

ART IN REVIEW

INTERMINGLING IMPRESSIONS: MELTING POT/MELTING POINT

Museum of Encaustic Art, 632 Agua Fria St.; 505-989-3283;
by admission through Oct. 21

Encaustic painting has been around since the days of the Fayum mummy portraits of imperial-era Rome, but the medium rarely gets its due. The mixed-media format appears to play second fiddle to its more esteemed cousin, the oil painting. It's far less popular than oils or acrylics among contemporary



artists. It's not easy to work with and notoriously hard to master. But encaustic painting, which combines heated beeswax with pigments, can lend depth and luminosity to a work of art. *Melting Pot/Melting Point*, loosely tied together by the theme of the diversity that enriches our common culture, is a showcase for the adaptability of encaustics.

More than 40 artists participated in the national juried exhibition. Juror and local artist Francisco Benitez selected the works, and they run the gamut from nonobjective abstraction to realism. They consist primarily of two-dimensional paintings and works on paper, and there are some examples of encaustic sculpture as well. Encaustics are often used in conjunction with other mediums like photography and collage, and such works in mixed media are also represented in the exhibition.

The theme of the show can be gleaned from individual works — although, among the abstractions

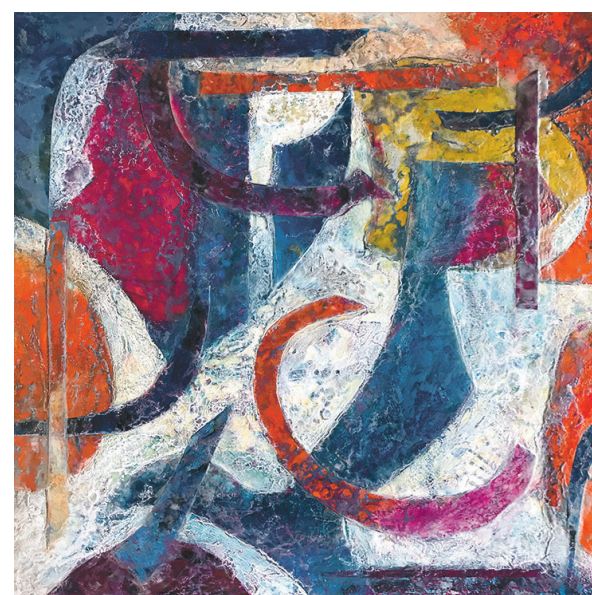
particularly, it is not necessarily explicit. Ashton Phillips' *Mysterium*, for instance, makes no overt reference to the idea of a homogenous, harmonious society — the kind of integrated community we think of when we hear the term “melting pot” — but it is an effective composition, juxtaposing linear forms and planes of color with a modernist aesthetic. More literal is Jorge Bernal's encaustic monotype *San Isidro Wall, Mexico-U.S. Border Crossing*, which depicts a huddled group of figures beneath a yellow sky. This portrait of the influx of peoples across a featureless landscape shows its subjects as distant masses, but any distinguishing details of individuals are impossible to ascertain. A kite flying in the lower right corner strikes a subtle, hopeful note, perhaps a reminder that, for many foreigners, America is still a land of promise. The show's title also references the encaustic medium itself, and one can surmise that a parallel exists between the ideals of a unified society, working toward the betterment of all, and the ideals of the artist, working to create a successful, cohesive composition.

Otty Merrill also tackles the theme in a piece that is not directly related to immigrant experience, as Bernal's piece is, but one that seems tied to a common experience of immigrant descendants: military service. Her composition *My Country 'Tis of Thee* is a sculptural wall hanging roughly in the shape of a flag. It is composed of multiple small parts assembled together into a patchwork configuration. *My Country 'Tis of Thee* was made with found objects and encaustic wax embedded with old family photographs. The lyrics of the namesake song appear throughout the composition. Several Christian crosses are incorporated into the work as well as military dog tags, encaustic techniques that resemble camouflage patterns, and photos of a soldier in uniform, children, and an older woman, perhaps a family matriarch. In another flag piece, Shari Lyon conjoins circles in a symmetric arrangement. These circles take the place of the stars of Old Glory, whose red-and-white stripes are, instead, the colors of the rainbow flag — synonymous with the LGBTQ movement. It is interesting to see how each of these artists takes a national symbol and uses it to convey ideas of personal history, on one hand, and social inclusion on the other.

In terms of proficiency with the medium and the effectiveness of the compositions, *Melting Pot/Melting Point* is a mixed bag, as group shows featuring dozens of artists often are. Because the show includes only one work per artist, it lacks the context of a larger series or body of work. Also, it seems a difficult thing for encaustic artists to get away from using the medium in a kind of muddy way that obscures rather than enhances a composition. Some of the works have

an ambiguous quality. In some others, pigmented wax pools and runs, not in a particularly compelling way, but in a way that merely suggests colored wax pooling and running. But there are some standout pieces.

Karen Frey's *Museum Study - Rome* is a good example of using encaustic formats as a primary painting medium for a representational composition. The painting shows a view from one gallery leading into another in a museum setting. In the foreground gallery, there is a noticeable difference in the quality of light, distinct from the brighter background gallery where two guards are in attendance. Frey takes full advantage of the luminous properties of encaustics. We don't need to see either room in its entirety to know the first room is windowless but not the second.



Ashton Phillips: *Mysterium*, 2018, encaustic, oil, artist-painted and cut collaged paper; top, Otty Merrill: *My Country 'Tis of Thee*, 2018; encaustic wax, photos, found objects on wood; left, Jorge Bernal: *San Isidro Wall, Mexico-U.S. Border Crossing*, 2018, encaustic monotype on wood