

Karin Schminke

Interview conducted by Eileen Fritsch, a freelance journalist and former magazine editor who has been reporting on the adoption of digital imaging by artists, photographers, designers and printing companies since 1994.

Karin Schminke, **Five Danaidea**, 1996. Color digital print, acrylics and photo emulsion exposed with inkjet-printed acetate negatives, on paper, 44 x 30.5".

Original print for subscribers:

Karin Schminke, **Trio**, 2009. Color pigment ink digital print from hand drawn and painted elements, 7 x 5.6". Printed by the artist.

★ Special thanks to Legion Paper for the donation of Moenkopi Unryu, a traditional Japanese washi of mulberry and hemp fibers, precoated for inkjet printing.

Karin Schminke is an internationally known artist whose work can be found in hundreds of corporate and museum collections, including the Smithsonian American Art Museum. She grew up on a farm in Iowa, received her MFA from the University of Iowa in 1979, and was an associate professor of art at several colleges and universities, including the University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire and California State University Northridge. In 1994, she moved to the Pacific Northwest and retired from teaching to focus full-time on creating art. That same year, she attended a workshop where she met two fellow artists who would greatly affect her career: Dorothy Simpson Krause of Marshfield Hills, Massachusetts and Bonny Pierce Lhotka of Boulder, Colorado. Together they formed the **Digital Atelier** and started experimenting with ways to combine traditional studio and media techniques with emerging digital imaging technologies. As a member of the **Digital Atelier**, Karin Schminke has influenced the development and acceptance of digital printmaking methods by leading countless demonstrations, presentations and workshops at galleries and conferences and providing consultations to global manufacturers of digital printing equipment.



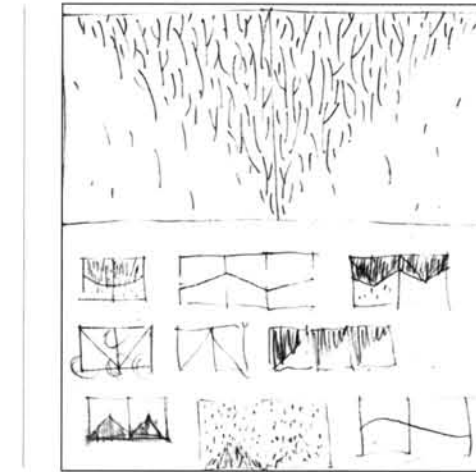
On the surface, my art suggests common themes of harmony with nature and a reverence for natural beauty. But I also hope to draw the viewer beyond the role of passive observer into an experience that echoes aspects of our relationship with nature. Time spent in contemplation of natural textures, forms and colors connects us to something beyond ourselves. I strive to capture that experience in my art. I hope the art I create helps people connect to the spiritual and meditative aspects of the natural world.

In 1997, the **Digital Atelier** and fellow artists Judith Moncrief and Helen Golden introduced digital printmaking to American museums as artists-in-residence at the Smithsonian American Art Museum; their "Digital Atelier: A Printmaking Studio for the 21st Century" received a Smithsonian/Computerworld Technology in the Arts Award.

The next year, the artists traveled to Michigan for a residency at Herman Miller, Inc., and to North Carolina where they introduced digital transfers to Harvey Littleton Studios. In 2001, they demonstrated digital printmaking techniques at the Brooklyn Museum of Art's 27th Print National, **Digital: Printmaking Now**. In 2004, the artists collaborated on a book, **Digital Art Studio: Techniques for Combining Inkjet Printing with Traditional Art Materials**. Since 2004, the American Print Alliance has circulated an exhibition of work related to the book.

Sometimes work begins with a small study sketch and develops in an orderly fashion to the finished artwork, as for *Valley Veil*. But just as often it is created out of a number of my source materials, more like working on a collage. The source materials consist of my own drawings, monoprints, photographs and found objects that are scanned and organized into a digital database. Working this way frees me to devote days to drawing and printmaking without much regard to a final result. I find those days to be creatively very liberating.

Whatever the inspiration, I always work digitally to compose my final images from the source materials. I usually combine various traditional and digital techniques to produce the work, making this a fairly complex and lengthy part of the process. Before I consider any artwork finished, it has to have what I call "magic" — a rather undefined quality that would be the equivalent of a person having "soul."



Walk us through the steps involved in the development of a typical piece.

Karin Schminke, **Sketch studies for Valley Veil**, 2005. Graphite on paper, 6 x 6". See the completed print on page 5.

Yes, I am aware of the irony of using modern digital technologies to express timeless responses to the natural world. But artists always reflect their era in both ideas and techniques. Digital technology is a powerful tool in many fields and can be used for many ends, both for good and bad purpose. The best course of action for me is to use the most advanced tools to stimulate an enhanced appreciation for nature.

More than 20 years ago, I recognized that digital printing technologies were going to be very powerful and enable artists to do things that could never have been done before. Because of my early enthusiasm about the possibilities of utilizing digital tools with traditional art materials and methods, and the research done as part of the Digital Atelier, I was able to get access to new technologies as they were being developed.

Being among the first to have access to these tools has been exciting. It required bringing a spirit of adventure to the task and doing lots of experimentation. And of course there were many unexpected results and failures of technique. That helped me become more of a risk-taker in my work.

Access to wide-format printing has encouraged me to explore a wider range of sizes in my work. Additionally, working digitally has been a great way to expand my understanding of color theory and develop more sophisticated color palettes.

Other influences are more incremental. For example, for the past year I have been working with a CO₂ laser from Universal Laser Systems. The possibilities for integrating it into my studio seem endless. Yet I think the art created by integrating laser cutting or engraving is not significantly different than work produced without those techniques. I see this tool as giving me more options to achieve the same ends, rather than pushing my art in a substantially different direction. This is especially true as I use a rich mix of media to produce each piece.

Do you see any irony in the fact that you use high-tech tools to explore the primal elements of nature?

How has your art been influenced by the consulting work you have done for digital-printing equipment manufacturers?

Throughout this remarkable, trailblazing journey on the frontiers of digital printmaking, Karin Schminke has remained true to her artistic vision. Her art reflects the richness of her diverse life experiences. View her galleries at www.schminke.com.

I notice your work has been migrating away from photography in recent years.

I have always loved to draw, but early on in my digital explorations drawing took a secondary role to photography as it was such a natural partner for digital imaging. Now that has reversed. Improvements in print quality facilitated this, but the impetus came from my art.

This change began in 2003 with the *Natural Harmonics* series. I was unable to capture the imagery I envisioned for this work photographically, so I turned to creating ink and color pencil drawings. I printed on Arches Cover Black in this series, lightening the center of the print with white pigments so the spaces within the plant form glow and vibrate with life.

Drawings and monoprints are now the starting points for most of my work. I like the immediacy of the media and the way they communicate directly to the viewer. I also feel drawing-based media help me move beyond the pictorial elements to explore more interesting and complex expressionist concepts.

I have always had a strong affinity for paper and my early work reflects this. My first art to find an audience was created in my own handmade paper. A few years later, my early explorations in digital tools incorporated photography with the textural surfaces of Japanese papers.

In what other ways has your "mix" of media evolved over the years?

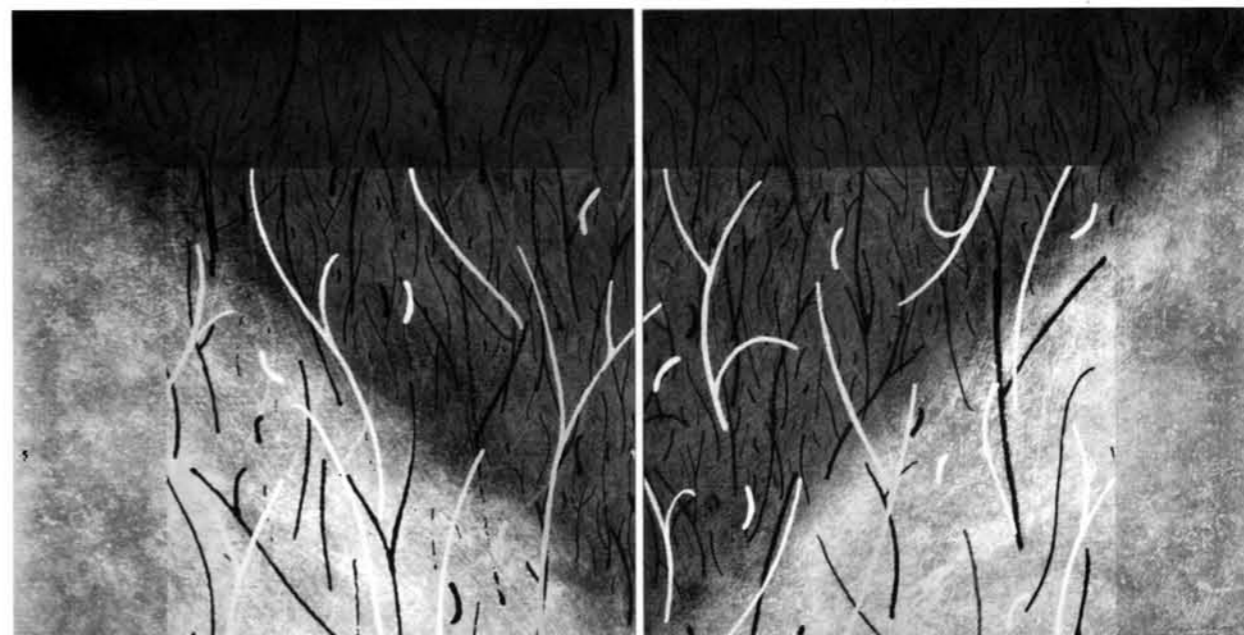


Karin Schminke, *Magic*, 2003. Color pigment ink and white inkjet precoat on black paper, 30 x 22". From the *Natural Harmonics* series.

Karin Schminke, *Fragments: Ridge*, 1997. Color pigment ink, acrylics and digital transfer on paper, 30 x 22".



When I started printing on a wide format inkjet printer in 1995, I created strongly patterned surfaces with rich visual textures. In work such as *Fragments: Ridge*, I began to layer imagery printed on my large printers with acrylic paint and textured papers to create what I called "sandwich prints" that relied on a synergy between the visual and actual textures. The *Fragments* series explored combinations of skeletal, patterned and textural forms — the fragments — gathered in drawings and photos, reflecting my impression of a place, form or time.



Over time, the actual textures of the work became as important as the visual textures. I didn't like the way framing under glass negated the physicality of the surfaces of the sandwich prints. I began to explore the use of panels for presentation. At first I just applied works on paper to a panel in lieu of framing, but then the Digital Atelier's on-going technical research pointed to a new approach.

About five years ago Dot, Bonny and I did experimental printing on large flat-bed digital printers with UV (ultraviolet) cured ink. UV-cured ink allows printing on unprepared and non-porous surfaces up to several inches thick. For that project, I printed on a material called Dibond, a metal laminate with a solid polyethylene core usually used in architectural applications. This led me to printing on metal panels.

Until I started experimenting with the UV printer, I never would have thought to print on metal — especially with my nature-based subject matter. But it was an eye-opening experience. The metallic surface added a sense of preciousness to the content that resonated with my environmental concerns. It brought to mind Byzantine art which often used gold to signal a spiritual subject. In *Valley Veil 1* for example, grays turned into silver and pewter, and browns into bronze on the brushed aluminum surface — giving the whole image a sense of the mystical.

In addition, the metal helps illuminate the art in a natural way. The art looks different in the morning than it does at noon or night because of the way metal responds to changing ambient light. For example, the top quarter of *Equinox* is mostly exposed aluminum, while the center spiral has a ground of textured white paint and the bottom is rusted metal. Light interacts with each section in a different way as it responds to the environment in which it is hung. Colors change, textures come and go. The metaphysical becomes united with the physical. Since those UV printer experiments I continue to use aluminum as my substrate of choice for almost all of my work. As a bonus, it is a recyclable product, and also aluminum's light weight reduces the environmental impact and financial costs of shipping my — often large — panels around the country.

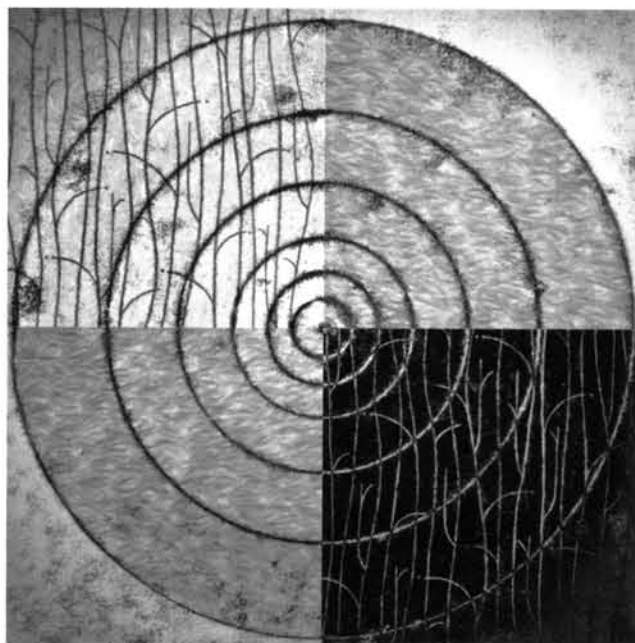
So experimenting with one major component of printmaking, the ink, dramatically changed your ideas about the support and surface for printmaking, from paper to metal?

Karin Schminke, *Valley Veil 1*, 2005. Color UV-cured ink printed on brushed silver aluminum panel (Dibond), 24 x 48" diptych.

Besides the physical/metaphysical thread throughout your work, I also see interplay between geometric and organic forms. What role does geometry play in your work?

Karin Schminke, **Water Garden**, 2007. Color pigment ink, Japanese paper, monoprints and acrylics on aluminum panel, 30 x 30".

Karin Schminke, **Equinox**, 2006. Color pigment ink, acrylics and rust on aluminum panels, 48 x 24" diptych.



Yes, the dichotomy of organic and geometric form has been a theme in much of my art. This may be a reflection of my "natal landscape." I have come to believe that we all are imprinted by the landscape we grew up with, and the shapes and forms of those landscapes touch something very basic and primal in us throughout our lives. So I feel that my interest in integrating geometric form into my art comes from a visual impression of fences and roads superimposed on the fields and woods of my childhood.

Early on I began to divide my drawings into panels to create diptychs or triptychs. I still appreciate the way the divided image takes on new meanings. Space becomes flattened, emphasizing the more abstract qualities of the subject. The panels begin to suggest shifts in time and perspective, and at times can become almost narrative.

The geometry found in my work can be strong and obvious, or soft and suggested. In some work, the organic and geometric are presented as polar opposites. At other times, geometry represents consciousness and intent in the natural world. A good example of this is *Water Garden*, where geometry represents human influence on natural elements.



Tell me more about your most recent work, the *Open Space* and *Herbarium* series.

During a recent remodel, I found myself with very little room to work on my art, as we had to live in my studio. Often I spent all day in a five by five foot space and then slept in the same room. One day I placed some pre-painted aluminum panels on the floor in a random arrangement. They had a strange pull on me. It took about a day to see I was reading them as deep and open space. Shortly after that, I found myself

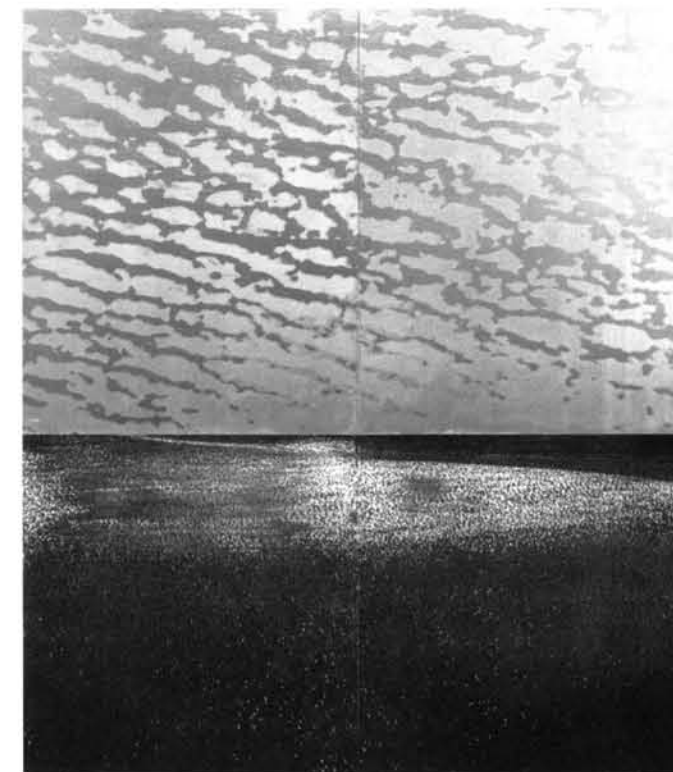
on a car trip across Iowa in very early spring and the landscape of my home state echoed the space in the panels. That led to work such as *Everly Evening*, one of the first I created for the *Open Space* series. It can be read as a memory piece or a "landscape recalled" from that road trip. Like most works in this series, it combines elements of both landscape and abstraction.

In opposition to the grand spaces of the *Open Space* series, I am also working on a series of intimate plant "portraits" in the *Herbarium* series. This group of work was inspired by an artist's book that reproduced selections from a historical *herbarium*, a collection of herbaceous plants that had been gathered over the course of 100 years and pressed dry to preserve. I found the strong positive/negative shape relationships of the plant arrangement on each page very compelling. Each plant in the herbarium conveyed a sense of suspended time. I decided to choose select plants and bring them back to life.

In a series of drawings, I combined elements of the herbarium page with details of the live plants found in research. In the end, this group of prints is as much about the space in which the forms exist as it is about the bold forms of the plants themselves.

It is really empowering to mix the digital tools into your process. In addition to new production options, these new tools are helpful in pre-visualization of outcomes and non-destructive editing. For example, it is easy to digitally try countless color combinations.

When it comes to producing your prints, these tools are amazing in the way that they expand an artist's options. To create work more complex than a plain inkjet print on paper, be prepared to experiment and test. But with all these new options, you must maintain focus on your aesthetic and conceptual goals. The key is to know when to stop experimenting and to master those techniques best suited to express your vision. ✨



Karin Schminke, **Columbine 2**, 2009. Laser engraving of color acrylics on aluminum panel, 20 x 16".

Karin Schminke, **Everly Evening**, 2009. Laser engraving of color acrylics, varnish and pigment ink on aluminum panel, 36 x 32".

What advice do you give to printmakers who want to follow in your footsteps and mix digital printmaking with traditional media?