

by Joanne Mattera

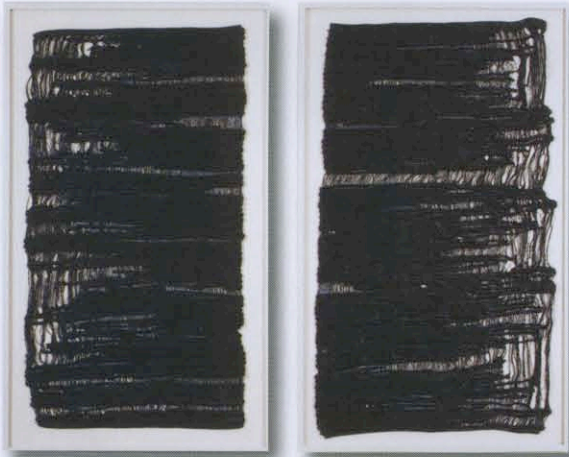
Affinities Fiber and Wax

Aside from batik, which employs wax as a dye resist, fiber and wax have not traditionally had much in common. Lately, though, I've noticed some interesting affinities between the two mediums. In part this is because so many artists have been exploring encaustic, that wax-based paint first used by portrait painters in Greco-Roman Egypt and made famous over the last 50 years by **Jasper Johns**. In equal measure, contemporary artists are turning to textile materials to create paintings and sculptures.

You don't need to be an "encaustic artist" to work with wax any more than you need to be a "fiber artist" to work with cloth and thread. Johns, working in encaustic, painted the image of flags—how textile can you get?—but his interest was in what he famously described as "things the mind already knows." And then there's the doyenne of

materiality, **Louise Bourgeois**, for whom the form and image of the spider, the great weaver, is the signature of her *oeuvre*. Bourgeois's textile connection stretched all the way back to her childhood in France, where her parents owned and ran a tapestry restoration business and little Louise was sometimes called upon to help out. Interestingly, Bourgeois introduced wax into her work in the last years of her career, just as Johns has introduced a catenary rope in his.

Neither Johns nor Bourgeois is identified by materials but by ideas—a good reason for all of us to eliminate the adjectives we use to define ourselves as artists. In that spirit, I'd like to consider nine contemporary artists who are working with a textile sensibility in wax, or integrating fiber and wax in ways that transcend conventional boundaries of textile thinking.



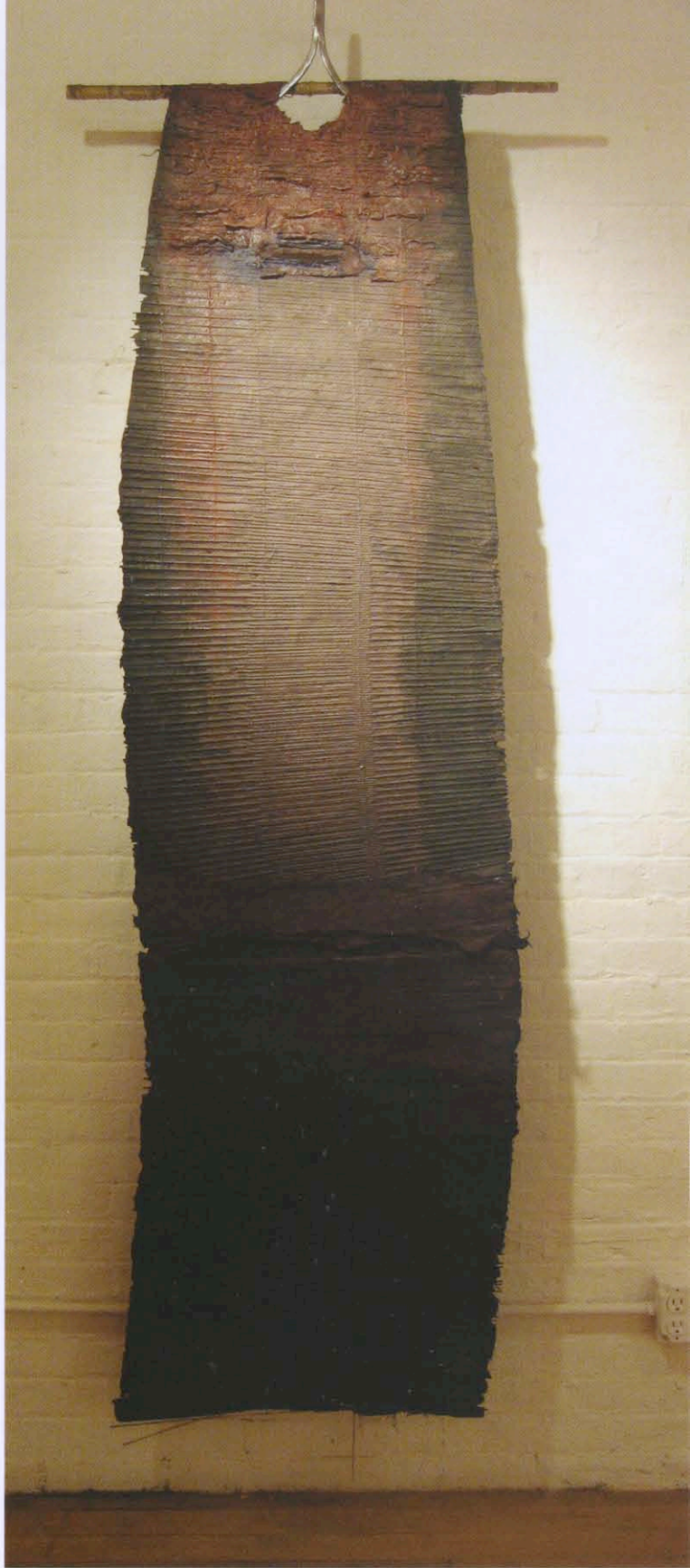
SAM MOYER *Worry Rug 5* Encaustic on deconstructed cotton rugs; diptych, each panel 53" x 32.5", 2009. Detail. Photo: Joanne Mattera.

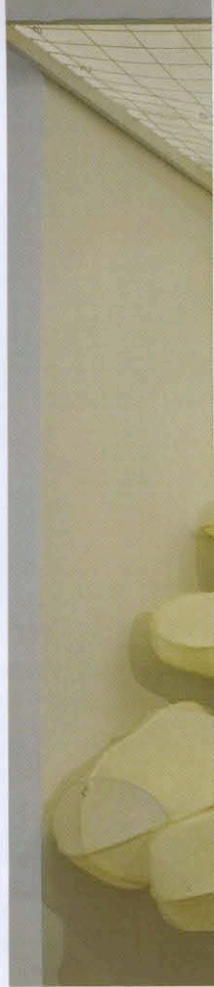
LEFT: **LOUISE BOURGEOIS** *Red Room (child)* Mixed media. Photo: Courtesy of Art © Louise Bourgeois Trust/Licensed by VAGA, New York, New York.

RIGHT: **JOAN GIORDANO** *Resonance* Pulp-dyed kozo painted with encaustic 96" x 24" x 7", 2007. Photo: Joanne Mattera.

Earlier this year, on a visit to the Lower East Side in Manhattan, I saw the work of **Sam Moyer** in a solo exhibition called *Shape Shifters*. Along two facing walls were eight framed hangings, all just over 50 inches high and 30 inches wide. Formally they are arrangements in black and white, of mass piled against negative space. Technically, they are deconstructed weavings that have been painted with black wax. But here's the thing: Moyer didn't actually weave them. She buys inexpensive cotton rag rugs from Ikea, pulls them apart until she gets the open structure she desires, and then coats them with wax. This is heresy to anyone thinking traditionally about craft and technique, but Moyer's wax-encrusted un-weavings provide a shockingly fresh, refreshingly irreverent take on medium and process.

Another artist who waxes a woven surface is **Joan Giordano**. Unlike Moyer, Giordano—the daughter of a dressmaker—creates the fabric herself. Working with kozo fiber, she creates elongated, garment-like structures she calls *Presences*. These are formal, graceful beauties that evoke the spiritual. The wax paint she applies to the surface has a connection to mud slathered onto fetish garments to protect the wearer, or oil rubbed onto wood to make it water resistant, even wax applied to root vegetables to preserve them. In other words, her process connects to human cultures throughout history while at the same time her forms, so laden with materiality, have a decidedly ethereal presence.





That place between the physical and the ethereal is also present in the work of **Valerie Hammond**. As a printmaker Hammond is known for her lyrical, large-scale images of hands trailing garlands of vines and flowers. Hammond looks to the garlands to suggest the physical world and to the hands—each unique and expressive—to convey the essence of things. In *Aether*, her solo show in Boston earlier this year, Hammond took the images into three dimensions, presenting a series of exquisite hands in cast wax. In one life-size sculpture, a single hand of dark brown wax emerges from a large pink blossom made of wax-covered silk. In another life-size work, two pale-hued wax hands each emerge from a lush bouquet of roses made of wax-dipped silk. This particular combination of fiber and wax, as well as the utterly poetic quality of the work, evokes longing, intimacy, perhaps prayer.

Using decidedly material means, **Lorrie Fredette** (who has worked as an upholsterer) creates sculptures that would seem to defy gravity. Fredette's sculptures, comprised of numerous bulbous elements invisibly suspended, appear to float toward and gather at the ceiling. Each element is made from a metal armature over which a skin of muslin is sewn. The muslin is then given a skin of wax, which Fredette melts into the fabric, making it translucent. Formally, Fredette's work is about the movement of organizational systems, but physically she has fused the two materials so completely that they are one.

Another group of artists works not with textiles but with a textile sensibility, a feel for fabric. **Nancy Natale** builds up her surfaces





Affinities
Fiber and Wax

TOP LEFT: **VALERIE HAMMOND** *Transition 2* Wax, silk, wire, 26" x 22" x 5", 2008. Photo: Joanne Mattera, courtesy of Walker Contemporary, Boston.
 BOTTOM LEFT: **NANCY NATALE** *The Boys of Liberty* Deconstructed book on panel with encaustic, oil stick, rubber, tacks, 16" x 12" x app. 2", 2010. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

ABOVE: **LORRIE FREDETTE** (*more/less*) *Reflective* Waxed muslin over wood and steel armature, 100 elements amassed and suspended within 95 square feet, 2010. Photo courtesy of the artist.
 BELOW: **BARBARA ELLMANN** *Foreign Affairs* Encaustic on 16 panels, 102" x 102" overall, 2008. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.



Joanne Mattera
Soie 2 Encaustic on panel 17" x 17", 2010. Photo courtesy of Arden Gallery, Boston.



Affinities



RENEE MAGNANTI *Kesi* Carved encaustic on panel, 20" x 16" x app. 4", 2007. This piece was inspired by a Qing Dynasty tapestry from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. Photo: Joanne Mattera.

RIGHT: DANIELLA WOOLF *Yours, Mine and Ours* Encaustic mixed media, 360" x 40" diameter, 2010. Installation in the stairwell of the Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History, Santa Cruz, California. Photo: rr Jones, courtesy of the artist.

with a mix of paper, rubber, tacks, and encaustic wax. The geometric patterns she creates are evocative of Ghanaian kente cloth, Navajo wedge weave and Amish quilts. Natale, who graduated from art school with a degree in painting, created what she calls "an unofficial minor in surface design" but looking at her work, would it surprise you to know that she is the granddaughter of a blacksmith?

Barbara Ellmann began painting textile patterns when she moved her studio into the Scalamandre Silks building in Long Island City, Queens, a few years ago. Call it "fiber by association." Working with a fluid hand in traditional encaustic, Ellman paints pattern swatches, one per panel, which she assembles into a quilt-like grid. In a work like *Foreign Affairs*, she incorporates spiralic designs from Aboriginal Australia, eccentric Turkish kilim patterns, hard-edge American quilt squares, translucent Middle Eastern paisleys, and jumpy Kuba geometries. In doing so, Ellmann not only connects the dots between and among cultures, she makes a tangible connection between ethnic expression and contemporary geometric abstraction.

Renee Magnanti makes quilts and batiks with a strong sense of painterliness, as well as paintings with a strong sense of cloth. She describes textile pattern as "an inspirational force" in her artmaking. Earlier this year I saw her small carved-wax paintings based on Chinese embroideries and Central Asian ikats. Their glorious materiality is the result of Magnanti's precise incursions into the surface. Magnanti even incised elements that suggest stitching. Each painting is a kind of "reverse embroidery"—dug into rather than built up, conceptually akin to reverse-appliqué molas. But you may also see similarities to Chinese lacquer work, which is carved from layers of natural resin; beeswax for encaustic is typically combined with about 15 percent damar resin for hardness, so the lacquer connection is not far fetched.

In my own work I'm creating small, reductive color fields in encaustic with the iridescent luminosity and visual hand of woven silk. I don't always intend for materiality to assert itself so dramatically, but coming from a family of weavers and tailors, I find that it just, well, rises to the surface. The formalist grid and the representation of warp and weft have become fairly inseparable for me, so with or without wax, my paintings and works on paper tend to evince connections to cloth.

While many artists working in encaustic have a background in textiles and incorporate textile techniques, few work on a scale as large as **Daniella Woolf**. Having shown an enormous environment of knotted ropes in the *7th Biennale of Tapestry* in Lausanne in 1975, Woolf remains involved with fiber, especially paper. These days, however, she is just as likely to be immersed in wax. Woolf amasses fragments of personal documents, machine stitches them together, dips them into wax, and then amasses them anew into large installations. Cancelled checks, yellowed Rolodex cards, anything flat enough to be stitched may find its way into Woolf's recycled and largely unreadable narratives. Fortunately the medium is the message.

There are many other artists who have exploited the affinity between fiber and wax. A short list would include Ellen Banks, Josef Beuys, Petah Coyne, and Richard Tuttle. Another place to pick up the thread would be Woolf's recently published book, *Encaustic with a Textile Sensibility*, a visual anthology that weaves together wax, thread, pattern, materiality and the grid.

—Joanne Mattera, author of *The Art of Encaustic Painting: Contemporary Expression in the Ancient Medium of Pigmented Wax and the Joanne Mattera Art Blog* (www.joannemattera.blogspot.com) is a widely exhibited painter who plies sumptuous color against reductive geometry, an esthetic she calls "lush minimalism."

