

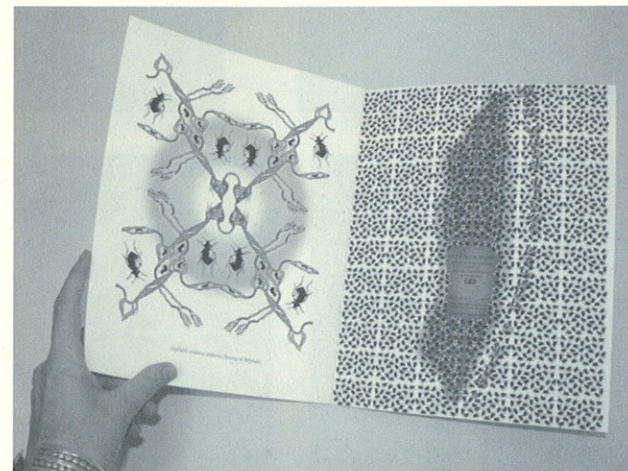
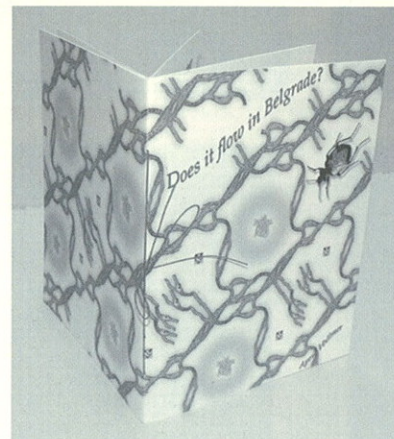
## Bridges, New York to Belgrade & Beyond

By April Vollmer

April Vollmer graduated from Hunter College, New York City, with a BA in 1975 and an MFA in 1983. She teaches Japanese woodblock at the Lower East Side Printshop and other print shops across the U.S., and has exhibited her prints internationally. She maintains an informative website at [www.aprilvollmer.com](http://www.aprilvollmer.com), which includes photographs from the Fine Arts Assembly in Višegrad (.../visegrad) and last year's exhibition in Belgrade (.../belgrade2008).

Biljana Vucović, [The bridge at Višegrad], 1999. Color etching, 9 x 12".

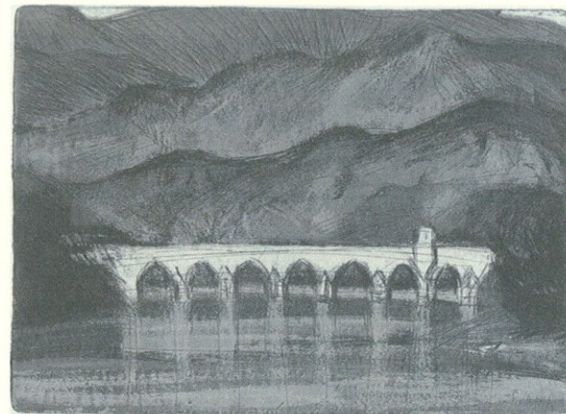
In May 2008, I exhibited my color woodblock prints at the Akademija Center for Graphic Art & Visual Research of the Faculty of Fine Art in Belgrade, the capital of Serbia. The show was the culmination of several exchange projects that began in 2000, and will doubtless result in further cross-cultural exchanges. The new woodblock I carved during the following three-week residency depicts a zova, the compound flower of the European elderberry. I also printed the new Zova block several times over to create a new print called *Network*, that shows the transformation made by multiplying connections.



### 8 + 8 Exchange, 2005

I first met Biljana Vuković in January 2000, when she and her student Jelena Jocić were invited as exchange artists to work at the Lower East Side Printshop in New York. Biljana and I traded prints during a studio visit. I gave her my print *Meander*, a woodcut fish with bold patterns, in return for her landscape etching of a white bridge between green mountains. We kept in touch by email, and in 2005 she contacted me to participate in an exchange project called *8 + 8, Belgrade — New York* with eight artists from each city. Each artist was to request specific photographs from an artist in the opposite city as a basis

April Vollmer, *Does it Flow in Belgrade?*, 2006. Artist's book: pigment ink digital prints, hand sewn, 11 x 8.5", 12 pages, edition of 25.



for new work to be included in an exhibition in Belgrade. The project was about bridging cultures, and was conceived after Belgrade's bridges were bombed by NATO in 1999. I made a book of digital prints titled *Does it Flow in Belgrade?* that incorporated photographs of insects from the Belgrade Museum of Natural History with river patterns from a map of Belgrade. The book suggested the similarity of the life and flow of Belgrade on the Danube with the life and flow of New York on the Hudson.

### 13th Annual Fine Arts Assembly, Višegrad, Bosnia, 2006

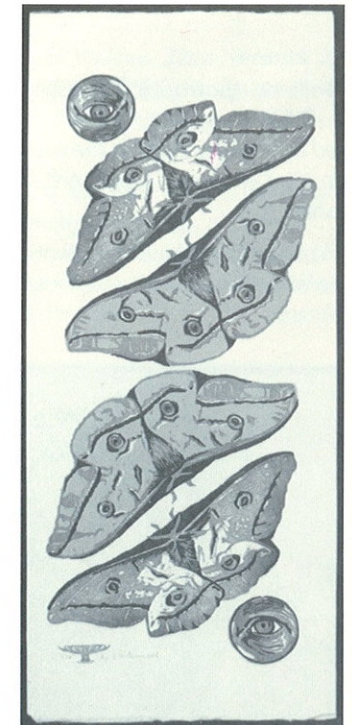
In 2006, Biljana invited me to accompany her on an artist retreat to Višegrad with a group of four other women printmakers. Višegrad is a small city a few hours southeast of Belgrade in Bosnia, which, like Serbia, is part of the former Yugoslavia. We were invited as the printmaking contingent within a larger group of mostly male Serbian painters. I flew to Belgrade a few days in advance to meet Biljana for the trip. The first thing she did was take me to the fortress-park Kalemegdan, which overlooks the confluence of the Danube and Sava, the rivers I had used in my book. I can confirm, it does indeed flow in Belgrade!

In preparation for my trip to Višegrad, I had read Ivo Andrić's 1945 *The Bridge on the Drina*, which tells the history of the bridge illustrated in the etching I had exchanged with Biljana in 2000. The book documents the mixed heritage of Bosnia, which is on the trade routes between east and west. UNESCO World Heritage lists the bridge as a masterpiece of Ottoman civil engineering whose construction embodies a long history of cultural exchange. Višegrad was profoundly affected by the conflicts of the 1990s and remains isolated. The rehabilitation of the historic bridge after the war has been a focus of civic pride and a reassertion of the identity of the city. The Annual Fine Arts Assembly in Višegrad provides a way for the city to connect with the larger world.

We six women printmakers from the U.S., Denmark, Belgium and Serbia jokingly called ourselves "The All-Girl Print Team." We gave demonstrations in the Višegrad Gallery that were videotaped for television. I demonstrated printing with a Japanese baren, using my blocks for *Alstromeria*. My woodcut prints *Eyes on Bosnia* (for a Southern Graphics Council exchange) and *Eye-Cup* grew from work I began during the Višegrad residency.



Ivo Andrić, *Na Drini ćuprija (The Bridge on the Drina)*, original in Serbo-Croatian 1945, English translation by Lovett F. Edwards in 1959; available in a paperback reprint from the University of Chicago Press, 1977.



April Vollmer, *Eye Cup*, 2008. Color Japanese woodcut with rubber stamp of Greek eye-cup, on handmade washi paper, 26 x 11". Begun at Fine Arts Assembly, Višegrad, Bosnia, 2006.

Biljana Vucović, [Sićevo Landscape], 2008. Color etching, 22 x 30".

Ivana Stanković, [Sićevo Trees], 2008. Etching, 30 x 22".



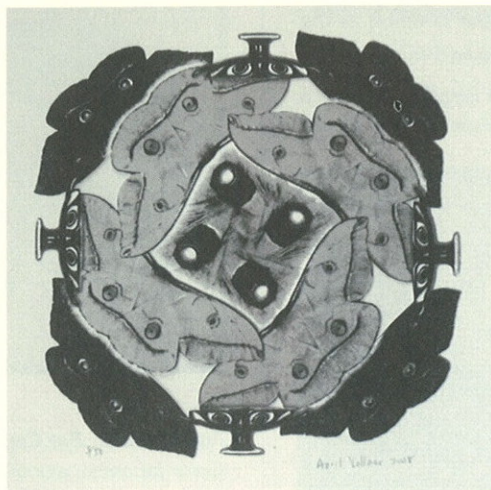
## Faculty of Fine Arts Exhibition, 2008

A year later, Biljana asked me if I would be interested in presenting my woodblock prints at the Akademija Center for Graphic Art, where she was now director. We arranged a date for May of 2008, and the project grew to include a demonstration of Japanese woodblock printing at the gallery, meetings with students at the college, and the creation of two lithographs with Tamarind-trained master printer Nebojsa Lazić at the Akademija print shop, in the same building as the gallery.

I carried 16 large woodcut prints for my exhibition on the plane from New York. I arrived on a Tuesday, the preparators hung the show on Wednesday, and the gallery held the reception on Thursday. The gallery staff, led by Liljana Tašić, offered me a warm welcome and a professional exhibition. Slaviša Trailović designed an illustrated bi-lingual Serbian-English catalogue and an impressive poster in Serbian Cyrillic for the entrance. Nataša Janković translated and helped in innumerable ways. Each print was carefully hung from wires between two sheets of glass. Attendance was excellent: Belgrade's Old Town offers an active art scene. I was delighted to re-connect with people I had met on my previous trip. Biljana's sister brought me flowers! The next day, I gave a demonstration of Japanese woodblock to an enthusiastic audience of students, teachers and artists. Nebojsa Lazić translated my talk, and asked many of his own questions about the Japanese technique of printing blocks with watercolor using a baren.

Apri Vollmer, *Apotropaic Object*, 2008. Color lithograph, 11 x 17". Printed by Nebojsa Lazić at the Akademija Center for Graphic Arts workshop.

April Vollmer, *Zova* block proofs on inexpensive Chinese paper available in Belgrade.



Niš was the birthplace of Constantine, the first Christian Roman Emperor, responsible for moving the capital from Rome to Constantinople. I had traveled to the far reaches of the world I knew, only to find that it was actually a central place, the location of decisive turning points in world history.

## Sićevo Art Colony, 2008

After the exhibition, Biljana arranged for a group of printmakers to participate in a week-long art colony stay at Sićevo, the oldest colony in the Balkans, founded by the female Serbian expressionist painter Nadežda Petrović. My companions in Sićevo were Biljana, the Danish artist Ulla Madsen, and Biljana's former student Ivana Stanković. We stopped first in Niš, where I gave a demonstration of Japanese woodblock printing to Ivana's printmaking class at the Art High School of Niš. I found the students to be highly skilled and highly motivated. Although Biljana translated my presentation from English to Serbian, the students understood much of what I said, and many spoke English well.

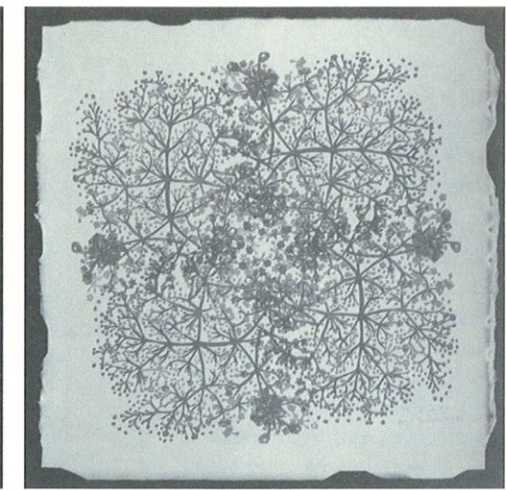
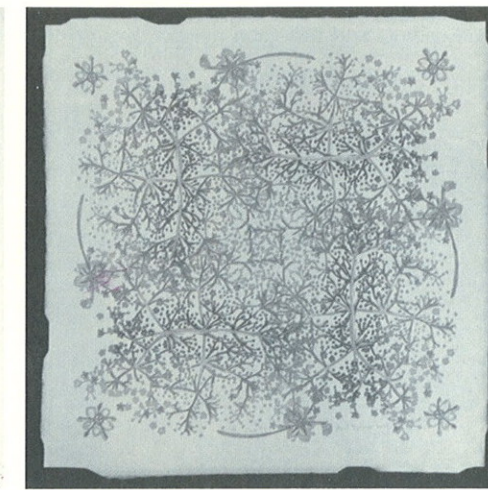
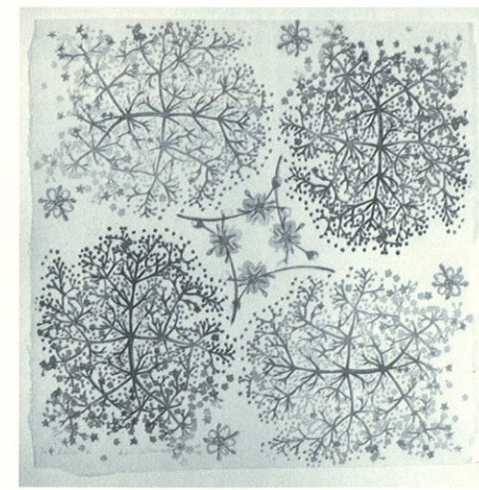
Sićevo lies twenty kilometers from Niš, past the Roman archeological site. It is a small agricultural town whose unpaved roads are jammed with the traffic of sheep morning and evening. The colony building was once a school, and has served as a summer art colony since the 1930s. Artists share small



bedrooms and work together in a large open studio. The small press room was next to the studio, but I printed with a Japanese baren, so I stayed in the large studio next to a big window overlooking a garden.

The City of Niš supports The Gallery of Contemporary Fine Arts, which arranges two week-long printmaking residencies each year. The gallery has three impressive exhibition spaces: one downtown, two in the historic Niš fortress complex. The Sićevo residency program is administered by Slobodan Radojković, who welcomed us warmly to the colony. He is an artist himself, and met us at the Arsenal Gallery for the exhibition of last year's Sićevo prints. I brought him a set of woodcut tools in return for two linden wood blocks. We four visiting printmakers produced a group of etchings and woodcuts that he is showing at this year's 2009 Sićevo print exhibition.

Leaving a selection of our prints with Slobodan, we boarded the bus for the two hour ride back to the big city of Belgrade, which seemed much bigger after having spent a week in tiny Sićevo! I made a final visit to the university print shop to meet with Biljana's students, we enjoyed several Serbian farewell dinners, and traded small prints. Then the helpful staff of the Akademija Gallery took down my show, packed it back in my portfolio, and I was on a flight back to New York City, which seemed huge, and a little impersonal, after a varied and rewarding three weeks in Serbia! \*



I first saw the large yellow moth that appears in *Eye Cup* when I was in Bosnia in September 2006. From the Saturnidae family, big eyespots mark its lower wings. The bold eyespots on moths and butterflies frighten away predators, but research now shows it is due to the startling intensity of the colors rather than the appearance of eyes. I too found the eyespots startling, which (perversely) attracted me.

People use eye images in the same way that the moths do, to protect themselves from danger, as in the eyes painted on the prows of fishing boats. I thought of the moths as protective emblems for a place of danger, a place where both Muslim and Christian cemeteries are filled with stone markers. In the woods around our hotel, signs still warned visitors to stay on the paths to avoid unexploded bombs.

I was always fascinated by the elegant Greek eye-cups, which functioned like a mask as symposium guests lifted their cups to drink wine. I scanned an image of an eyecup and had a rubber stamp made so that I could use it in my woodcuts. Both the cup and Saturnidae moths appear in my Serbian lithographs as well, to show the parallel apotropaic function of the eye images, intended for protection.

A special delight at the art colony was the food: wonderful Serbian dishes from the fruits and vegetables grown down the road, and cheese from the sheep who caused the traffic jams. Elder flowers (zova) are used to make a refreshing summer drink.

April Vollmer, *Zova Network 2, 3 and 4*, 2008, Color Japanese woodcuts on handmade paper, 18 x 18" each.

The *Network* series is the result of multiple printings, in various rotations and colors, from the two linden blocks cut in Sićevo of an elder flower.