

*Jason Edward Kaufman*

Patricia Olynyk is a master of drawing, printmaking, sculpture and collage. Her skills were honed during study of the traditional arts of Japan, but she is adept also at the latest technologies, from photomechanical reproduction to digital imaging. Seamlessly she knits together both timeworn and cutting-edge craftsmanship in mixed-media assemblages, collaged prints, and accordion books of exquisite elegance and refinement. They are beautiful handmade objects, and, moreover, they are suggestive of large ideas.

There is nothing inherently sad or sentimental about the skulls, seashells, and seed casings that inhabit Olynyk's pictorial world. But in her art, they become vehicles for the passage of time. They resonate with the poignancy of life's frailty and the futility of our striving to understand. She effects this transformation of the ordinary by mingling the naturalistic motifs with texts and illustrations excerpted from centuries-old scientific and mystical books, and by placing the various elements within a subdued nocturnal atmosphere that gives her compositions an elegiac patina such as one might expect on the dog-eared and yellowed pages of a well-thumbed bible or alchemical text.

Layering is the catalytic property of Olynyk's work. She collects images, then prints them onto handmade translucent papers, and collages the sheets onto various supports according to her sense of order. In some cases, she attaches an antique manmade object—a wooden shoe form, a wrought-iron rake. The resulting multi-level compositions commingle motifs in luminous aqueous depths. Hybrid forms emerge from the overlaps eliciting unanticipated associations and connections. The additive process creates not merely spatial stratification and depth, but a sense of time and growth. The superimposition of imagery and text functions as a metaphor for the way science, epistemology—indeed consciousness itself—builds on the foundations of what has come before. In this way, the process by which her images combine and blend in the mind's eye serves as a kind of visual correlative for the evolution of knowledge.

The imagery itself recapitulates phases of intellectual history. Her use of structural diagrams betrays a Renaissance predilection for the measurement of nature and man, and her precise ordering of that material calls to mind the Enlightenment penchant for systematizing the universe. But Olynyk also has a Romantic tendency to aestheticize science, to evoke a kind of scientific sublime. She appropriates the trappings of scientific knowledge, but discloses no special truth beyond their essential grandeur and mystery. In her visually sensuous realm, knowledge exists solely in the service of beauty. This is the wellspring of her Faustian enterprise: After millennia of searching for truth, do we know any better who we are, where we came from, or where we are going? Self-evidently, we do not. And Olynyk's art reflects this perennial condition. In her universe, the various forms and notations merge and hover in a sepia-toned dreamscape, inviting the viewer to cast a nostalgic eye on the obsolescent findings and primitive strivings of science. But finally, we are left with an enigma.

One of the many pleasures of Olynyk's work is its elucidation of harmonies of structure between nature and culture. On the one hand, her biomorphic motifs and her palette of blood red, earthy ocher, mineral gray and green locate the imagery within nature. Yet, on the other hand, her calibrating diagrams and texts reference human culture. It is the classic opposition of mind and matter. Olynyk points to correspondences—a labyrinth that echoes the shape of a shell, a tool that resembles a sea creature—which suggest that humankind and nature are indeed different aspects of a single continuous field. The cultivation of that field has brought Olynyk into contact in recent years with leading physicists, geneticists, and other searchers at the forefront of the so-called life sciences. Looming above their field is the question of spirituality. Olynyk is not a religious person, yet her works' submerged luminosity, their soft glow, suggests an immanence, a presence of larger forces shaping the universe, forces tantalizingly present, but as yet just out of reach.