

Overview



Mamma Andersson, *Mother's Day*, 2013. Color spit bite, sugar lift and soap ground aquatints. 29 $\frac{3}{4}$ -x-45 $\frac{3}{4}$ -inches on a 38 $\frac{3}{4}$ -x-53 $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch sheet. Edition 35. All images printed by Emily York.

MAMMA ANDERSSON

by Kathan Brown

"Art is a sort of experimental station in which one tries out living. One doesn't stop living when one is occupied making the art."—John Cage

"To make a concentrated feeling for something, you have to reduce it to the few small things that can tell a story. Then you can make your own history."—Mamma Andersson

John Cage was born in 1912; Karin "Mamma" Andersson was born in 1962. Cage, in his day, was a pioneer in dispensing with the idea that art is an expression of the individual self. Mamma Andersson's art appears to be personal. It is usually composed of scenes that resemble everyday life. Is her approach completely different from the one Cage advocated?

I e-mailed Karin to ask her about this. ("Mamma" is her professional name; she is normally called Karin.) "I agree that John and I are in one way very far from each other, but we are also from the same galaxy," she replied.

In the galaxy of people who focus on works of art, John's lens was wide-angle. He would start each work with a set of circumstances—almost any set would do—and (to quote Tom Marioni) "run it through his noodle machine" (John called it chance operations). The work then extended in unexpected ways.

Karin's lens is the opposite. It is so closely focused on "the few small things that can tell a story" that the surrounding context disappears. "You enter in, but there is no beginning, no middle, and no end," commented her gallerist, David Zwirner, who added that it's up to you to create your own narrative. If you spend time with a work of Andersson's, it's likely you will dis-



Mamma Andersson in the Crown Point studio working on *Mother's Day*, 2013.

cover in it a story personal to you. This is at least partly because her noodle machine is, as the art critic Kim Levin has written, “disruptive of time and space.”

“Disruptive of time and space” could also describe Cage’s art, though his disruption is different since his images are essentially abstract and they are expansive. Andersson presents, like many artists of her generation, semblances of real life, and although her works can be physically quite large (*Mother’s Day*, illustrated here, is a big etching) they do not seem to be expanding; each one contains a “small story,” a compression, a concentration.

Where does Karin get her stories? Are they from her experiences? Some of them are. The subject of the first print she began in her first project at Crown Point Press (2008) is a birch forest in snow, reminiscent of Northern Sweden where she grew up. “That’s a motif I can’t escape,” she told me. “It could be a long time ago, or today. Memory’s there.”

The memories she uses, however, are not necessarily her own, and perhaps this is at least partly why her art is adaptable to the stories of others. In her student days, she has said, “if I wanted to learn to paint, I had to engross myself in someone else’s work,” and throughout her career she has collected, and often used in her art, a variety of found images: reproductions of paintings or drawings by artists like Bonnard and Munch, photographs of ancient sculptures or of contemporary crime scenes, news clippings that catch her visual attention. She describes these images as “frozen moments.”

The first thing Karin did when she arrived in the Crown Point studio in mid-November, 2013, was unpack a portfolio labeled “Inspiration and Material for Crown Point Press.” She pulled from it a stack of papers including an old book page showing an open hand with symbols at its fingertips; some early Renaissance nudes; a landscape etching from Rembrandt’s time by Hercules Seghers; several Japanese prints; some soothsaying symbols; a couple of photos of wooden statues; a blurry photo image showing a young girl standing by a stone statue with trees behind; a nude caught in a film still as she looks into a mirror that has curtains at each side; and a couple of small drawings of female nudes. Karin neatly

pinned some of the material on the pin wall; the rest she spread out on a nearby worktable.

She began with the two small drawings, “old drawings,” she said, “They’ve been in my studio a long time.” She traced them onto small plates, and also copied a kimono-clad woman from a Japanese print onto a third plate; this she later abandoned. When we saw the first proofs of the two nudes, I thought them beautifully sensual. Karin darkened the images, adding a texture like wood grain—somehow the sensuality remained. She kept going back into these plates as she worked on two larger images over the next two weeks.

In the end, the small nude figures acquired fascinating backgrounds and became statues. They float in space standing on pedestals; one pedestal is lodged on a graceful table copied from a Japanese print. These little images, titled *Sundial* and *Tropic Circles*, are odd, yet touching. They have strength and also vulnerability, a defining combination in Mamma Andersson’s work.

I was in and out of the studio with my video camera for the entire time Karin was working—you can see an eight-minute condensation of my footage on our magical secrets website. She worked with painstaking care to achieve the delicate figure in the etching called *Saga*. She built the picture patiently, layer by layer. The lovely dark-haired woman is relaxed yet pensive, momentarily still, flanked by swaying curtains and protected by a strong wooden window frame. There is a suggestion of reflected landscape. She gazes at herself against the light; she is quietly alone.

In the monumental landscape called *Mother’s Day* you and I, observers, are the ones who are alone. We look from outside the frame into a deep, strong, gorgeous space. The only remotely human shape in the picture is a statue, standing on a high pedestal, outlined against dark trees by the glow of evening.

The feeling is something like the Seghers etching in Karin’s pile of clippings, but the trees, strongly lighted from behind, and the placement of the statue come from a black and white blurry photo with a young girl in the foreground. The girl is gone. It crosses my mind that I am in the picture instead; my own consciousness has replaced her. A mountain has been added. And the



Mamma Andersson, *Saga*, 2013. Color sugar lift and spit bite aquatints with soft ground etching and drypoint printed on gampi paper chine collé. 18¾-x-33¼-inches on a 27¾-x-41¼-inch sheet. Edition 30.

statue, originally stone, has the character of wood.

In the videotape you can see Karin drawing the first plate of the image. As she draws, she keeps looking up, referring to an enlarged ink jet printout of the trees, the young girl, and the statue. She is also seeing two small works of her own, proofs of the wood-stature prints, *Sundial* and *Tropic Circles*, which she has pinned below the printout. She is alert, standing, then sitting, drawing by stretching her body, her hand, and the brush, which she holds flexibly at the end farthest from the bristles.

Later, with the first proof on the wall, Karin is defining the statue. Her body is athletically balanced; she holds the brush handle at its center, a saucer of white etching ground in her other hand. Outside, it is dark—we are in the last hours of the last day before she flies home to Sweden. The small prints have been put away. Karin is referring to a book page lying on the big plate next to the statue she is drawing. The page shows two photos of historic pieces of wooden sculpture.

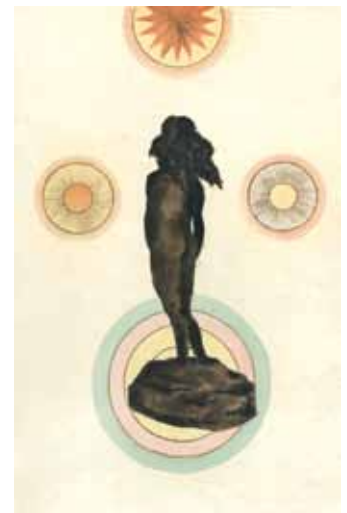
The image of the artist at work is electric, focused, pure—nothing can distract her. When I first played that bit of videotape, I heard in the back of my head a distinctive voice saying, “Now it’s time to spring into action!” And in my mind’s eye I saw John Cage, etching tool in hand, energetically approaching a plate in much the same way that Karin was doing.

Were you wondering why I started this discussion with a quote from Cage, placing him in conjunction with a woman artist fifty years his junior, residing on the other side of the globe, and working with figurative images? It is a stretch. But I’ve been lucky enough to see many disparate artists “spring into action” in the

studio, and I’ve come to realize that a capacity for full concentration connects the ones who are really good and know what they are doing.

Superficially, John Cage and Mamma Andersson are very different. But art is not superficial. The deeply human place from which it comes is available to everyone, and the best artists of every generation create a sense of that place in works that can be different on principle but similar in approach. “Trying out living” and “making your own history” do not rule one another out. Definitely, John Cage and Mamma Andersson are part of the same galaxy.

Visit crownpoint.com for prices and information, or phone Valerie Wade, (415) 974-6273.



Mamma Andersson, *Sundial* (left) and *Tropic Circles*, 2013. Color sugar lift and spit bite aquatints with hard ground and soft ground etching printed on gampi paper chine collé. Each 17-x-11-inches on a 24½-x-18-inch sheet. Edition 30.

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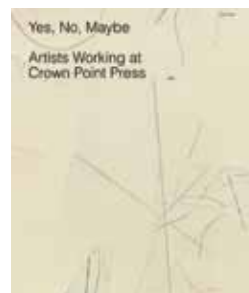
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For \$50 you can purchase both Kathan Brown's memoir, *Know That You Are Lucky*, and the National Gallery catalog, *Yes, No, Maybe: Artists Working at Crown Point Press*, a value of \$83. Visit our gallery, magical-secrets.com, or call us, (415) 974-6273.

ON OUR WEBSITE

Kathan Brown's new eight-minute video, *Mamma Andersson at Crown Point Press* is featured during March and April on magical-secrets.com, Crown Point's process-oriented website.

On this site you can also view other videos from the Crown Point studio, including *John Cage at Work, 1978-1992* (45 minutes) and *Richard Diebenkorn at Work, Two Weeks in January, 1986* (35 minutes). These two videos were presented together in a film program at the National Gallery of Art in conjunction with *Yes, No, Maybe*, our exhibition that closed in January 2014.

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This year, SGC International hosts its 42nd annual conference. It will be the first West Coast conference in the organization's history, and will take place in the San Francisco Bay Area. The SGCI will confer its Lifetime Achievement in Printmaking Award on Kathan Brown. The title Printmaker Emeritus will be awarded to artist Wayne Thiebaud. Kathan Brown will present a lecture, *Crown Point Press: An Insider's Perspective*, for those attending the conference.