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Art of Reflection

By: Nancy Geyer



Kumi Korf's exhibits are good-looking. On the opening night of Light & Color, at the Upstairs Gallery through June 3, Korf feared that her prints, now that they were behind glass and in handsome frames and expertly hung, would keep viewers at a distance. Undoubtedly, this was a case of the perfectionist worried about too much perfection (Korf attended to every detail of the presentation), but her musings also reveal something about the relationship she has with her art - tactile and immediate and anything but slick.

In fact, Korf's prints tend to pull you in. In "Blossomy," one of the smaller intaglios at the Upstairs, one finds oneself nose-close to the blossoming process itself. You can almost see the energy in an opening flower. As for the larger works on akatogashi paper - "Water Lily Pond," for example, in which transparent water skims over pebbles - you might step back to take it all in, but you're never far from the water's luminous surface. "Surface" might be the wrong word: these works seem to eliminate such boundaries.

An artist of uncommon versatility, Korf, whose works are collected and exhibited internationally, was born in Tokyo in 1937. She earned an undergraduate degree in architecture in Japan and a graduate degree in printmaking at Cornell University. She has designed houses (her West Hill home is a modern structure inspired by Japanese farmhouses) and far more intimate spaces such as the entrance alcove and reception area at August Moon Spa, the rock garden outside her front door and her numerous artists' books.

For the last decade, she has focused on making intaglio prints - nature-inspired abstractions that communicate color and gesture and form with a simplified vocabulary.

"The memory of seeing something is very important to me," says Korf, as we sit facing the woods surrounding her home. She and her husband Richard, now a Cornell professor emeritus of mycology, raised four children here (they met in Japan, where he was a Fulbright research professor, in the late 1950s). She is explaining that she rarely works before an actual landscape but "maybe from a sketchbook in my head." No plein air artist, Korf is a habitu  of her studio.

If Korf makes preliminary drawings, she often prefers to forget them by the time she starts etching a copper plate. On a trip to Vermont, for example, she sketched some tree branches that were casting shadows across a barn roof. Several months after returning home, she broke the branches up into "letters," and the resulting prints - "Letters in VT, Blue" and "Letters in VT, Red," both in the current show - look like texts written in her free-form calligraphic style.

Korf's calligraphic gestures, particularly in the Vermont prints, are reminiscent of her earliest markings. Before she was old enough to write, she "emulated" her mother's letters to some young men who were deployed to China, parts of which were under Japanese occupation. The soldiers responded to both versions enthusiastically.

In 1944 to 1945 Korf's family had to leave Tokyo for the countryside in Nagano prefecture, where she made watercolors from stream water and crude pigments that she extracted from grass and from rubbing stones together - yellow with yellow, brown with brown. The area was mountainous and beautiful, and it cultivated her responses to nature, she says.

Korf has said that her observation of, and abstraction from, nature is "undeniably tinted with Japan," but warns that this can be misleading. Her work is not about a particular place but comes from an accumulation of experience and impression. "There's no separation - local or Japanese," she says.

Likewise, there's a melding of artistic influences. Matisse comes up frequently - his colors and the simplicity of his lines. She also mentions the colors of local artist Gillian Pederson-Krag. And she runs into her home to retrieve a book about Hon'ami Koetsu, a celebrated early 17th-century Japanese artist whose calligraphy was prized for its elegance and fluidity.

So fluid are Korf's own lines that it's difficult to grasp that they are the result of etched metal and not the direct application of brush to paper. As Trumansburg painter Loretta Roome says, "The lines and shapes seem without weight...almost like light or shadow...There are lines so delicate, one can hardly believe they are not the work of a calligrapher's brush."

Korf used to feel that painting was "a faster way to get to where I wanted to go" (in fact, her MFA printmaking thesis consisted of paintings eight feet high and some small drawings, but not a single print). She still finds this notion appealing but says, of printmaking, "Once you get into this intermediary machine and the processes, there's a kind of surprise [when the paper is lifted off the plate] and I've become addicted to the surprise because that is just so wonderful."

The processes are many and diverse. By scratching a plate with a scrap of metal, Korf evoked the delicate filigree of ice as it begins to break up ("Thaw"). In a technique called "spit bite," acid is brushed onto the plate in a manner that yields variations in tone. In "Depth of Sea," this produced a blurry effect in which blues bleed into deeper blues, suggesting depth without the aid of scale or lines of perspective.

Last summer, Korf was working on some water images on akatogashi, a wisp-thin Japanese paper with a reddish tone that she uses without the stiff backing of European paper. "I probably was innocently thinking about Monet's pond or something," she laughs (and, in fact, several of these prints are of water lily ponds). She made some plates and was feeling influenced by the vibrant colors of the Fauves.

"But then I became aware that it was the 60th anniversary of the atom bomb," she says. "The river which goes through Hiroshima had lots of dead bodies floating, this is what I hear, because people jumped in to escape the heat, but it was not safe to do." And so another work became "Radiation River," the once-innocent vermilion now suggesting "extreme heat." It is, she says, a tribute to the victims, adding that "mass destruction is something to think about and worry about." (Her Upstairs show also includes several explorations of natural disasters such as twisters and hail.)

The evolution of "Radiation River" is typical of Korf's methods in that she doesn't allow preconceptions to get in the way of in-the-moment decision-making. Christa Wolf, a printer who has assisted Korf since 2000, explains that although "moods and ideas are prepared" in advance, "[Korf] hits for almost immediate results on the plate. She normally doesn't go and add more lines afterward." Nor does Korf title her pieces until they are completed, after she has had a "good conversation with my work."

Korf began to hire assistants about 15 years ago, after being diagnosed with lymphoma. She was worried about continued exposure to toxic materials, but she wonders now whether this might also have been a convenient excuse to loosen her "possessive" grip on her work by letting someone else in on the process - someone with a "willingness to participate in my crazy adventure," as she puts it, stopping short of using the word "collaborator."

Korf and Wolf, who was also a founder of the Ink Shop Printmaking Center and serves on its Board of Directors, describe their working relationship in very similar terms. In Wolf's words, "There's a back and forth of understanding, interpreting and almost mind-reading about what to do." She adds, "It's always been very exciting that I'm let in on Kumi's creative process. She puts in a lot of her resources and her spirit. She really goes for her goals and makes them happen."

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