

Juror: Ben Shattuck, lead curator at Dedee Shattuck Gallery in Westport, MA

Statement: Historically, artists have thrived on constraints. Poets hewing language with rhyme or rhythm gave us sonnets, haikus, villanelles, or the bizarre and intricate Welsh cyhydedd hir. In music, some of the world's most treasured compositions formed under the bounds of sonatas, operas, requiems, or symphony. For visual artists, physical necessity often drew out the constraints: ancient Greek sculptors in need of workable rock for life-sized statues turned their chisels on marble, and a thousand years of marble carving was born; church walls in need of adornment produced frescoing and the spanning majesty of the Sistine Chapel. Artists today focus their work into categories like painting, print-making, photography, or sculpture – often further constraining themselves with material limits within categories. In a career, an artist might identify herself as either an oil painter, or a watercolorist, lithographer, ceramicist, bronze sculptor, encaustic artist, land artist, or performance artist, among many other titles. In the great river of creativity, each finds a tributary to follow.

The question is, why stick so closely to form, why tack so near tradition? Given a pen, violin, paintbrush, or chisel, why return to techniques that – in the case of this exhibition – are thousands of years old, that come with astounding precedent? The answer might lie in a sort of organic inversion that happens when an artist limits herself: in narrowing down her tools, the artist can make statements that appear expansively distinct, wildly personal in relation to other works that share the medium. When Picasso wanted to dig out a new artistic vision, he still kept his brush loaded with oil paint.

What will strike the viewer of this exhibition is the diversity in conceptual, emotional, spatial, formal, or narrative approaches. The guiding curatorial force was to showcase that range within encaustic, instead of triumphing a particular style or skill set. Some work is whimsical, as in “Alphabet Soup”, “Gothic Mélange”, or “Long Reach”. Other work is meditative, as in “Gevurah/Strength”. Some is clearly narrative, like “Envelop II” or “Women’s Day in Iran”, in which the wax becomes sealant for older stories. Other work is powerfully minimal, as in “Symphony in Black”. Some artists here use harsh lines to counter the natural liquidity of hot wax, like “Metric in Play” and “Metric in Shift” or “Echo”. Other works forefront the material’s most natural state, providing the wax a pedestal to speak in its own oozing voice.

But even with twenty-six different artists represented, common themes do arise: abstraction leaning into biology (“Bio Layers,”; “Many Colored Lichen,” “Flow,”); collage (“The Circular Nature of Order and Chaos,”); or the use of wax to layer items into what becomes a visible excavation (“Envelop II,”; “Mystic Mountain,”; “Normalcy of Beauty,”). The most prominent theme, though, is an investigation of the material. An encaustic free form work like “Primary Instincts” takes this course to its lush extreme – the piece buckles under the weight of itself, preserved a moment before collapse.

Within the bounds of this ancient medium, these artists have made work that is refreshingly alive, spanning the full breadth of contemporary subject matter. The exhibition is a thrilling example of what happens when many creative minds focus on one material. Each perspective is like a cut on a gemstone, collectively illuminating.