kernan, a lithe, earthy fifty-something with a softly graying ponytail and enviable physical energy, on a recent studio visit. “First you look at what it is, and then you think, ‘How was it made?’”

The images themselves derive from plein air sketches Kernan has made on her frequent travels around the world, which she abstracts and, these days, carves mostly into wood, using implements ranging from sleek Japanese

hand tools to power chisels. When it comes to the printing, Kernan says, “My technical training is in multi-plate etching, so I bring a lot of that knowledge to what I do—registering things, thinking in dimensions, layering things, right and left reversals.”

“[Kernan] has built up an astounding technical command and knowledge, to the point where instead of being imprisoned by it, she has been liberated by it,” says Sinclair Hitchings, the former keeper of prints at the Boston Public Library and a vocal supporter of local artists. “She's not school of this, school of that, follower of so-and-so. She's herself. She's carved out a position of great individuality.”

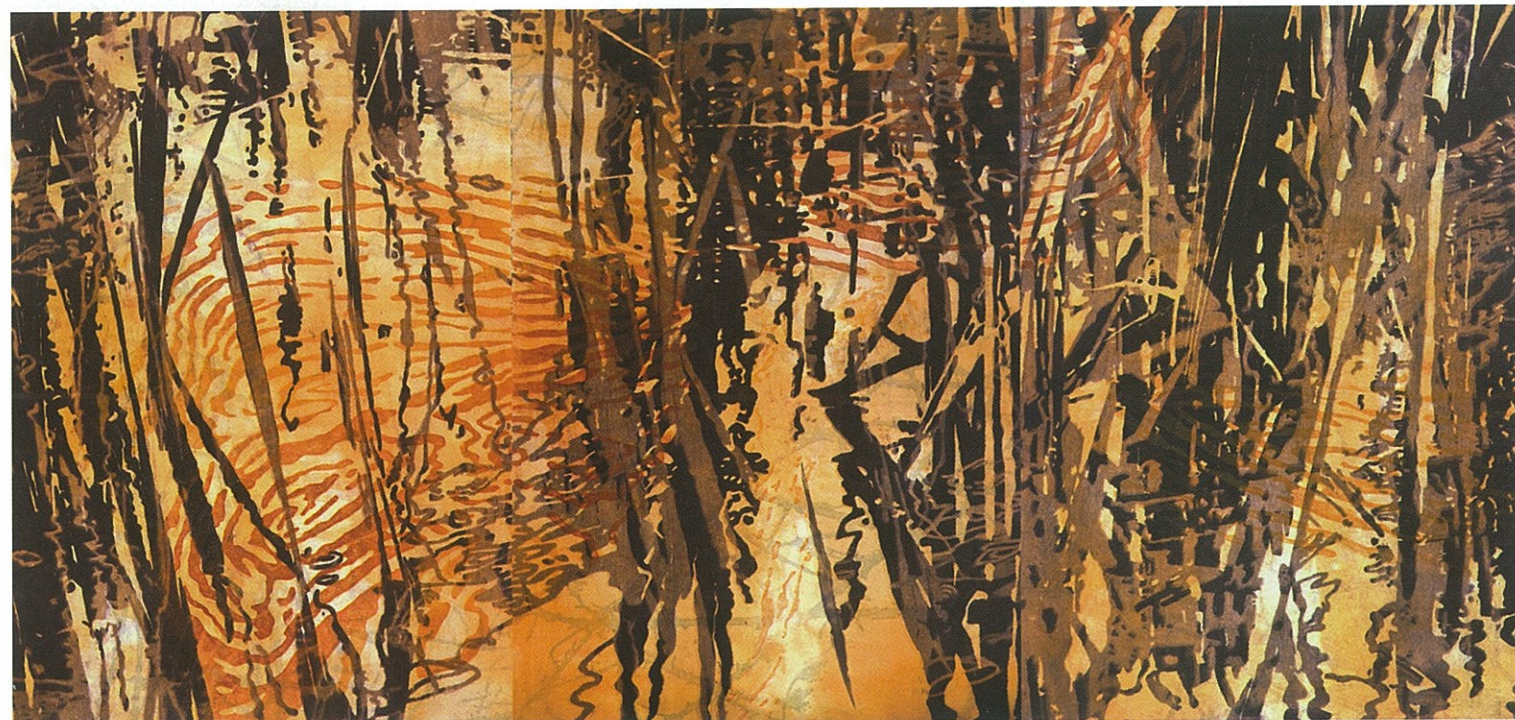
Kernan moved to Cambridge in 1981, when Jane Goldman, a friend from her MFA program at the University of Wisconsin, invited her to join Artist's Proof, a cooperative printmaking studio. “I knew I didn't want to go through the rat race of applying for teaching jobs right away,” says Kernan, who had just graduated. “I wanted to see if I could survive on my own as an artist.”

Although she has made her way into countless exhibitions, fellowships, and public and private collections, and has representation in

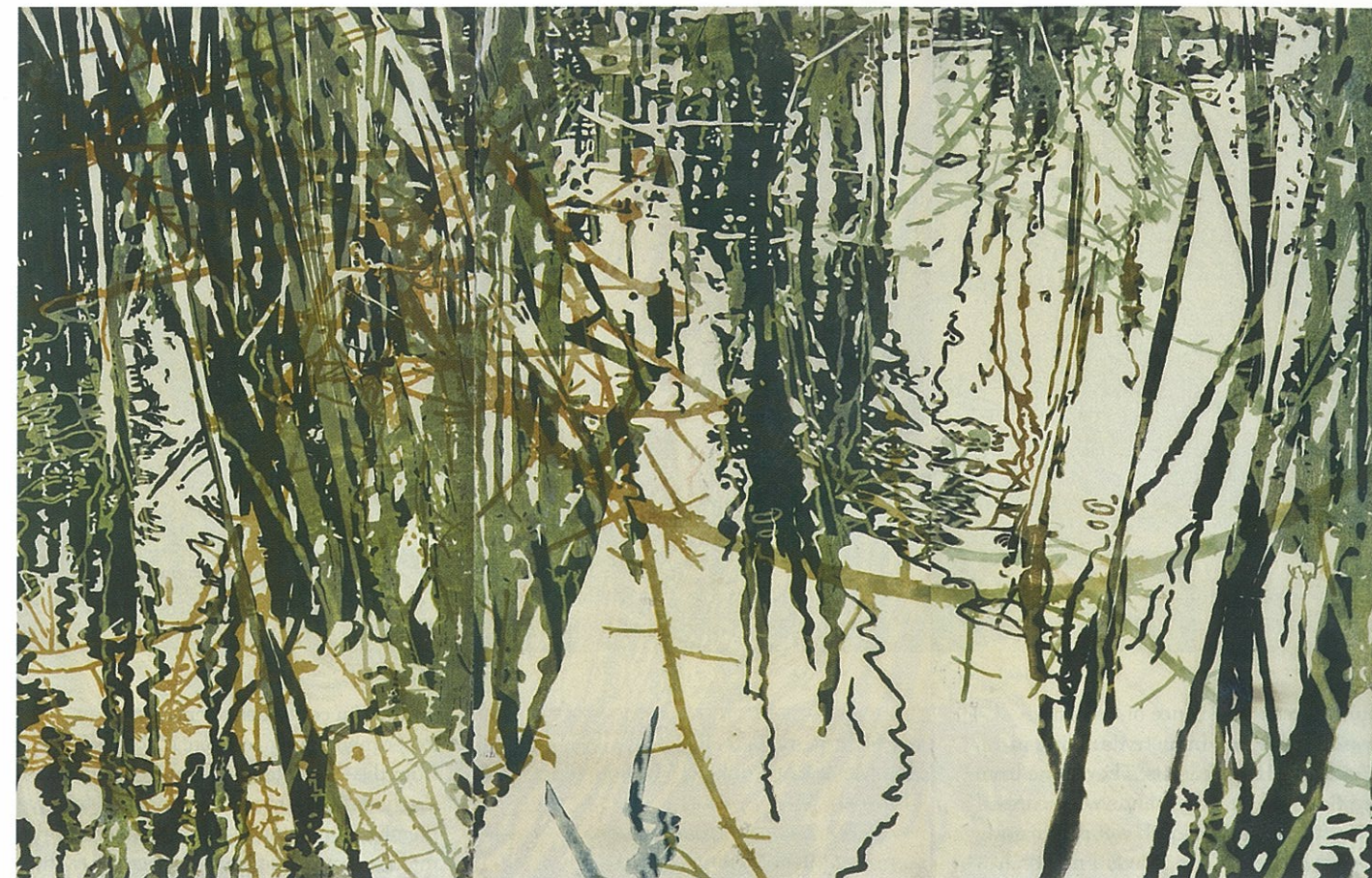
Boston, New York, and elsewhere, Kernan's survival owes much to working collaboratively as well. After several years with Artist's Proof, she and Goldman gut-renovated a large building in Somerville in 1986, forming their own cooperative and print studio.

Mixit Print Studio rivals the local art schools' facilities with three presses, including a magnificent nineteenth-century French-American model that Kernan bought from her friend Aldo Crommelynck, Picasso's late printer. “There are very, very few of them in this country,” Kernan says. “It's my baby.” In addition, Mixit has light-exposure setup and etching facilities. Kernan calls herself the “systems engineer,” having built much of it herself.

The facilities, which occupy about half of the ground floor, are rented to up to three experienced artists at a time. Upstairs are seven live-work spaces, including Kernan's and Goldman's. Kernan's space is dominated by her studio, lined with a workbench, shelves of plastic-wrapped sketchbooks, and flat files. The studio opens to a roof garden and living space boasting Kernan's work, and in the kitchen, the cabinets are



Catherine Kernan, *Splicing Shadows*, 2010, woodcut monoprint, Akua water-based inks on Hahnmuhle copperplate, 42 x 89".



Catherine Kernan, *Suspension*, 2010, woodcut monoprint, Akua waterbased inks on Seichosen paper, 55 x 90".

fronted by glass that Kernan etched with her own water motifs.

Although she would gladly spend every day in the studio, Kernan spends two days a week serving as interim director for the new Maud Morgan Arts, a modestly sized community arts center in Cambridge. Devoted to the late abstract expressionist, the center, which opened in October after a decade of legal battles with neighbors, offers intimate painting, printing, clay, figure drawing, and other art classes for children and adults. “The studios are small, so it's the equivalent of a master class, four to six people,” Kernan says.

With her own work, Kernan has become more experimental than ever. “In her recent series, she's taking more risks, and the results are both exquisitely beautiful and edgier,” says Frank Roselli, owner of Soprafina Gallery in Boston's SoWa District, which represents Kernan and mounted a show of her recent work in October.

Central to these pieces is perhaps Kernan's most innovative technique, which involves ink-

ing one block, and then, rather than pressing its image into paper, pressing it onto another carved block. Where the two touch, paint is transferred from one to the other, giving each a composite of positives and negatives. When printed, the effect is something like sunshine dappling through a thick canopy of leaves onto a friend's face, or the way light flickers and undulates on unstill water: moving, beautiful, and hard to capture. The finished images evoke moving through a thicket by a stream, topography, or even, when executed in reds and blues, the demographic maps so ubiquitous around election time.

The scale of the recent works, which measure nearly five by eight feet (sometimes on multiple sheets), are made more manageable with the use of soy-based Akua Inks, which Kernan has been instrumental in developing, giving the manufacturers constant feedback and even appearing in a DVD about them (to be released in February).

The movement toward more experimen-

tal—and unpredictable—techniques, Kernan says, resulted from her increasing realization that there's really very little in life that we can control. Rather than aiming for the precision, she invites peccadilloes. “I don't think there is such a thing as perfection,” she says.

Kernan's new approach—in her art and life—rings of the Buddhist path to enlightenment, and in fact, when asked if she's happier, she says, “I don't think happy is correct. I feel like I'm less outside the art and more inside it. [Before] there was a satisfaction in achieving something that I'd set out to achieve, but now I'm getting nourished more by the things that I see and catch and find and that appear in front of me. The trick is to see them—not to predict them, but to see them when they appear.”

Kris Wilton is a freelance writer and editor based in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Her writing has appeared in *Modern Painters*, *Art+Auction*, *ARTnews*, *Emerging Photographer*, *Slate*, and *the Village Voice*, among other publications.