

Joanne Mattera

AND THE ANCIENT ART OF ENCAUSTIC

By Jan Lhormer

A PAIR OF DARK foreboding garage doors in Salem, Massachusetts, provide a stark contrast to the luminous world of color housed within: wood panels glow with layers of paint and pattern, blocks of sumptuous encaustics line the shelves, and a plethora of pigment-stained brushes meticulously arranged by hue fill worktables. Joanne Mattera's studio was once an auto mechanic's workshop, but it has been transformed into her laboratory for exploring what appear to be endless juxtapositions of intense color vibrations infused with various geometric shapes and textures. January was the ideal time to visit because each New Year's Day she makes a ritual of cleaning and organizing the space. It was easy to appreciate the elaborate materials and processes giving way to three walls of rhythmic imagery.



Mattera's studio

Mattera trained as a painter at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design (MassArt) and has been a successful artist for forty years. Encaustic, an ancient painting technique using beeswax, resin, and pigment, is her signature medium. Encaustic was first used in ancient Greece by shipbuilders to decorate warships and then in Greco-Roman Egypt for portraits in mummy casings; since the 1950s it has seen a growing resurgence in contemporary art. Mattera employs the medium the same way one might apply glazes of oil paint, building up multiple coatings, or scraping away layers, intuitively adjusting compositions. Additionally, she sometimes works in gouache or graphite on paper, and oil or acrylic on canvas. Mattera's imagery is usually built upon a grid, and she refers to herself as a "formalist" who sees "color and geometry" wherever she goes. When viewed from the side, the work's sculptural quality is enhanced by a thick under-layer of waxy

color, which Mattera explains "creates a border, charges the color field, and defines the edges" of the jewel-like images.

Two ongoing series of paintings, *Silk Road* and *Chromatic Geometry*, were displayed in the studio during my visit, and we discussed the many factors that have shaped her artistic voice. She cites Persian miniature artwork as a major influence because of its "transparent and translucent use of exquisite color over patterns against patterns." Paintings from Renaissance Siena are equally important to her for their chromatic intelligence. While studying at MassArt, Mattera took a transformative class called Painting Materials, which introduced her to encaustic. The course focused on a myriad of art-making methods, from fresco to encaustic to egg tempura, and cemented her deep affinity for the cadences and rhythms of process. Mattera's relationships with a beloved grandfather and aunt, each working in the textile industry, meant that sewing, crocheting, and,

later, weaving were natural pastimes for her growing up, and this skilled craftsmanship translated well into her painting. In art school, she was cited as a colorist, so, naturally, Matisse's focus on expressive and exotic color resonated with her. She found another kindred spirit in Eva Hesse and her reductive grid-based work.

The *Silk Road* series, which originated in 2005, showcases a zen-like display of breathtaking pigments. Multiple paintings are presented as a horizontal sequence or arranged within a grid, each individual piece holding its own as a complete work of art. In *Silk Road 354* (2017), a textured sea of turquoise melts into cherry bands of light along the top of the image. *Silk Road 355* (2017) mirrors the composition with a field of gold against strips of pale blues, while subsequent paintings in the series shine in other vivid tones. Inspired by the shimmering quality of iridescent silk, luscious hues are embellished with strokes created by brushes dipped in the hot encaustic. The artist's brush races against cooling wax to complete its mark before the wax dries. Resulting raised lines suggest writing that fills the pages of a book, or strands of woven fabric, or even ripples of waves. But Mattera maintains that geometric form and process define the meaning of her evocative work. She also acknowledges the influence of the sea on her work: when she was growing up in Revere, Massachusetts, the ocean was always in sight and became "etched in her visual experience." Some paintings in the series suggest a landscape with their horizontal divisions and charged atmospheric color; however, Mattera is thinking more Albers than Turner.

The *Chromatic Geometry* series, which Mattera began in 2013, is characterized by analogous hues, a less saturated palette, and smooth surfaces. One particularly striking painting, *Chromatic Geometry 37* (2015), oozes shades of metallic gray and silver and cool blue and green. In this series, Mattera skews the grid to create



Silk Road 354, 2017, encaustic on panel, 18 by 18 Inches



Silk Road 355, 2017, encaustic on panel, 18 by 18 Inches

diagonal lines that intersect and form diamond patterns dancing between foreground and background. There is an unintended nod to linear perspective caused by shifts in scale and diagonal movement. Occasionally, a perky pigmented triangle will pop up to surprise the viewer. Mattera laments the laborious process of taping edges and choreographing layers of hue, but her efforts yield intricate details such as raised triangular shapes and exquisitely nuanced color.

With so much expertise honing her artistry, including her past experience working in the publishing field, Mattera set out to create a book and wrote the influential text entitled *The Art of Encaustic Painting: Contemporary Expressions in the Ancient Medium of Pigmented Wax*, which was published in 2001. Mattera's book explores

the history, preparation, and techniques of encaustic, and includes images of work from a wide variety of professional artists using the medium for abstraction, realism, and even sculpture. After the iconic Jasper Johns brought the ancient medium into his work in the 1950s, many reputable artists followed suit, and the 1990s saw an exponential increase in the use of encaustic. Due to widespread interest in the topic and the success of the book, Mattera found herself becoming "a Dear Abby" for encaustic. She saw a need for an event that would allow artists to ask questions and get answers from the best practitioners working in the medium and established the International Encaustic Conference, which attracts artists from all over the world.

Beginning in 2007, the first four conferences took place on the North Shore. In search of a better venue, Mattera conferred with Cherie Mittenenthal, director of the Truro Center for the Arts at Castle Hill, and in 2011 she chose the Provincetown Inn as a venue to host the event. Mittenenthal, who is also an artist working in encaustic, had been a speaker at one of the earlier conferences. While she and her staff at Castle Hill handled registrations and logistics, Mattera remained at the helm, conceptualizing and producing the event. Each year, she coordinated the schedule, inviting over forty presenters to allow ample choices of both talks and demonstrations. On successive years, half of the presenters would be new, so that the conference offered both continuity and an infusion



Chromatic Geometry 37, 2015, encaustic on panel, 12 by 12 Inches



Chromatic Geometry 23, 2015, encaustic on panel, 12 by 12 Inches

CHERIE MITTENTHAL, executive director of the Truro Center for the Arts at Castle Hill, and an artist in her own right, has enthusiastically assumed the role of director of the 2017 International Encaustic Conference. When we spoke in February, she had planned an extensive lineup of speakers and events for the conference, which took place in June. Having worked so closely with Joanne Mattera over the last five years, Mittenthal was well versed in the procedures that had proved successful, but she also planned to add her own personal flavor.

Past conferences have brought over two hundred participants from the United States and countries all over the world, including Israel, Venezuela, Saudi Arabia, Ireland, Mexico, and Canada, and this year's conference promised to be equally well attended. Still taking place at the Provincetown Inn, the conference continues to promote the type of programming Mittenthal and Mattera set in place, including talks and demonstrations by widely respected artists, curators, gallerists, and critics. Topics include specific techniques, such as how to pour the perfect smooth wax, sculptural uses, stenciling, and how to incorporate metallics. Use of the medium is held to high standards through talks that address safety and ventilation and stress a historic perspective as context for making art. Programming also delves into professional issues related to developing one's personal voice and content, as well as ethical issues regarding the appropriation of methods or styles learned through classes.

Many visitors take advantage of the workshops offered at Castle Hill three days before the event begins and five days after. Since the conference provides a substantial financial boost to an economy dependent on summer crowds, the entire town welcomes the artists by extending discounts at local restaurants and shops, and



Cherie Mittenthal at Castle Hill

hosting exhibits of their work along Commercial Street at Adam Peck Gallery, Kobalt Gallery, and Julie Heller Gallery.

There are numerous curated exhibits of participants' work in conjunction with the conference. This year, two galleries at Castle Hill were filled with encaustic art in concert with the opening night party hosted by Castle Hill. Provincetown's traditional Friday-night gallery stroll showcased encaustic art throughout Commercial Street's East and West Ends. Finally, on Sunday evening, buses transported conference-goers to a closing reception at the unrivaled exhibition space at the Cape Cod Museum of Art.

One of the most innovative means of allowing artists to display their talent is the hotel fair, and this year the fair was open to the public for the

first time. On Sunday morning, people staying at the Provincetown Inn opened up their hotel rooms as gallery spaces, putting in extra effort to make their spaces unique. Mittenthal recalled an artist in recent years who created an installation on the ceiling, walls, and tabletops, and then cast himself as a performance artist watching viewers from his bed.

As the conference has become so embedded in the Truro and Provincetown communities, Mittenthal elected to open up the much-anticipated postcard sale to the public. The postcard sale is a fund-raiser at the Provincetown Inn showcasing encaustic work by attendees. Cards sell for thirty dollars and all proceeds go to scholarships for prospective artists attending the following year. In the same spirit of community, the vendor room welcomed outside visitors to enter and browse through many typical or eclectic accoutrements related to encaustic, such as various paint brands, support boards, ventilation systems, and hot box tools.

Another change Mittenthal implemented was to move the keynote speech, this year given by nationally recognized artist Sharon Loudon, to Saturday morning from Saturday night. Loudon is a graduate of Yale University's MFA program, and is an artist, educator, and editor of the *Living and Sustaining a Creative Life* series of books. Following the keynote speech were more discussions and demonstrations on topics such as the use of encaustic on Japanese papers, printmaking techniques with encaustic, and contemporary portraiture in wax.

After giving me the elaborate conference summary, Cherie made a point of speaking highly of all that Joanne Mattera has accomplished by establishing the International Encaustic Conference. "Joanne has done a lot for so many artists and truly has a gift for bringing people together," she reflected. "She has affected so many people, giving them a national stage, literally changing lives by opening up opportunities through creating communities." ☒

of fresh ideas. In addition to specifics of the medium, topics ranged from creative inspiration to the business side of art, and speakers included dealers, critics, curators, and working professionals from within the encaustic community. The overwhelming turnout meant that Mittenthal also coordinated pre- and post-conference workshops at Castle Hill.

With the burgeoning interest in encaustic, Mattera notes, it is easy for a new practitioner or beginner painter to be seduced by the beauty of the material as an end in itself. The conference upholds her standards and educates participants about safety issues and the historic context of the medium. For Mattera, success in encaustic requires an awareness of art history and a commitment to developing personal content. Her own success in this genre is demonstrated in numerous exhibitions of her work, including

Chromatopia at Tacit Contemporary Art in Melbourne, Australia; *The Summer Show* at dm contemporary in New York City; *Black Tie (optional)* at the Adam Peck Gallery in Provincetown; and *Depth Perception*, which the artist cocurated with Cherie Mittenthal at the Cape Cod Museum of Art in Dennis, Massachusetts.

Along with attaining prominence as an exhibiting painter and a well-received writer, Mattera garnered attention in the art world in 2006 when she started an online blog whose mission was to highlight "interesting work exhibited in New York City and elsewhere, including Provincetown and the annual art fairs in New York City and Miami." With a steady decline in the number of shows receiving reviews in print, the timing of the blog was perfect. As testimony to its substance and relevance, the blog has received a wide and varied readership from all over the world.

After ten years of juggling the daunting jobs of running the encaustic event, managing a full-time studio career, and keeping up with blog posts, Mattera decided to sell the conference. After completing a tenth conference in June 2016, she sold the rights to Castle Hill and is thrilled that it will continue with Mittenthal as director. Mattera will return as a conferee and says she will be the one wearing the shirt that reads "ask Cherie." ☒

JAN LHORMER is a painter, art professor, and arts writer living in Falmouth, Massachusetts. Her large canvases combine abstraction with landscape imagery and have been exhibited in galleries and museums throughout the region. She will be exhibiting this September at the Painting Center in New York City. For more information, go to www.janlhorner.com.