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## Filter Photo Interview: Sarah Rehmer (http://filterphoto.tumblr.com /post/60151384175/filter-photo-interview- sarah-rehmer)



*Sarah Rehmer, new mexico dreams #1, 2013, photo + encaustic*

Sarah Rehmer (<http://anthemsofempty.com/>) is a workshop teacher for the [2013 Filter Photo Festival](http://www.filterfestival.com/) (<http://www.filterfestival.com/>). Rehmer lives and works in Chicago, and she teaches workshops and classes across the Midwest. Her work is held in a number of private, institutional, and corporate collections. You can read her full bio on her [site](http://anthemsofempty.com/biography) (<http://anthemsofempty.com/biography>).

At the 2013 Festival, Rehmer will be teaching *Altered Images: An Introduction to Encaustic and Photography* (<http://www.filterfestival.com/portfolio/altered-images/>). In this workshop attendees will explore the use of encaustic medium and encaustic paints to transform photographic based images into tactile works with a sense of soft focus, optical depth, and layered imagery.

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Image 37

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*Sarah Rehmer, new mexico dreams #2, 2013, photo + encaustic*

By Maggie Pfaff, edited by James Pepper Kelly

**Maggie Pfaff:** How did you get started working with encaustic?

**Sarah Rehmer:** In an absolutely roundabout way! I graduated with degrees in Photography and Graphic Design, but suddenly post-graduation found myself with no darkroom to work in. That was at the point where digital was just becoming more mainstream, but wasn't yet very common, certainly not like it is today. So I began working with more mixed media projects, specifically with parts from deconstructed books and using acrylic mediums as the binder. In 2004 I was at [Art Chicago](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Art_Chicago) ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Art\\_Chicago](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Art_Chicago)) and came across the work of an artist from New York, [Eric Blum](http://ericblum.net/) (<http://ericblum.net/>). His tiny, ethereal, portraits of women that just had the most beautiful surfaces and translucency, and they were encaustic.

Up until that point I knew nothing about encaustic medium, as I had avoided painting classes as much as possible in school. So I threw myself full force into learning everything I could. There were no workshops being held around the country at that point (not often anyway), so I went through a lot of trial and error along the way. Now, with the availability of so many different papers to print on and affordable printers with excellent quality, it's really nice to come full circle and back to photography, and to work with encaustic medium and photography together.

**MP:** Is there a particular aesthetic or subject matter of photography that works particularly well with encaustic?

**SR:** I wouldn't say that there's one subject matter that works better than another, but I tend to see landscapes and cityscapes working quite well. Still lifes work too. The subject matter that creates the most challenge is portraiture. When it works well, it works really well; when it's just a snapshot, the result isn't usually too pleasing. But you have to be willing to experiment, that's how you find your own aesthetic and build your body of work.

**IMAGE 37** ([HTTP://FILTERPHOTO.TUMBLR.COM/](http://filterphoto.tumblr.com/))

*Eric Blum, Untitled N°677, 2013, ink, silk, & beeswax on panel*

**MP:** Your artist statement refers to fleeting and fading memories, and the impermanence of the physical world. What sparked your interest in this topic?

**SR:** Right before graduating from college my maternal grandmother was diagnosed with dementia and Alzheimer's. Seeing this strong woman who worked all her life no longer be able to take care of basic needs like cooking, cleaning, and remembering to take her medication really affected me. The more that her short-term memory failed, the more it made me begin to question what happens to these memories that have slipped away. If the individual can no longer recall a certain event or memory, does that mean it never occurred? It's like the thought experiment of the tree in the forest.

The book became an important metaphor for me, and in the early stages I mostly used blank end-pages. These papers were recognizable as being from books but they were devoid of words and stories, They showed the mark of time through the discoloration in the paper, but not in any other way.

Looking back now, a decade since graduating college and after going through old prints and binders full of negatives, I'm seeing that memory was a theme present throughout much of that work. I tended (and still tend) to gravitate towards photographing locations where people usually are, but which are temporarily barren of people. The spaces only show that humans were there at some point, and have left behind detritus, graffiti, urban sprawl, paths plowed through prairie lands, etc.

**MP:** Do you feel a sense of responsibility to archive mental or tactile memories through your artwork?

**SR:** I wouldn't say I feel a responsibility to archive mental or tactile memories specifically (certainly the books that I dismantle are not being archived in their original state!). I would say that I feel the need to try and facilitate people taking a closer look at their own lives and memories and realizing just how fleeting things can be, how memory in general can vanish so quickly. These mental pictures and recollections of events that we keep locked away only in our minds can all of a sudden be gone. I want the viewer to reflect on how she can keep her own memories and histories, and if they

**IMAGE 37** ([HTTP://FILTERPHOTO.TUMBLR.COM/](http://filterphoto.tumblr.com/))

are kept safely. I guess I can quote myself here—this is something I wrote for a show proposal, so why not—“The work is often quiet in nature and offers the viewer a chance to contemplate how we, as a society, tend to our vulnerable histories- as related to cultural history and personal history.”



*Sarah Rehmer, from the site-specific installation rejected stories*

Another project I'm working on, [rejected stories](http://rejectedstories.weebly.com/) (<http://rejectedstories.weebly.com/>), gives people a chance to participate by submitting their own stories of things that they haven't followed through on or that have not come to fruition, therefore never really becoming a memory. It gives participants a chance to question how they go about choosing what they deem important enough to pursue in order to create these memories and histories. In a way, I am taking responsibility for archiving these memories, or at least trying to have the viewer take responsibility for dealing with their own memories.

**MP:** Should Filter attendees make any special preparations for your workshop?

**SR:** They should come with open minds and ready to work. Since this is a one-day workshop, we'll be squeezing in a ton of information in a short time. I know most of the participants will have photography backgrounds and may not be too familiar with other studio art disciplines. However, I went from photo to painting, so we'll all still speak the same language!

**MP:** What should participants in your workshop expect to walk away knowing?

**SR:** Participants will walk away with some basic knowledge of how to work with encaustic paints, medium, and pigment sticks to alter their inkjet printed photographs. They also will be given information on the basics of setting up a workspace for encaustic, which includes the types of equipment needed, and, most importantly, how to safely work with the medium. As mainstream as encaustic has become over the last few years, there's still a great deal of misinformation out there (for example, the belief that encaustic and caustic have anything in common—encaustic medium is composed of beeswax and damar resin, nothing caustic). So I always make sure to give the most accurate information on working in both a safe and archival sound method.

**MP:** Lastly, anything else you feel attendees should know about you/your workshop/your work/your life?

**SR:** I'm a Type A personality, so just consider yourselves warned (*sort of* just kidding)!

**IMAGE 37** ([HTTP://FILTERPHOTO.TUMBLR.COM/](http://filterphoto.tumblr.com/))

This is going to be a very new process to most people, so cut yourself a little slack. This advice will make more sense to people once they're in the workshop: you may not get perfection but the pieces you're working on immediately, but you will learn! And over time, and with practice, the medium can be controlled.



*Sarah Rehmer, tuscan light, 2012, photo + encaustic*

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Thanks for taking time to do the interview Maggie! Side note, in the question about what participants should expect to walk away knowing... it should read (for example, the belief encaustic and caustic have anything in common) semantics! Encaustic medium is composed of beeswax and damar resin- nothing caustic. Just want to keep the info correct.

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To those taking the class--Sarah is a terrific teacher. I've taken several of her classes and always come away informed and enlightened. Plus, encaustic is just big-time fun.

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