

SWEPT AWAY: TRANSLUCENCE, TRANSPARENCY, TRANSCENDENCE IN CONTEMPORARY ENCAUSTIC

Cape Cod Museum of Art
60 Hope Lane (off Route 6A)
Dennis, Massachusetts

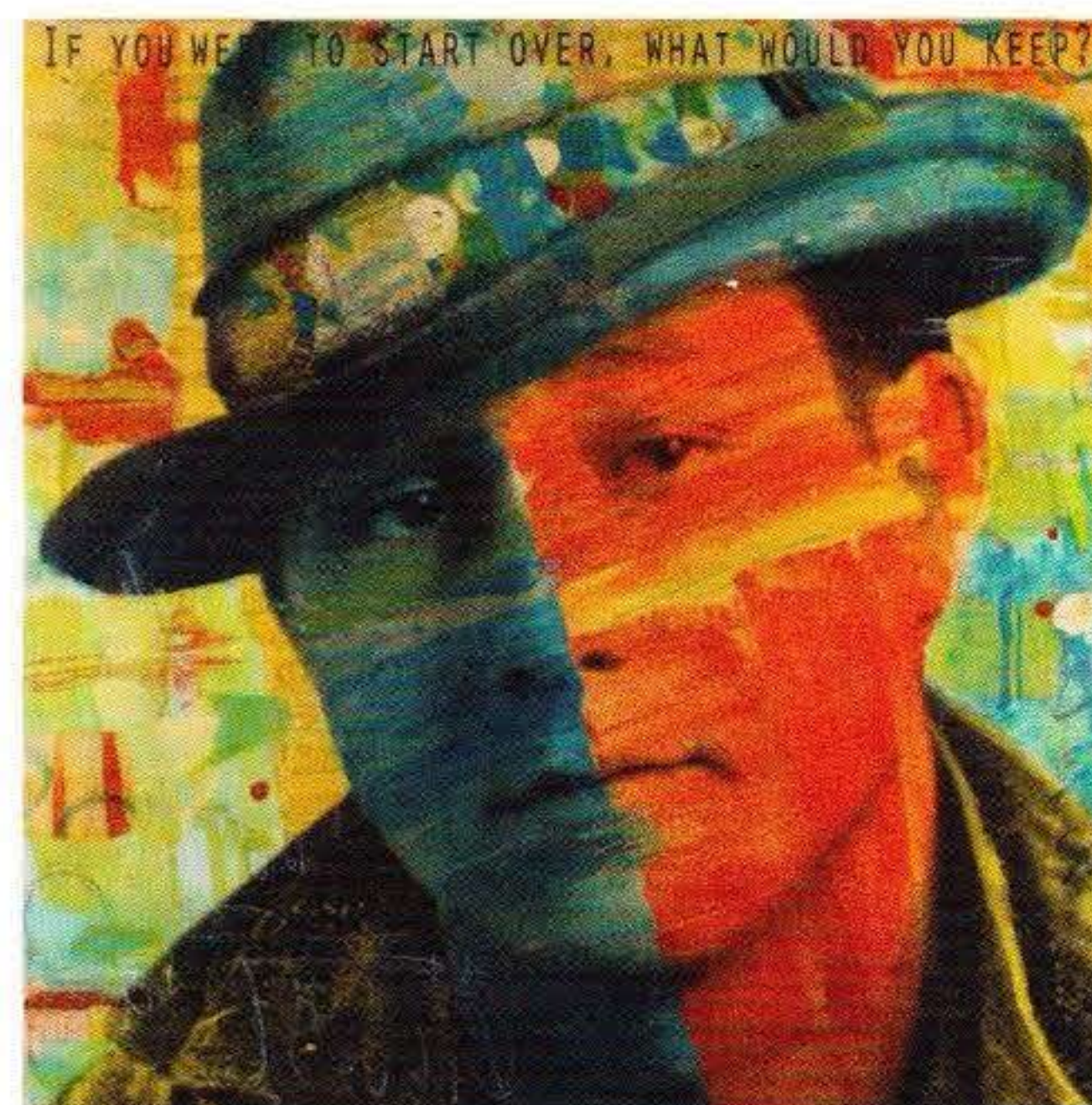
May 18 through June 23



Jane Goethel Guthridge, *The Space Between 22*, 2012, encaustic and archival inkjet on translucent Asian papers, 23" x 23".



Elena De La Ville, *Torso/Clouds*, 2012, encaustic, 24" x 24".



Marybeth Rothman, *Eugene*, 2012, photo collage, encaustic and mixed media, 40" x 40".

Encaustic, long appreciated for its complex ocular qualities and resilient physical applications, is the subject of “Swept Away,” the first dedicated exhibition, by a museum in our region, to the medium, an ancient process of visual expression utilizing heated and melted pigmented beeswax. Rediscovered and modernized by American painter, printmaker and sculptor Jasper Johns, one of the many artists of his generation who popularized the mixed-media process, encaustic allows artists enormous visual possibilities.

The sacred bee and its by-products — honey, the food of the gods, and wax, a substance both permanent and fluid — are held with great reverence. In Greece, for example, the bee was honored as *Melissae* (from which the word for honey — *Mel* — is derived), as teacher and healer.

It’s a great humanitarian medium — a jumping point from which connections to literature,

history, music and science are quickly made. For an excellent contextual discussion and study of its development across time, read Kristen Gallagher’s essay, “Discoveries in Encaustic: A Look through History,” in the journal *Explorations*, 2010, available online.

“Swept Away” is not, however, meant to directly comment on any one ecological concern or historical/cultural theme. Its focus is on art

fundamentals — the marriage of material and method — the resultant quality of luminosity produced naturally by the structural properties of embedded translucent wax.

It’s a textural spatial characteristic that allows for the creation of illuminated surfaces — a visual poetry — in which optical depth is produced. Material at various levels of thickness — metaphors for moments of time — are held in place; light seems to be suspended, absorbed, reflected and refracted, forming illusions, a foggy, soft glow held within and released from elegantly fused layers.

With encaustic, artists have great design freedom. Because it’s malleable and responds quickly to heat, wax has great capacity. It can be

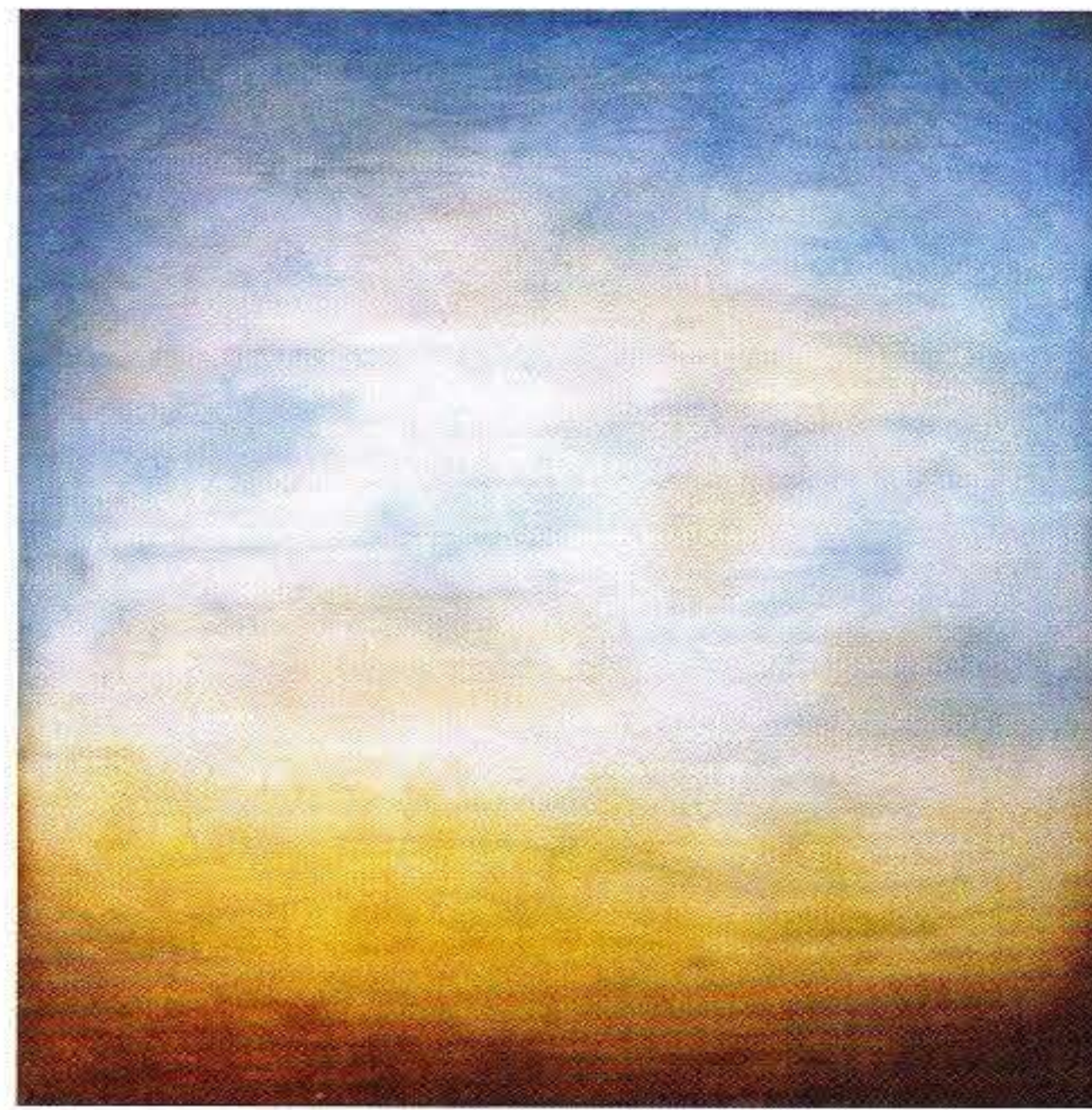
brushed, poured and cast. The representational and structural potential is endless, ranging from objective, as exemplified by Marybeth Rothman's portraits and Linda Cordner's hazy, lazy landscape, "Summer Sunrise," to forms of abstract interpretations, such as the beautifully crafted watery paintings of Jane Goethel Guthridge.

Exhibition organizers explain the process this way: "Keeping the paint molten, the artist works swiftly to charge the brush and place the stroke, whether it be a quick daub, a filmy layer or a gestural swipe. Each layer or group of brush strokes must be fused with a heating tool (tacking iron, heat gun or small torch) so that the surface, while composed of discrete compositional elements, is structurally unified."

"Swept Away" was given life by Michael Giaquinto, curator of exhibitions at the Cape Cod Museum of Art, and hosts 30 artists from across the country who offer 50 works of art including painting, sculpture and prints. It coincides with the Seventh International Encaustic Conference organized by artist, author and educator Joanne Mattera, the founder/director of The International Encaustic Conference. Mattera, author of the 2001 publication, "The Art of Encaustic Painting: Contemporary Expression in the Ancient Medium of Pigmented Wax," also wrote "Extravagant Light," the explanatory essay for Swept Away's exhibition catalogue.

Sara Mast's cosmic/molecular map interpretations in the work "Signal Cell" are built-up layers of amorphous material with underlining connective marks emphasizing the similarity between our internal anatomical structure, particularly cellular-level systems, and the grand configuration of the universe. By spotlighting "our biological origins in the stars," she explained that she is, "attempting to generate images that overlay our primal mythologies with the current scientific research in order to generate 21st century images."

Anatomy, in this case gestural, is again the focus for Elena De La Ville, who attempts to show, as she writes, "How the human body merges its inner psyche to the physical world." The figure



Linda Cordner, *Summer Sunrise*, 2010, encaustic on board, 24" x 24".

in "Torso/Clouds" participates in a type of dance with atmosphere as one unit — either emerging or retreating — in transformation. The changing figure moves with or against the cloud formation as metaphor for what De La Ville explains is an interconnection "that we cannot totally explain," occurring "as we age." The wax medium in this work is itself the subject, serving as communicator, a stand-in for encapsulated time.

Exploring illusions exemplifies the designs of Karen Freedman by way of geometric recalculations and alterations. Freedman's use of concentric repeating shapes is taken from her explorations with kaleidoscopic repetition — a layered, yet shifted identical matrix.

She explained, "varying colors and the order in which the elements are layered allows for an unlimited series of paintings." Playing with color theory and laws governing symmetry, Freedman creates highly reflective works with pulsating effect, a type of visual alternating beat — a syncopation — as if being affected by sound. In these paintings we can think of composer Alexander Scriabin and his atonal scale influenced by his association of colors to harmonic tones and his color-coded circle of fifths that was deeply inspired by Newton's "Opticks."

The balance between order and unexpected spontaneity, and explorations of spatial



Binnie Birstein, *What Lies Beneath: Pool*, 2012, encaustic on panel with India ink, graphite and oilstick, 48" x 36".

ambiguity as explored by Freeman's harder-edged paintings, is projected differently in style by Binnie Birstein's loose, line-filled, gestural abstractions. These artists are united conceptually, but with opposing modes and final forms. Through the use of vibrant color and tumultuous lines, Birstein distorts space and confuses time. Her purpose is to build dynamic subjective places in a process she calls a "contest between figure and ground."

Encaustic allows this process to occur naturally. Attempted organization via a messy grid pattern holds together broad-dripping brushwork and equally imperfect circular lines. In spiral shape, piled vertically above a low-lying horizontal turquoise band of color, this form is a continuous, energetic, non-stop blast of movement.

"Swept Away" demonstrates how the manipulation of one medium allows for the invention of diverse design forms and constructions. As Birstein stated, it is, indeed, a "contest" between control and dissonance, allowing for natural chemical reactions to dictate the next step. It's a scientific approach with a romantic twist, the hallmark of all encaustic.