Pretty As A Picture

Swampscott artist Robin Samiljan transforms an old medium to make modern beauties.

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new



Credit Robin Samiljan



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Robin Samiljan was a successful watercolor painter: her work had won awards; part of her "Moon" series had just been bought by the Newton-Wellesley Hospital for their permanent collection.

So why did she trade her paints and paper for a blowtorch, a griddle and blocks of wax?

"Being an artist means you have to take chances," she answers with the same positive energy she uses to root around in her attic to find just the right picture to show me to illustrate a point. She adds, "it was time to come to terms with my inner critic."

Even though she has worked in watercolor for over 20 years, and teaches it at the Montserrat College of Art, Samiljan now does a lot of her work in wax, or as it called, encaustic painting.

Encaustic, a technique that has been around for centuries, literally means "to burn in."

She credits her time in the Masters Program at Endicott College for giving her the courage to branch out. "They made us take risks and do things that were uncomfortable."

No one, however, at Endicott was working with wax.

Yet Samiljan was drawn to encaustics, and spent the next "six months to a year" in a process of trial and error in order to gain mastery of this medium.

That the details she had to learn are endless is obvious when she demonstrates the encaustic technique. The wax is, for example, toxic at certain temperatures.

"That's why I always crack a window," she says.

She places a paper photograph of hanging wisteria face down onto a wooden block covered in wax.

She smiles and pulls out a small blow torch. Clearly, she is having fun.

She heats the image into the wax. After rubbing the paper into the wax with a wooden spatula, she sponges off just the right amount of the paper under running water.

What's left is an imprint of the wisteria picture, pink colors and all, into the wax.

Using a griddle as a palate, she dips her paintbrush into colored wax and layers it on, working quickly before the wax becomes too cool. The brown vines become visible; the flowers pop, and a new scene forms. At each stage, she reheats the surface with the torch.

The result is stunning: a pretty photograph is transformed into a three dimensional scene, one that draws the viewer in, and evokes a more visceral reaction to the landscape.

Samiljan says she's always "felt connected to landscape painting." She has created a series of encaustic works taken from her photos of the Bird Sanctuary on Marblehead Neck. Often she takes a photograph, does a water color and an encaustic of the same scene.

When she attended the National Encaustic Conference last year, she met other encaustic painters. She discovered that most of them were abstract artists, and very few used the method for landscape.

Her pictures, however, prove the wisdom of her ideas. They are beautiful to look at. I can't be wrong, she jokes, "if other people like it enough to own it."

"Spring Pathway" took second place the Swampscott Art Association's Spring Show, and is at Marian Court College with the rest of the work from that show through May 19. Some of her watercolors are currently hanging at the Sovereign Bank in Vinnin Square through May 30, as part of the bank's partnership with the Swamspcott Art Association.

More of her work from the Bird Sanctuary will be on display at her solo show at the Lynn Arts Center this coming fall.

Her work is also on view and for sale on her

website: www.fineartbyrobin.com/Fine Art by Robin/Home.html