

ART / ARCHITECTURE; Improvised Images in Molten Wax, as Fluid as Jazz

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LEAVE it to modern artists to find intriguing beauty -- and expressive power -- in the gooey textures of waxy buildup. New materials and techniques have always attracted the avant-garde, but paradoxically, during certain periods in the 20th century, an ancient method of image making seized the imagination of many experimental artists. The results of some of those experiments are on view from Sunday through Aug. 15 at the Montclair Art Museum in Montclair, N.J., where "Waxing Poetic: Encaustic Art in America" examines its theme in more than 70 works by modern and contemporary artists, including Arthur Dove, Jasper Johns, Lynda Benglis and Michelle Stuart.

Throughout the 1990's, Gail Stavitsky, chief curator of the Montclair Art Museum, has noticed that encaustic art has undergone a resurgence among artists, art students, galleries and museums. As the main organizer of "Waxing Poetic," she has set out to demonstrate the variety of expression achieved in a technique for painting with molten wax that was first used in ancient Greece and Rome.

"Although more recent encaustic works, such as Jasper Johns's paintings of American flags and numbers from the 1950's, have exerted considerable influence, many artists today have been inspired by the unforgettable Fayum portraits of the first and second centuries A.D.," Ms. Stavitsky said. She referred to pictures made by Greco-Roman artists when Egypt was part of the Roman Empire; those now-legendary images, which had been attached to mummy cases, were excavated in the early 19th century in the Fayum region outside Cairo. Today, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Brooklyn Museum of Art house some well-preserved examples.

Technically speaking, encaustic, a word that derives from the Greek term enkaustikos, meaning to burn in, describes both a substance and a method of painting in which dry pigments are mixed with molten wax on a warm palette. Danielle Rice, an art historian who has studied the encaustic revival that took place during the 18th-century neo-Classical period in Europe, writes in the Montclair show's catalogue that these special paints "can be applied to any ground or surface, including wood, plaster or canvas."

Today, commercially prepared encaustic is made with refined beeswax and dry pigment (from mineral ores, for example). It also includes an important touch of damar resin. This natural tree resin from the East Indies gives the mixture a higher melting temperature and makes it harder.

Ms. Rice also cites the following essential step in the "classic" form of the technique: "It is traditional to pass a heat source close to the surface of a finished painting to 'burn in' the colors, fusing and bonding them."

For purists, deviations from these basic mixing and burning-in processes have always been problematic. Even now, sticklers for accuracy insist on the primacy of both the medium's wax-oil-resin recipe and the burning-in process. For them, both must be employed for an artist's encaustic technique and resulting artwork to be considered authentic.

But before commercial encaustic became available in recent decades, artists had to make their own. Some used linseed oil instead of damar resin. Or as Mr. Johns told Ms. Stavitsky, some time in the 1950's he came across a recipe calling for wax, varnish and oil. In his case, he recalled mixing beeswax with tube oils on a single-burner hot plate and using a sun lamp for the burning-in process. (Today, heat guns and blow torches are common tools.)

A decade later, Brice Marden made paintings with a mixture of hot wax and tube-oil color. But for him, wax did not function as a binder, and he did not fuse the layers of his works with an external heat source.

THE works on paper, canvas and board as well as the sculptures on view in "Waxing Poetic" offer evidence of the wide-ranging effects that artists like these have achieved through their often inconsistent, rule-bending adventures in hot wax. Invariably, such encaustic artists have spoken of becoming captivated by the distinctive, compelling properties of the technique. "The process itself is uniquely part of the message," said Richard Frumess, an artist and encaustic expert who advised the show's organizers and wrote a technical essay for its catalogue. With his business partner, Jim Haskin, Mr. Frumess runs R&F Handmade Paints in Kingston, N.Y., the world's largest supplier of commercially made encaustic. (Such paints come in small, colored cakes.)

"When you fuse encaustic, you lose control over it, and it does strange things," Mr. Frumess said. "It's exciting to watch pigments react chemically in odd ways. In this technique there is a kind of chaos, which I believe appeals to modern artists and links up with how we now think about the underlying nature of things." Encaustic can be brushed onto a surface or applied with a spatula. When it hardens, it can be scraped, incised or otherwise sculptured.

Noah Jemisin, an Alabama-born artist who keeps a studio in Brooklyn, said: "It's extremely fluid. It's improvisational, like jazz. When you work with it, you have to become fluid, too." In the Montclair show, Mr. Jemisin's abstract "Carnivorous Dream" (1998), with its graceful, white line drawing over broad washes of color, highlights the breezy style he has developed in the medium over some 20 years.

Although contemporary work like Mr. Jemisin's is at the core of the exhibition, "Waxing Poetic" also features seminal, representational paintings by the Boston-based artist and teacher Karl Zerbe, whose active promotion of encaustic set off its revival in America in the pre-Johns era. Likewise, a lyrical abstraction like "Morning" (1940) by Arthur Dove, who used his own oil-and-wax-emulsion variant of encaustic, proves that the investigation of new materials and techniques was an integral part of modern artists' search for a new visual language. And Alfonso Ossorio's "Headdress" (1950), with its red, white and green surface -- a blend of ink, watercolor and wax resembling an Abstract Expressionist pizza -- is a reminder that it was this Philippine-born painter who inspired his friend Jackson Pollock to explore wax-based methods.

"Its layers are transparent, depending on how much pigment you use, and it can be used simultaneously as a painting and as a collaging

medium," Ms. Stavitsky said, describing encaustic's flexibility. "Functioning like a membrane, it's malleable and evokes bodily sensations, emotion, layers of history, religious rituals and the passage of time. All are themes contemporary artists have been exploring."

With this in mind, encaustic's appeal as a medium of evocative visual metaphor can be seen in Michael David's "Jackie No. 9" (1997), a large enigmatic image on plywood depicting a nude woman standing against a blue background. The figure gazes out at viewers through a layer of milky-white wax. "Encaustic is physically direct," Mr. David said from his home in Brooklyn. "With its translucency, you sense the similarity between the skin represented in the picture and the skinlike quality of the medium itself."

Artists like Mr. David have also spoken about encaustic's "very physical, very cerebral" qualities and of the "deep personal involvement" they experience when working with it. Ms. Rice attributes this to the "almost alchemical" nature of a medium that has seduced artists and viewers alike with its magical combination of wax, fire and pigment. In "Waxing Poetic," this can be sensed as much in the vivid Fayum portrait of a laurel-crowned man from A.D. 120 to 130, on loan from the Brooklyn Museum of Art, as in the vaguely plantlike forms made of plaster, pulp and encaustic by the New York-based sculptor Mia Westerlund Roosen in the 1990's.

Inevitably, debates about the authenticity of variants of encaustic's "classic" formula will roil on. But as Mr. Johns, who worked with it almost exclusively from 1954 to 1958, told Ms. Stavitsky, his extensive use of the medium had given him "a sense of becoming more independent and more focused, recognizing private strengths, doing something which was my own." For artists, the promise of such rich, creative opportunities may help explain the odd technique's enduring allure. Meanwhile, for art lovers, encaustic's strong appeal may simply boil -- or melt -- down to the special ways in which works produced in this peculiar medium can both embody the spirit of their creators and physically record the manner of their making.

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