



# THE PARIS REVIEW

## Painting with Fire: A Visit with Betsy Eby

By [Liz Arnold](#) March 10, 2014

### STUDIO VISIT



*SANGUINE II, 2009.*

*Encaustic means “to burn.” The ethereal quality of Betsy Eby’s encaustic paintings belies the labor-intensive process of their making—an ancient method involving heated wax, damar resin (the sap of*



*a Southeast Asian pine), and pigment applied in translucent veils with brushes and knives. Using a blowtorch, she liquefies the wax and fuses the layers with fire.*

*Eby's solo show, "[Painting with Fire](#)," is now at the Morris Museum in Augusta, Georgia. Eby is also a classical pianist, and many of her works are titled for musical pieces; her delicate compositions often seem to possess fluttering rhythms reminiscent of piano music. Eby is steeped in the Romantic era's exploration of the interplay of senses. In a new book, [Betsy Eby](#), art historian David Houston contributes an essay about synesthesia in her work, exploring the connections between sound and image. He mentions Baudelaire's idea of correspondence, "anchored in the belief that sensory experiences can correspond to common emotions." One of the surprising benefits to viewing Eby's work in person is the engagement of another sense—smell—in the presence of natural beeswax. Drawing from poets and philosophers, composers and*



*visual artists, her paintings resonate as much with history as they do modernity.*

*I recently spoke with Eby from her studio in Columbus, Georgia, where she lives with her husband, the Realist painter Bo Bartlett, in his childhood home. (The Morris Museum is also hosting a concurrent show of Bartlett's work, "Paintings from Home.")*





I go back and forth between hot wax and cold wax, pouring, and vertical and horizontal application. I'm less interested in the formulaic rigors. In "pure" encaustic painting, you have these little tins that hold melted wax in different colors. There's a greater methodical process. I'm more attracted to going back and forth between hot and cold wax, because it allows me to have a more intuitive approach to mixing color, and application. I want to really push the luminosity and get my gestures quite thin at times.

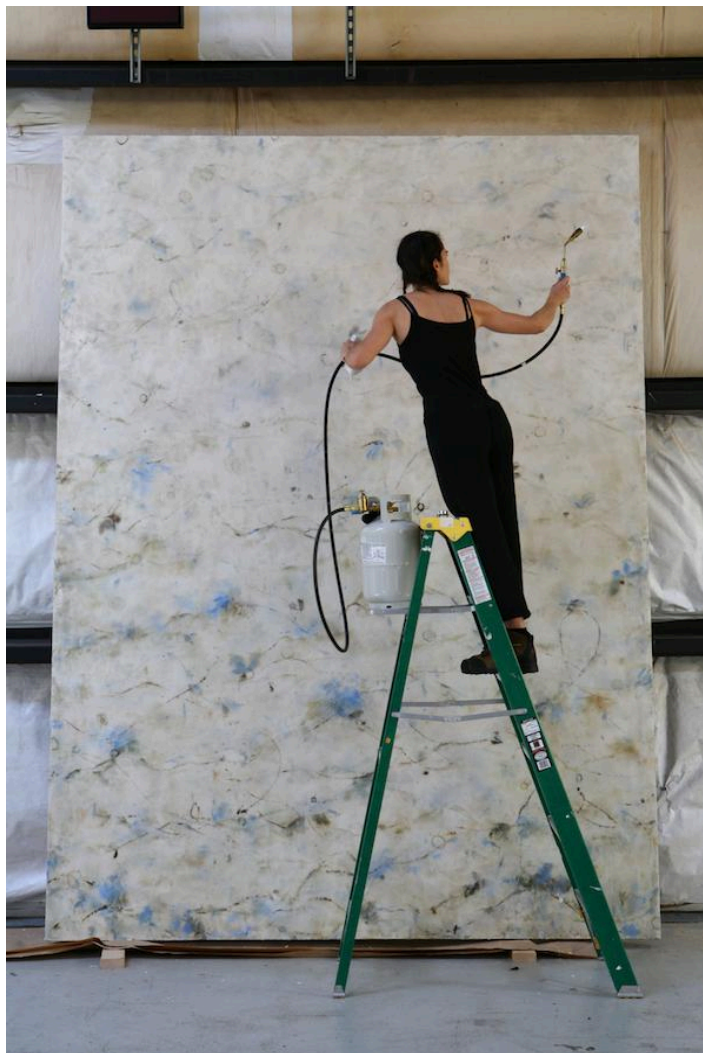
You can layer and layer and layer wax, so you're suggesting the layers beyond. I do that through tonal variations, just like anybody else who gets their underpainting down, but the underpainting is always a consideration of what I want to sacrifice and push back, to give the illusion of receding space.

You can tint the waxes in a particular way, so you get these scrimms of obfuscation. The material can be manipulated even further to push things back in space, but as I continue to work I'll leave more of an impasto



on the surface, to leave something as though it's closer to us at hand.

There is something about the way that when they're lit properly, they feel like they're lit from within—it's a very mysterious property. It's the quality I was trying to achieve, and until I refined my technique of working with this material, I wasn't able to achieve it.





I think my study of antiquities grew out of my primary study of classical piano, perhaps, because that's a nod back to ancient composers. I had a grandmother who spent most of her life as the only white person on the Indian reservation. She ran a general store. She loved fine things and antiquities, beauty and old objects, and I think that opened my eyes to look beyond the surface of things, and maybe that's what led me to the study of history.

I was raised in the wilds of the Pacific Northwest, raised as a country girl, and then transplanted into the suburbs. I always felt a certain longing for place and meaning and history that I lost in that move as a kid. My first access to reclaiming that sense of meaning and sentiment and nostalgia was through studying art history and the ancients.



*LA SONNAMBULA, 2011.*

When you start playing music at the age of five, it's just all in you. It's the way that you move through the world and perceive it—you see rhythms everywhere. You see what you look for—the phrase—and what you become steeped in; that shapes the lens through which you see



the world. So certainly the music is in me. It's in me inherently.

Sometimes I'll be working on a piece and I'll hear a piece of music and think, That's what this piece is, and it'll come to me that way. Sometimes I'll be working on a piece at the piano and think, I want to paint that piece. It's not really just one approach to getting there.

Theoretically I appreciate Baudelaire, as I do Mallarmé. They believed similarly—Baudelaire in synesthesia and Mallarmé in unifying synthesis. I think they're the same thing. They were both Symbolists and wrote of better lands where beauty flourishes with perfumed stars. But Baudelaire's writings are too full of angels and demons for me, and too held by Christian duality, and Mallarmé is oblique. I love the work of Yeats because while his writing employs all these ideals, and he acknowledges the symbols that ground us, he strives to push past those symbols and into the Zen essence of life itself. He was a mystic of sorts. So was Scriabin, the Russian composer.





As for synesthesia in music, Debussy was doing images—he titled his pieces “Images.” You get a sense through his music that there’s a flurry, or sometimes he can delicately suspend things in a way that seems supernatural. Of course Whistler was playing with the idea of nocturnes in his Nocturne paintings, where nocturnes would normally be a piece of music. That kind of borrowing of the senses really excites me.

I visited with third- and fifth-graders recently, and one student asked, “Why are you a painter?” It was one of



the more challenging questions. The more I thought about it, the more I realized I wanted to have a voice—and it occurred to me over time—I wanted to give a voice to the unsayable. What is it about a resonating musical line that sends you into nostalgia or melancholy? That's that world of the unsayable. That sense of ambiguity, of trying to create something that isn't absorbed just at first pass—I think that taps the quality of musical sound.





SPEIGEL IM SPEIGEL, 2011.

Going back to Debussy—I think he sometimes gets a little bit of a bad rap because he’s so popularized for “Clair de Lune,” which is in every elevator—but he was working with such complex music, and he was always trying to evoke the senses in such a different way. He was trying to take an instrument that’s a percussive instrument and push the bounds—the hammer is striking the strings.

Debussy struggled a lot. He would compose this music and he had an intention for how he wanted it to be played. And then he would turn it over to musicians, and he was often frustrated at their lack of ability to translate the senses. There’s a story that he was listening to somebody perform his music and he kept interrupting them, saying, “Stop stop, no—*dewier, dewier.*” It’s that sense of succulence and veils between it and us that the musicians weren’t able to convey.



There are not very many painters working in encaustic. I don't know why that is. I think it's demanding. You have to have a studio set up with the conditions and ventilation. It's a really slow learning curve, too—it's the slowest, slowest learning curve. Maybe those are impediments. And I think the reality is we're living in a time when the quick image is very popular. This process is not conducive to making a quick image.

In the South, we're savoring these big studios that are full of natural light. It allows me to see beyond where I



was seeing before—it's hard to go back once you're worked under pure, abundant, natural light. Bo and I go back and forth between Georgia and Maine. We let go of the West Coast house, and that was predominantly because of lack of light.



*CASTA DIVA, 2011.*

Ironically it's making me focus more on nocturnal work—I'm taking a turn toward darker work. Maybe that's a puzzle to be solved by psychologists or something, but I think it's because you can really see delicacy of tonalities. I'm really delighting in these



pieces right now with light emerging from darkness—I [Instagrammed a piece](#) recently, *Copernican (after Górecki)*.



*COPERNICAN (AFTER GÓRECKI), 2013.*

I'm interested in shimmering qualities and luminosity—I'm always interested in luminosity—and playing with those in a different way than I have been



able to before. And the results of that are yet to come, as far as my next body of work.

The paintings hover between material and immaterial. Material because of their obvious surface and receding depth allure, and immaterial because of the lapping ephemeral content that doesn't hold still. To me, that strange intersection between the material and immaterial reminds me of all that is fleeting and fragile—the very thing with which poets and philosophers have always wrestled.

*Painting With Fire, a solo show of Betsy Eby's work, is at the Morris Museum of Art in Augusta, Georgia, through June 1, and will travel to the Center for Maine Contemporary Art in August.*

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