

KARIN SCHMINKE

Dynamic Tension

BY BARBARA SMITH

While interviewing renowned mixed-media artist Karin Schminke, she used the word “tension” more than once to describe her work. For her, the tension is between abstraction and realism, like a tension created by the geometric precision of the panels and the tactile-layered textures in one of her pieces of art.

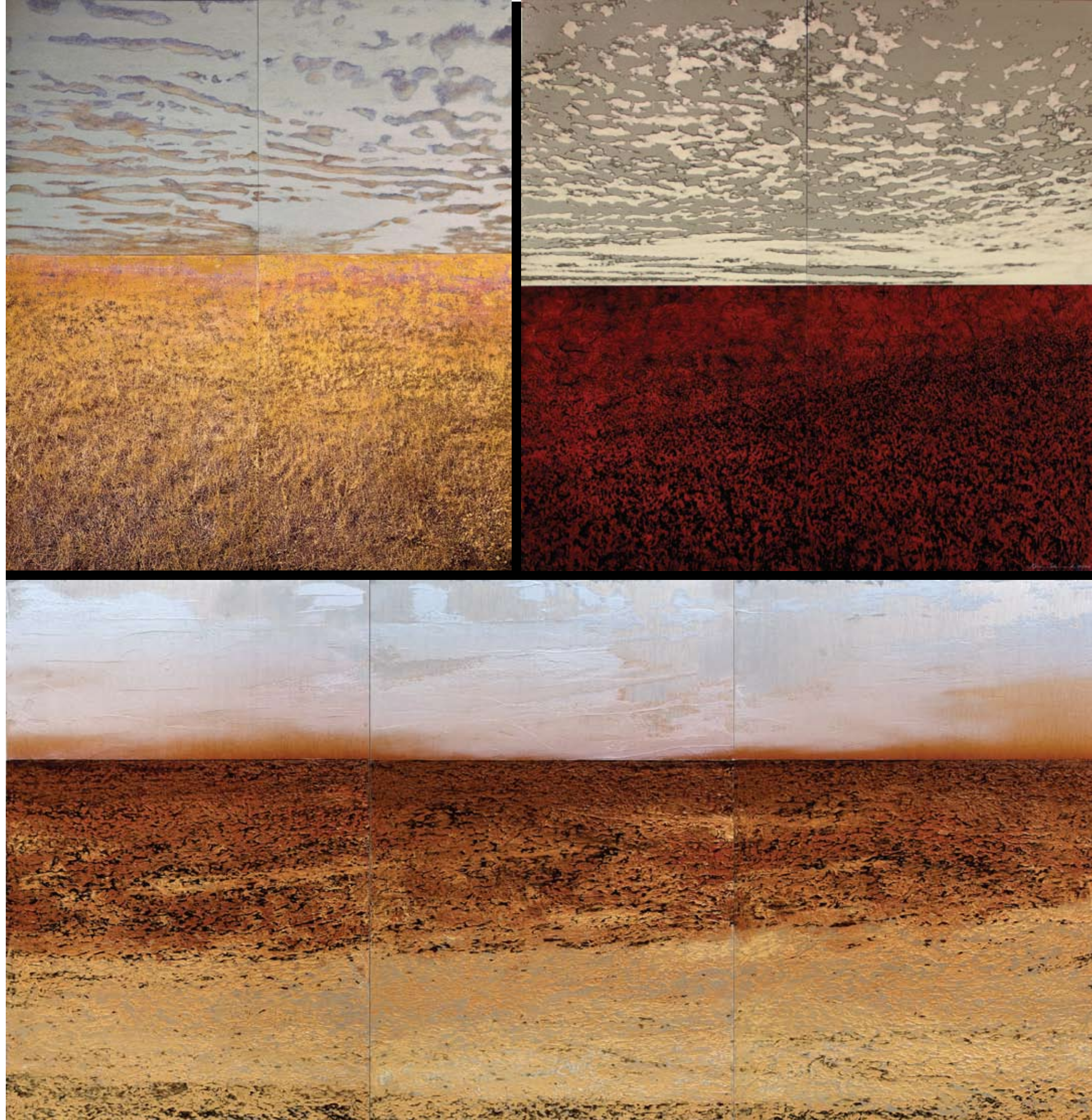
Always the art student, I, myself, sought a deeper understanding of the diction. Tension in art is a balance maintained between opposing forces or elements—a controlled dramatic quality to keep the brain interested and active. In photography, it might be an overt or studied mechanism for keeping the eye moving; in Schminke’s work it is a subtle, yet dynamic undercurrent.

The concept was intensified when I unwrapped the stunning example Karin provided me with, entitled “Four Square.” It arrived in a 25x25-inch box, yet was light enough for me to carry. Inside, layers of corrugated cardboard and bubble wrap protected four highly textured and richly colored lightweight aluminum panels.

Assembling them as instructed, I was first more fascinated by the process that pro-

duced the delicate detail—the tactile surface and the reflective luminosity—than I was by the image itself. To be honest, I couldn’t really see an image until I stepped back. And then, very much like viewing an Impressionist painting, where dots and daubs miraculously form an evocative portrait or landscape, suddenly I saw the “open space.” Not such an image, but the natural landscape and structured geometry suggestive of Midwestern farmland. And then the “A-ha!” moment struck when I experienced the tension inherent in the juxtaposition of near and far; moving back and forth between a closer look, and one farther away, each mesmerizing in its own right.

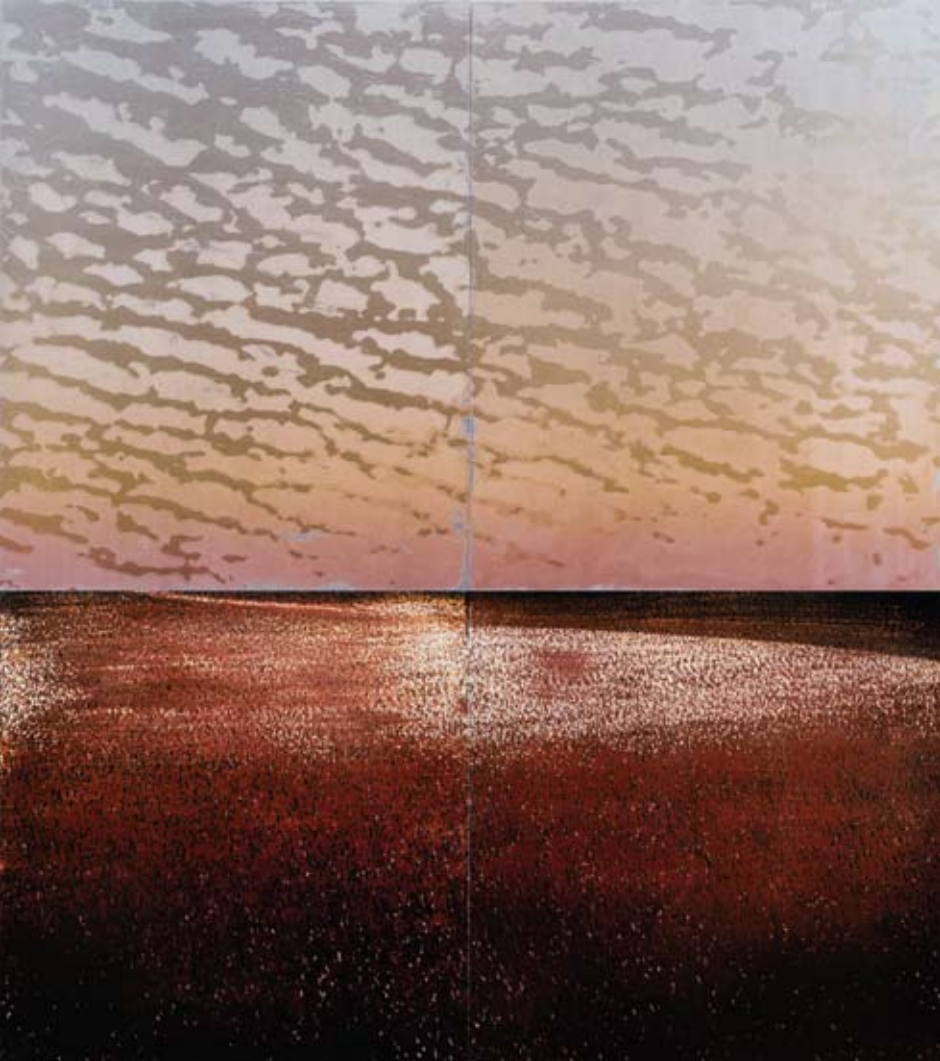
Schminke did indeed grow up on a farm in the Midwest, and the landscape is a major influence on her art. For her it’s an integration of organic form and geometry. The geometry is more obvious in some of her work than others, but in her *Open Space* series, each piece is four or more panels that physically divide the space. They create a partitioning akin to the rows of a field, or a structure.



Top left: “Fairview” – 36 x 32-in. Pigment ink, papers and acrylics on aluminum panel.

Top right: “Four Square” – 36 x 36-in. Pigment ink, paper and acrylic on aluminum panel.

Right: “Marble Rock” – 24 x 48-in. Pigment ink and acrylics on aluminum panel.



Left: "Everly Evening" – 36 x 32-in. Pigment ink and acrylics on aluminum panel.

Below left: "Evening Blues" – 36 x 32-in. Pigment ink, papers and acrylics on aluminum panel.

Below: Study for "Open Space 1" – 18 x 12-in. Pigment ink and acrylics on aluminum panel.

Right: "Strait View" – 36 x 36-in. Pigment ink, rice paper and acrylics on aluminum panel.

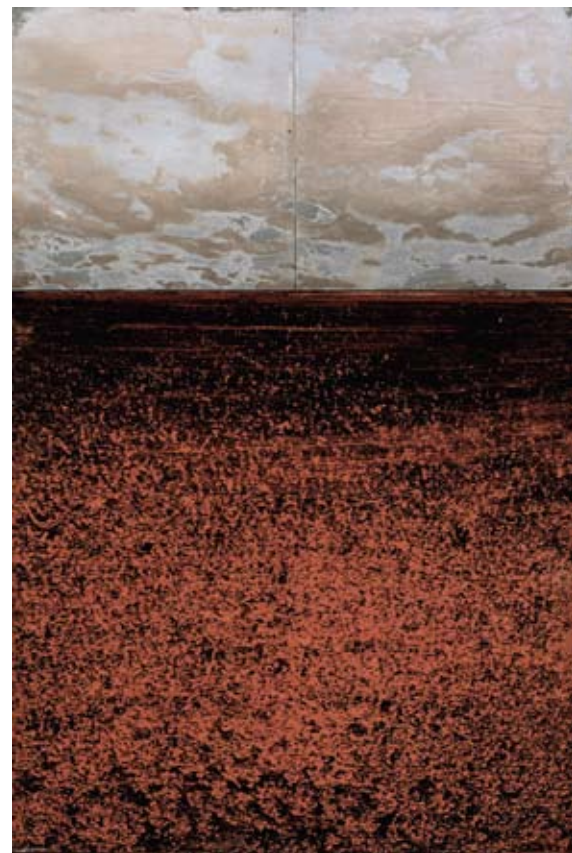
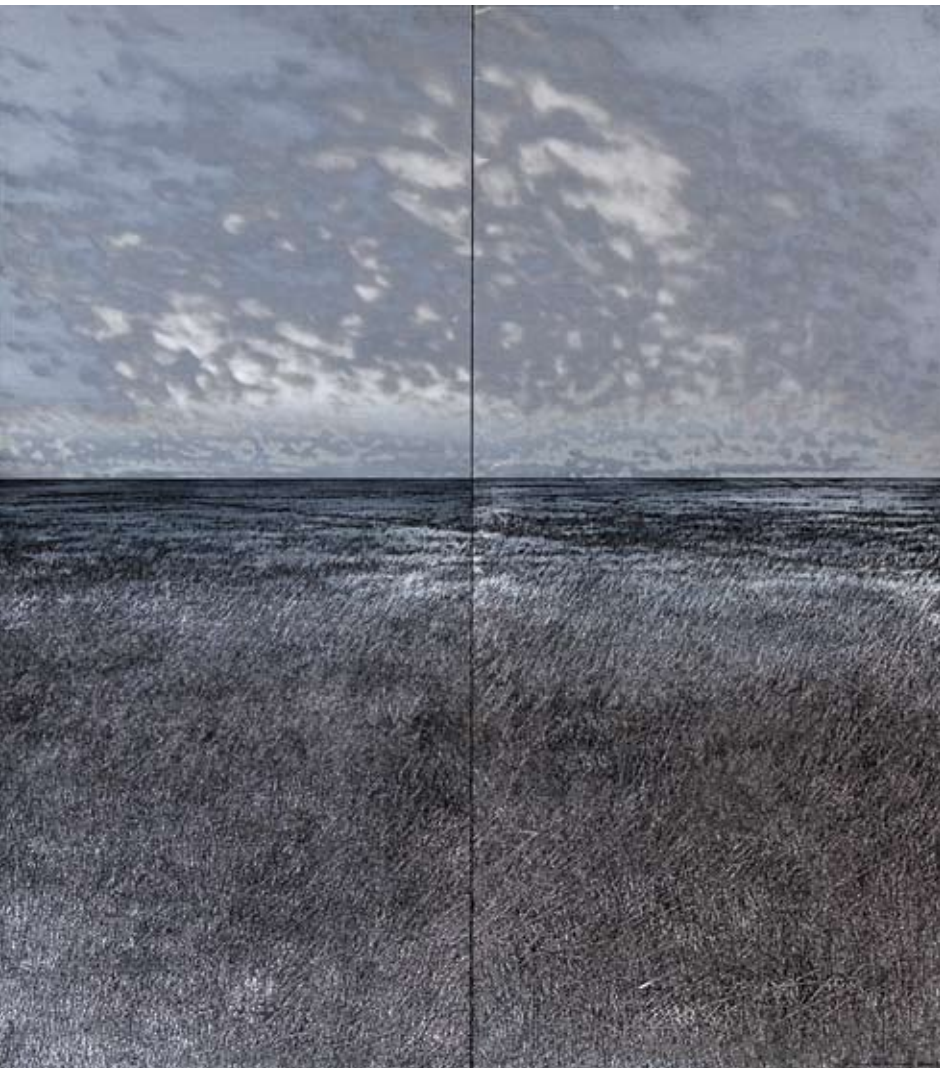
As Karin explains, "Geometry means 'measure of the earth.'" The ancients studied geometry looking for evidence of God in nature, and this resonates for her as she finds the ordering of nature fascinating, almost an oxymoron, since "nature seems so rambunctious," she says. All her work is nature-based.

Although her photographs of clouds, fields and water are fairly representative and straightforward in this particular series, Karin typically uses her photos as source material, more like ideas and elements, as opposed to finished pieces. Close-ups of textural images both small and large will become part of a contrived landscape of her own making, as she finds the tension between abstraction and realism she wants. Even a photographed texture or pattern creates the authority of realism; she uses a variety of tools and media to nudge it toward the ambiguity she prefers for a more potent image.

Tools of Creation

Schminke processes each of her pieces differently, using scanners, Photoshop, a laser etcher, large-format printers and other tools in unconventional ways.

Her source materials vary from digital photos, drawings, prints and scans—and sometimes she uses a scanner like a big camera, setting plant forms on it or textures, or maybe even a failed print. Most of her compositional work is done in Photoshop. Images are con-



structed and sometimes deconstructed and then put back together in multiple layers (often 20 or more), incorporating various opacities, blending modes and layer properties. Colors are created and/or tweaked. A master file is generated for inkjet printing and/or laser registration purposes. Photos may be converted to bitmap images to be sent to a laser engraver.

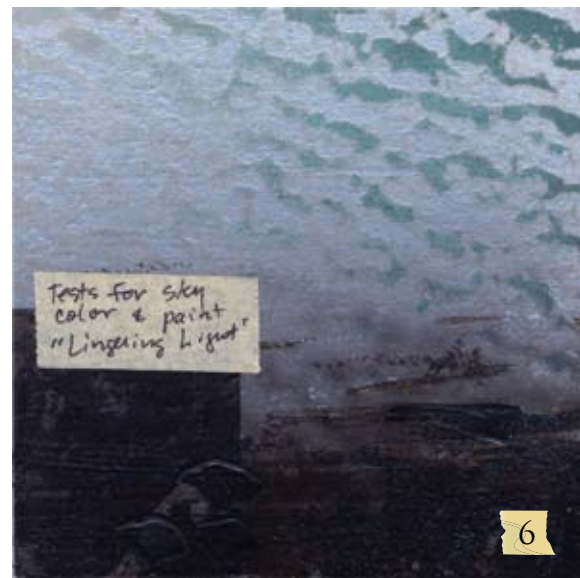
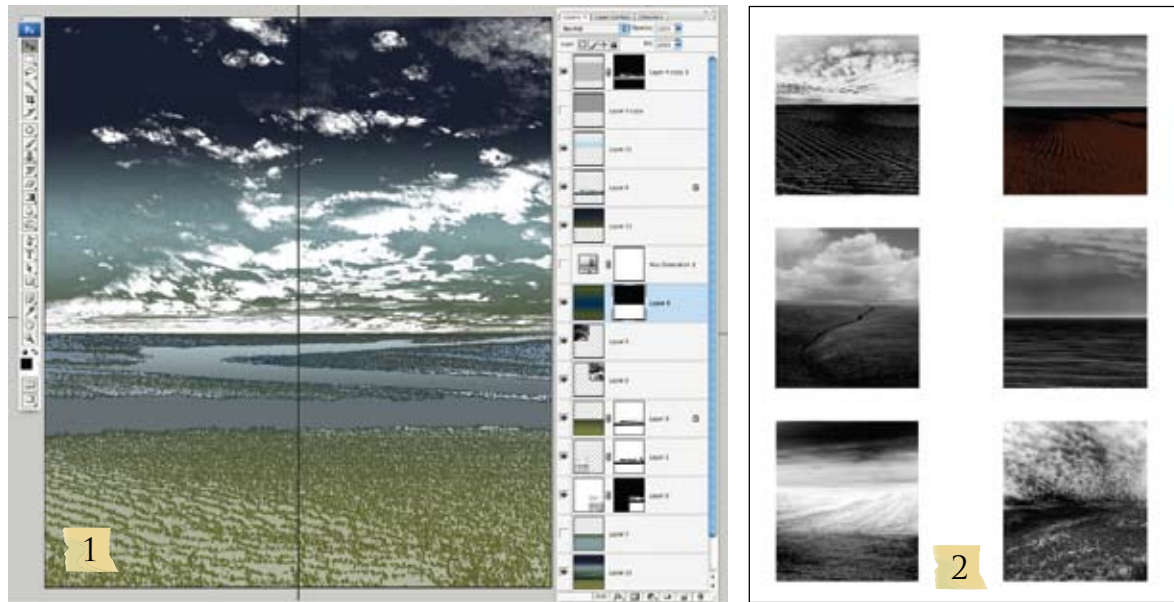
For output, Karin uses an Epson Stylus Pro 9600 or HP Z3200 inkjet printer. One of her many processes may include a paper print adhered to aluminum and then

laser engraved with a Universal Laser, resulting in aluminum showing through. As another technique, Schminke might apply an inkjet pre-coat and print on top of the etched paper. (She uses the same pre-coat to prepare other materials like acrylic paints for inkjet printing.) Other times she prints directly on the metal, in which case a pre-coat enables the pigment ink to stick to the metal, whereas pigment ink is the primary medium.

She'll often add acrylic paint for texture, color and form to create physicality

without losing and actually enhancing, the reflective luminosity of the metal. This in turn yields an additional element that changes during the day with the light, sometimes reflecting brightly, changing color or disappearing altogether.

After printing, the image is very vulnerable until it is varnished with a mineral spirit-based varnish like Golden MSA varnish. Several coats of varnish add a sense of depth, of looking not only at, but also through. Now looking at this body of work as a whole, seeing the con-



1. Each piece involves multiple studies, versions, panels and Photoshop layers.
2. Rough photo sketches, which became the starting point for the "Open Spaces" series.
3. Original color source photo before etching.
4. Printed bitmap image being etched on a Universal Laser.
5. Close-up of an 8x8-in. test for "Whites."
6. Close-up of a 6x6-in. test for "Lingering Light."



Above: "Whites" – 32x40-in. Pigment ink, paper and acrylics on aluminum panel.
Right: "Verdant Vista" – 36x32-in. Pigment ink, papers, watercolor and acrylics on aluminum panel.

trast between earth and sky, the interplay of light and color, we can see Schminke's artistic intention in tension.

Upcoming Shows

Along with Bonny Lhotka and Dorothy Krause (both subjects of previous *AfterCapture* articles), Karin Schminke is a founding member of the Digital Atelier and co-author of the groundbreaking book, *Digital Art Studio: Techniques for Combining Inkjet Printing with Traditional Art Materials*, (2004, Watson-Guption).

Her work has been exhibited



throughout the world and been covered by dozens of magazines. She is a frequent lecturer on the blending of traditional and digital media and lives in Seattle, WA.

Their show *Portals: The Dimensional Imagery of Digital Atelier*, will run May 15–July 17, 2011, in conjunction with the Boston Cyberarts Festival 2011 at the Art Complex Museum in Duxbury, MA. Visit Schminke's Web site at www.schminke.com. CC

Barbara Smith is an innovative photographer/author/instructor. Her books, The Art & Craft of Keepsake Photography and Baby Face were published by Watson-Guption. She teaches both personal and online video workshops. To learn more about her work, please visit www.bsmithphotography.com.