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## Artists in Conversation: Joanne Mattera's "Journey of Visual Pleasure"

By LIZ HAGER

*Author's Note: Unless otherwise attributed, all remarks by the artist were made in a recorded conversation between the author and the artist on 1/27/10.*



Joanne Mattera, *Silk Road 115*, 2009  
Encaustic on wood panel, 12 x 12 inches  
(Courtesy of the artist)

Joanne Mattera's most recent work—the ongoing *Silk Road* series—is a manifold tribute to the eponymous trade route. In these mostly 12 x 12 " paintings the artist has deftly exploited the encaustic medium to opulent results. By applying thin layers of individual and highly-saturated color repeatedly on top of one another, Mattera has captured the exquisite iridescence of raw silk. Additionally, the luscious texture created by remnant brushstrokes of molten wax subtly suggests the warp and weft of the woven material. And even the detritus Mattera has left in the wax ("schmutz" she would "normally strain out") subtly mimics the imperfections of raw silk.



Joanne Mattera—*Silk Road 5*, 2005  
Encaustic on wood panel, 12 x 12 inches  
(Adler Gallery)

Yet, appreciating this series of 129 paintings solely on the basis of its tour-de-force technical achievement would be to miss the richer sphere that the work inhabits. Each painting contains the inherent mystique invoked by the series; which is to say, each piece promises a journey full of visual delights without a specific roadmap. The most exhilarating revelation for this viewer is that color on the scale of intimacy that Mattera achieves is a powerful experience.



*Silk Road* installation view

Mattera clarifies her intention:

I wanted to work with color in a really reductive way and make something beautiful without making it pretty . . .

It's strictly a journey of visual pleasure. . . I love beauty, I paint beauty, I'm not afraid of beauty. . . Beauty is color. Sensuality. The material that I am using is a sensuous material. And the combination of sensuous material and color is what makes beauty for me.



Joanne Mattera—*Uttar 286*, 2002-2005  
Encaustic on panel, 32 x 32 inches  
(Courtesy of the artist)

Beauty in color is a journey that Mattera has been on explicitly through most of her adult artistic career. But the search was clearly influenced early on by a childhood filled with the family textile legacy. Her great-grandmother was a weaver in Italy; her grandfather a tailor. Growing up as the eldest of five children, Mattera spent a good deal of time with her two maiden aunts, themselves emigrées from Italy. From them she learned the traditions of the needle arts. More importantly, they stimulated her creative soul:

So I was surrounded by all these fabulous colors and textures and processes. . . . And it was only later, that (sculptor) Nancy Azara pointed out to me that I had made in my childhood a connection between creative expression and unconditional love.



Joanne Mattera, *Uttar 296*, 2006  
Encaustic on panel, 24 x 24 inches  
(Courtesy of the artist)

The artist was introduced to the paint media at Massachusetts College of Art, but it was encaustic that made an indelible impression on her.

Once I got past the process of preparation [applying multiple layers of hide glue gesso] and I started actually painting with encaustic, I loved it. I loved the process, the smell, the physicality and materiality of it, the almost alchemical thing that happens when you put your brush into the molten wax.

You dab it on the surface—you have to be quick, otherwise the wax hardens on the brush or even worse the brush gets stuck into the painting. It's the rhythm of brush strokes fused with heat, brush strokes fused with heat. . .

Mattera didn't choose encaustic as her primary medium right away. "I knew I wasn't ready to pursue it then—I didn't have the painting chops and I didn't have the patience certainly. I always knew one day I would go back to that." Once beyond college, she committed herself to continuing her artwork, supporting herself through a variety of jobs, eventually full-time writing and editing (which included stints at *Women's Wear Daily*, *Glamour*, and *Fiber Arts*).



Joanne Mattera, *Open Book 23*, 1992  
Thread and wax on Twinrocker paper, 6.5 x 6.5 inches  
(Courtesy of the artist)

Through the late 1970s and early 1980s, Mattera developed an increasingly reductive abstract style, using geometry as her underlying organizing principal. Even before Mattera returned to the encaustic medium, she was testing the grid—its grounding foundation, as well as its limits. Early experimentation with thread and paper (an early expression of the textile "gene"?) found full articulation in the 1992 *Open Book* series.



Jasper Johns, *Winter*, 1986  
Encaustic and collage on canvas  
(Private Collection)

In 1986, the world shifted for Mattera, as a result of interviewing Jasper Johns for *Women's Wear Daily* on the occasion of his print retrospective at MOMA:

So I found myself in this bank-turned-studio on the Lower East Side, maybe around the Bowery, talking with Jasper Johns about his work. Here along one long wall were these four paintings in mostly grays. And it was his *Four Seasons* quadtych. We looked at the work, we talked about it, and he allowed that, yes, that was his silhouette.

I could see his set up, which fascinated me. He had a little old-fashioned hotplate with the four legs, you remember those? He'd not changed his set up for a very long time. . .

But after having been in Jasper Johns studio, and being so up close to the work, I found myself setting up the hot plate.



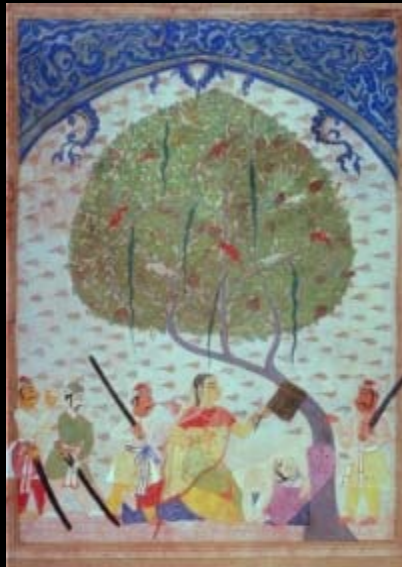
Joanne Mattera, *Vicolo 54 (Paul)*, 2009  
Encaustic on wood panel, 12 x 12 inches  
(Courtesy of the artist)

Certainly, Mattera is part of the painting tradition that includes "Color Field" painters like Morris Louis and Helen Frankenthaler. One cannot help but think also of Rothko's explorations of color (albeit on a grand scale Rothko's work achieves different ends), as well as Agnes Martin's minimalist grids as potential influences on her work.



Morris Louis, *Where*, 1960  
Magna on canvas, 99 3/8 x 142 1/2 inches.  
(Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden)

In the properties of encaustic, however, Mattera has found unique ways to explore the chromatic and geometric realms. Though she does not always work in encaustic, she's especially attracted to the refractive quality of pigments suspended in wax. Further, her choice of a highly-saturated color palette—which references but does not copy Indian miniatures—automatically means that she's playing in the bold realm of maximum vibration to the eye.



*The Heroine Chanda fanning her beloved, Laurak, under a tree, from a manuscript of the Chandayana (The Story of Chanda), 1540*

Pigments on paper

([SF Asian Museum](#))

Her work has been influenced by artists outside the painting medium.

[Eva Hesse](#) ("Here was someone working reductively and materially and working experimentally with materials. It was textile, sculptural.");

[Martin Puryear](#), particularly his adeptness at "weaving together art and craft;" and [Louise Bourgeois](#).

Mattera prefers to work in series, because they allow for the unfolding of the initial idea in both structured and unpredictable ways. In 2000 she embarked upon the longest running series to date, *Uttar* (2000-2007), in which she explored the effects of geometric repetition—a stripe or block repeated within a grid. In *Vicolo*, the series prior to *Silk Road*, she scraped back the surface to see how revealing different tranches of color would effect the grid.

Although Mattera does not always make the connection to textiles explicit in her work (the *Silk Road* title aside), in one way or another aspects of the textile tradition are faintly present in all these series.





Helen Frankenthaler, *Nature Abhors a Vacuum*, 1973

Acrylic on canvas, 103 x 112 inches.

(National Gallery of Art, DC)

Along her aesthetic journey, Mattera necessarily dove deeply into the technical aspects of painting with pigmented wax. Encaustic is a venerable medium, older by a millennium than tempera and oil. Although a few modern artists (most notably Diego Rivera) worked in the medium, it was all but sidelined in the 20th century, until the 1960s, when Jasper Johns restored it to prominence.

As she started again with encaustic, Mattera felt a need to re-educate herself about the technique. Finding no available texts on the subject, the artist put together her own notes from conversations and her own experimentation. These later became the basis for her authoritative monograph on the subject, *The Art of Encaustic Painting*.

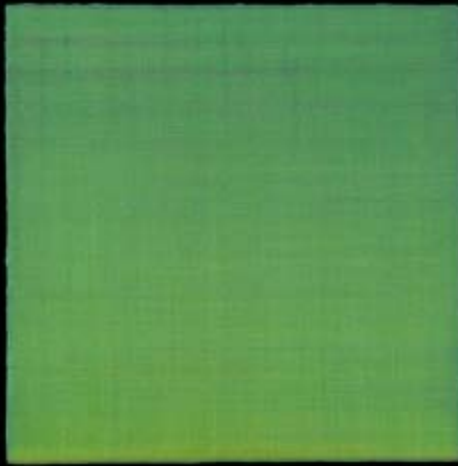


Mark Rothko, *Orange and Yellow*, 1956

oil on canvas, 91 x 71 inches

(Albright-Knox Gallery)

With regard to what's next, Mattera asserts: "My intention is to continue with *Silk Road*, but as I'm working on them, looking on them, I'm thinking 'This may be a byway, a road off the Silk Road.' " One thing is certain—there are still chromatic places left for her to explore.



Joanne Mattera, *Silk Road 127*, 2009  
Encaustic on wood panel, 12 x 12 inches  
(Courtesy of the artist)

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Taschen Art Series — [Jasper Johns: The Business of the Eye](#)

Mark Rothko (Taschen 25th Anniversary Special Edition)

Alison Rowley—[Helen Frankenthaler: Painting History, Writing Painting](#)

[Joanne Mattera Art Blog](#)

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