

# IT'S ONLY NATURAL

## DEBRA CLAFFEY WAXES POETIC

"I'm after the sensation of being with the plants I paint and experiencing their shapes and edges, transformed in line and mark, to two dimensions," said encaustic painter Debra Claffey, whose work is part of the "Beneath the Surface" exhibition on view through May 28 at the Saco Museum in Saco, Maine; it'll also be shown in "The Mark of the Brush" exhibition that'll take place May 23 through June 10 at the Truro Center for the Arts at Castle Hill in Truro, Mass. in conjunction with the Tenth International Encaustic Conference.

"The natural world is such a big part of what I choose to paint. My studies in horticulture for my gardening business were an eye-opener to the magnificence of natural systems, such that it became an imperative for me. Plants are so intelligent and adaptable. I loved learning about their communication processes, the cooperation between and among species for self-defense and mutual benefit."

To look at a Claffey painting is to be drawn closely into the natural world she works with and reinterprets. Her use of encaustic increases this sense of being a part of natural processes, with layers partly hidden and lines drawn or incised, mixing foliage and leaf patterns with vestiges of objects from her studio. Some are encaustic over oil monotypes on panels, some are wax and pigment stick on paper on panel. All feature a limited color palette, their graphic qualities emphasized, with a focus on rhythm and nuance in line and pattern.

"It became important to me to share that the natural world is not filled with objects for our use or abuse, but living systems that we are but one part of. It's a change of mindset, losing the sense of separateness of 'I'm me and all that is out there' to 'It's all us: stars and soil, and atoms, and air, all we,'" Claffey observed. "So, if you accept, as I do, that the

artist's role is to dig deep into experience and report back, then taking nature as my focal point is a logical step. That's what I want to be thinking about and feeling about when I'm in the studio painting."

Claffey is an advocate for the process of encaustic, as an artist, a curator and a member of the artists' group New England Wax. She said she finds encaustic seductive, tactile, immediately rewarding, and yet surprisingly complex. "It is very easy to get images and compositions that please, but it can be more difficult to put the medium in service to your own content. The rewards include not having to wait for layers to dry, transparency and translucency, colors that won't yellow over time, and a soft gloss surface that needn't be varnished. It can be painted, poured, scratched into, carved, layered, embossed, impressed, or cast. There are endless oppor-

*Cool on Blue Water*, pigment stick, oil, encaustic, graphite on panel, 2016, 36" x 36".



**BENEATH THE SURFACE**  
SACO MUSEUM  
371 MAIN STREET  
SACO, MAINE  
THROUGH MAY 28:

**THE MARK OF THE BRUSH**  
TRURO CENTER FOR THE ARTS AT CASTLE HILL  
10 MEETINGHOUSE ROAD  
TRURO, MASSACHUSETTS  
MAY 23 THROUGH JUNE 10

**VISION AND VERSE**  
UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND ART GALLERY  
PORTLAND, MAINE  
JULY 6 THROUGH OCTOBER 2

**BALANCING ACTS, FIVE NEW ENGLAND ARTISTS WHO USE WAX IN THEIR WORK**  
TWIGGS GALLERY  
BOSCAWEN, NEW HAMPSHIRE  
JULY 30 THROUGH SEPTEMBER 4

**SOLO EXHIBITION**  
GALLETLY GALLERY  
NEW HAMPTON SCHOOL  
NEW HAMPTON, NEW HAMPSHIRE  
NOVEMBER 1 THROUGH DECEMBER 9



## Artist Profile

tunities to experiment with its material qualities and sometimes that becomes the challenge. It's very easy to get lost in what the paint can do and forget what you were trying to say."

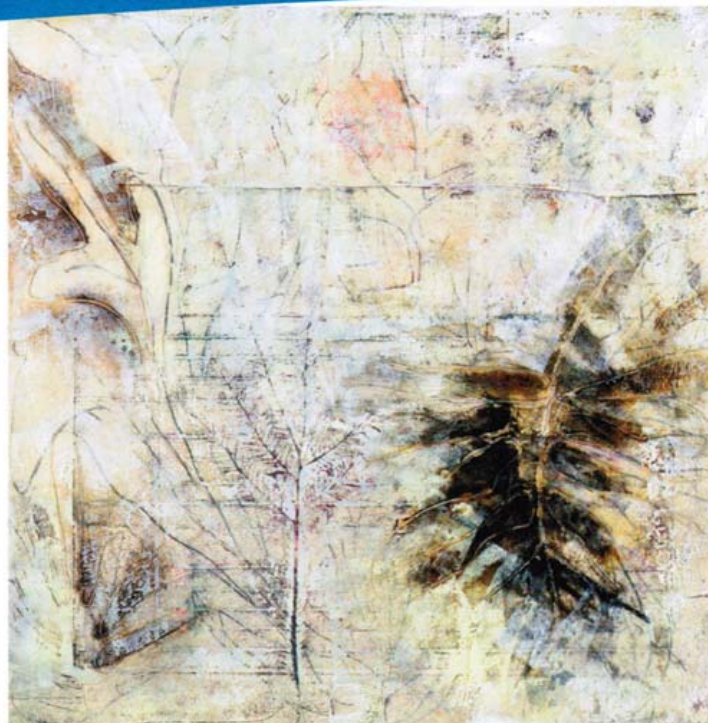
Claffey took a circuitous route to art, saying that her life has been "full of tangential journeys," including jobs as a receptionist, grocery manager, truck driver/deliveryman, stockbroker, graphic designer and bookkeeper. In high school in the late 1960s, she was advised to head for an English major and a teaching career. When that began to feel like a dead end, in her 20s, she took her first painting class at Westfield State College in western Massachusetts.

"It was something I'd always wanted but felt that there wasn't time for," she said. "I read about the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston (SMFA) and started to apply. Arno Maris, then chair of the Art Department at Westfield, persuaded me to enroll there for two years for some basic training. Then came a divorce, a change of job, and suddenly I was headed to Boston with my clothes, guitar and paints in a Honda Civic." Once at the SMFA, she began to discover artists who spoke to her.

"Today I find it incredible that after four years of high school and two years of college, I didn't know who Henri Matisse was. But it turned out that the magazine reproduction of a painting of a woman seated in an armchair that I had cut out and kept pinned to my wall for years while I worked in a grocery store was by Matisse. Then Cezanne, Picasso, Vuillard, Käthe Kollwitz, Alice Neel – each enthralled me and I couldn't get enough. I realize now that it was the experience of a life consciously lived and shared through art-making that pulled at me. But the greatest impact came from learning that making art never stops challenging, it's never mastered, never completed."

Claffey is mostly in the studio afternoons and evenings. She finds that regular times, continuity and freedom from interruption work best. By working in a small barn on her property, "daily life" is kept at bay during her studio hours. "For many years I worked at freelance jobs and was in the studio two or three days per week. Fifteen years ago I began a garden maintenance business that operated spring, summer and fall, so I set aside November to April for full-time studio work. I have just downsized my business, so I am looking forward to working full-time in the studio."

Whether gardening or not, nature remains the primary theme in Claffey's work. "I like to work in series on several pieces at a time.



*The Singing Tree*, oil monotype, paper, oil, pigment stick, graphite on panel, 2016, 24" x 24".

I'll work with a theme, like plant life and foliage, or still life, until I lose interest, which can be a long time. I've been using the plant life in my studio for models for 10 years or more."

Asked what she hopes viewers will take away from her work, Claffey replied, "I would be so happy to be able to transmit my experience of being alive, today, on Planet Earth, to those who look at my work. And perhaps make them a little more sensitive to and respecting of all the other forms of life around us. It's not a direct transference, I know. I think I'm saying such and such and who knows what the viewer is hearing or seeing, but I do put myself into it, and hope that all those intangibles and sensations that are beyond verbalizing actually get in there and get sent out into the universe."

Discover more about Claffey's work and the encaustic process at [debraclaffey.com](http://debraclaffey.com), which includes her blog, Making Something Out of Nothing.

| Marcia Santore



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