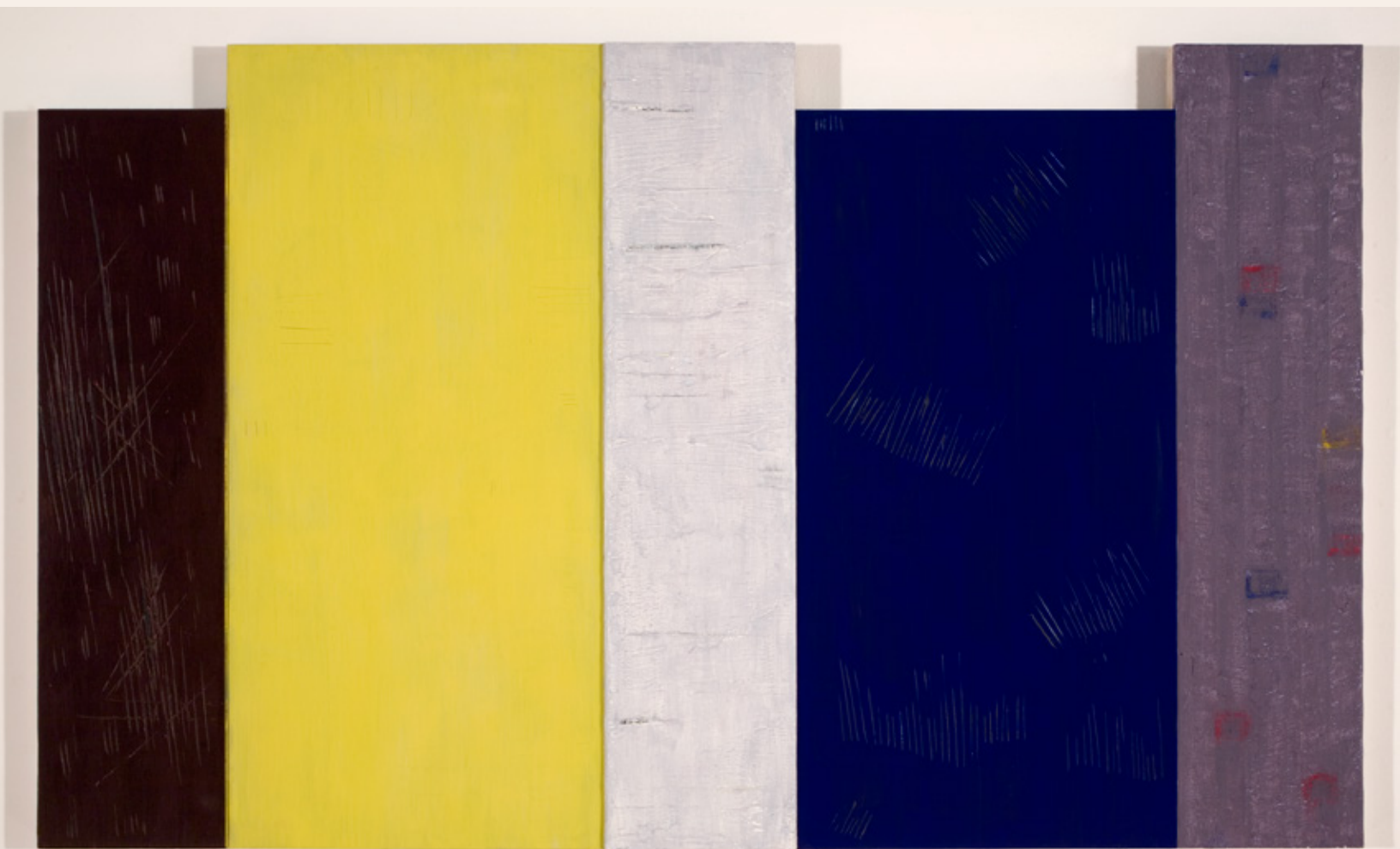


Encaustic Art at the Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery

Louis Comtois, Marc Garneau, Marion Wagschal, and Tony Scherman

By Isabelle Hawkins



Comtois, Louis, *Surface Events #2*, oil and wax on wood, metal, plaster, and cement, 1984, (Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery).

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Introduction

Traditional encaustic painting involves mixing melted beeswax with pigment, applying it to a support, and then reheating the surface to “burn in” the colours.¹ The term encaustic comes from the Greek word *enkaustikos*, which translates to “burn in.”² Artists have also liquified wax by adding an alkali to emulsify it, or have dissolved it in either turpentine, mineral spirits, or carbon tetrachloride.³ Others have applied wax to a support in its unaltered, cold state, and scraped it away to define the surface of their works.⁴ Because encaustic techniques are so varied, there is a long history of debate regarding what qualifies as encaustic. Given the range of practices I am considering in my research, I believe it best to accept a broad definition of encaustic: any painting that incorporates wax as a medium.

Using the 1980s and 1990s encaustic revival as a reference point, I examine four encaustic paintings in the Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery’s permanent collection—by Louis Comtois, Marc Garneau, Marion Wagschal, and Tony Scherman—to consider how they both align with and diverge from larger trends among concurrent encaustic artists. In Comtois’s *Surface Events #2* (1984), the luminosity and volume of encaustic imbues the work with more energy than other mediums would allow. On the other hand, wax’s unique surface qualities unintentionally obscure the texture of the wood in parts of Garneau’s *Trinité* (1996). Wagschal’s *Bi-polar Landscape* (1996), employs encaustic to attract and repel viewers, while Scherman’s *Napoleon’s Last Shave* (1995–1997) uses wax to amplify the tension between the two-dimensional surface of the work and the three-dimensional space within the portrait.

I have chosen to present these findings in an electronic zine with embedded videos because the materiality of encaustic is a central focus of my project. I believe that short video clips of selected works convey the surface qualities of these paintings more accurately than a photograph or a written description.

Timeline

To offer further background on the encaustic medium, this timeline charts the known emergence, disappearances, and revivals of encaustic.

77 CE

The earliest known mention of encaustic painting appears in Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*.⁵ In book 35, Pliny refers to paintings by the Greek artist Polygnotos who lived during the fifth century BCE, which suggests that encaustic was an established technique long before the Common Era.⁶

Middle Ages

From the Middle Ages onward, the less complicated tempera, fresco, and oil paint supplanted encaustic in popularity.¹⁰

1752

The first major encaustic revival was initiated by the comte de Caylus (1692-1765), a prominent French antiquarian.¹² In 1752, he began conducting experiments with a chemist and painter to determine the encaustic formula used in ancient paintings.¹³ Caylus sought to prove that ancient paint was more durable and artistically superior.¹⁴ He exhibited an encaustic painting made with his newly discovered technique in 1754 but did not reveal his methods.¹⁵ In 1755, the French philosopher and art critic Denis Diderot (1713-1784) anonymously published a treatise on wax painting and claimed that Caylus had not perfected the ancient encaustic technique because he used turpentine.¹⁶ The subsequent debate between these figures drew much attention to encaustic and inspired many artists such as the French painter Carle Vanloo to experiment with the medium.¹⁷

0–199 CE

The earliest surviving examples of encaustic painting are Fayum funeral portraits on small wooden panels attached to Egyptian mummy cases from the first and second centuries CE.⁷ These works were likely painted by Roman or Greek artists residing in Egypt, who adapted the older Egyptian practice of effigy masks to a new medium.⁸ Egyptian masks were traditionally composed of linen soaked in plaster, then were gilded or painted with mineral pigment.⁹

Renaissance

There is some evidence of a minor encaustic revival during the Renaissance, as several artists such as Lucas Cranach (1472-1553) and Andrea Mantegna (1431-1506) are reputed to have experimented with the medium, though none of their works have survived.¹¹

Left: Figure 2, *Portrait of a man with a mole on his nose*, encaustic on limewood, 130-150 CE, (Metropolitan Museum of Art), <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/547857>.

Right: Figure 3, *Portrait of a young woman in red*, encaustic on limewood with gold leaf, 90-120 CE, (Metropolitan Museum of Art), <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/547860>.



1980s–1990s



Figure 4, Vien, Joseph-Marie, *Minerva*, encaustic and oil on wood panel, 1754, (Hermitage Museum), https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Joseph-Marie_Vien_-_Minerva_1754.jpg.

In the 1980s and 1990s, there was an explosion of interest in encaustic. Several factors contributed to this revival. First, the availability of electric heating equipment and commercially prepared materials made encaustic easier to work with.²⁴ Second, Karl Zerbe, a prominent artist and the head of painting at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston from 1937 to 1955, championed the medium through his teaching and exhibitions, inspiring many students and peers to start working with encaustic.²⁵ Third, the American artists Jasper Johns, Brice Marden, and Lynda Benglis created encaustic paintings in the 1960s and 1970s that were highly influential because of their makers' status in the art world.²⁶ For instance, Johns's works were significant sources of inspiration for Tony Scherman.²⁷ Fourth, beginning in the 1980s, there was a broader turn towards painting as a reaction to the dematerialized minimal and conceptual art practices of the 1960s and 1970s.²⁸ In response to the detached intellectualism of these styles, artists began making more expressive art.²⁹ Finally, many

Canadian and American painters who took up encaustic during this period did so for wax's unique and particular qualities. Some mobilized wax's skin-like properties to reference the human body.³⁰ Others preferred encaustic for its thick, adjustable, transparent, sensuous, or ethereal surface quality.³¹ Many also valued wax's versatility and malleability,³² or its ability to render rich colours.³³ Finally, some used wax because it absorbs light, making it a more luminous medium than acrylic or oil paint.³⁴

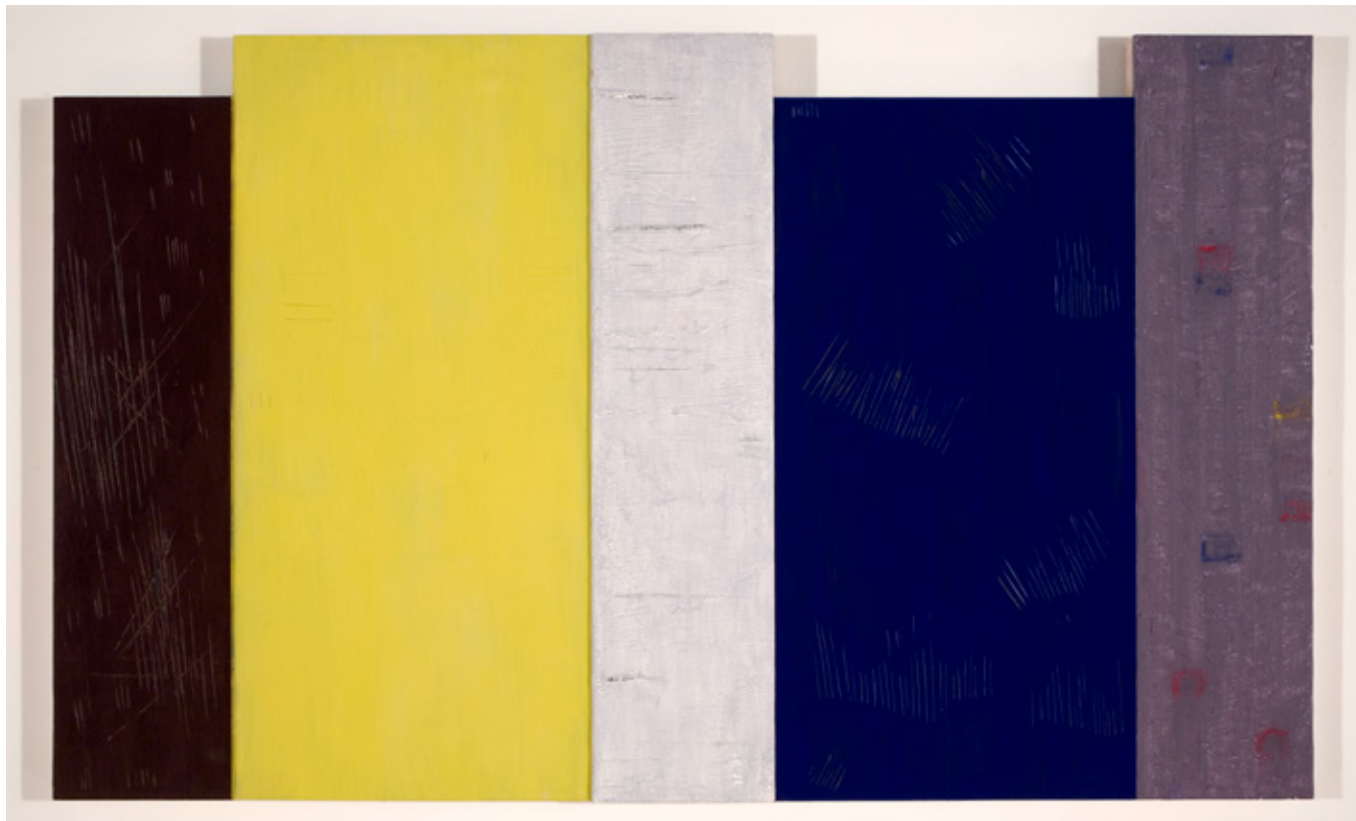
1754–1900

Following the first encaustic revival, interest in the medium spread throughout Europe.¹⁸ While the 18th century revivals can be read in the context of Neo-Classicism, 19th century uses were more Romantic, motivated by desire for simplicity.¹⁹ Paillot de Montabert (1771-1849), a French painter and key encaustic theorist for the first half of the 18th century, believed that using a more naive technique, encaustic, would result in a purer, truer style of painting.²⁰ Influenced by the 1884 publication of *L'Encaustique et les autres procédés de peinture chez les anciens* by artist and writer Henry Cros and scientist and philosopher Charles Henry, several Impressionist and Symbolist artists such as Paul Gauguin experimented with encaustic in the 1880s and 1890s.²¹ By the late 19th century, encaustic was commonly used in Europe and North America.²² In England, painter and writer W. B. Sarsfield Taylor published *A Manual of Fresco and Encaustic Painting* in 1843 and painter and writer Sir Charles Eastlake included a chapter on encaustic and fresco in his influential history of oil painting, inspiring many artists to experiment with wax for wall decorations.²³



Figure 5, Zerbe, Karl, *Penny-Gaff*, encaustic on canvas, 1946, (McNay Art Museum), <https://collection.mcnay-art.org/objects/1198/penny-gaff>.

Louis Comtois



Comtois, Louis, *Surface Events #2*, oil and wax on wood, metal, plaster, and cement, 1984, (Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery).

Louis Comtois (1945–1990) was born in Montreal, Quebec.³⁵ He studied at the Cégep de Saint-Laurent and graduated from the École des beaux-arts de Montreal in 1968, before travelling across Europe and moving permanently to New York City in 1973.³⁶ In the late 1960s, Comtois painted in the Hard Edge style inspired by Les Plasticiens and American abstract artists.³⁷ In 1970, he started working with anodized aluminum collages, but soon abandoned the material and the hard edge style in favour of monochrome paintings with subtle variations between colour planes.³⁸ By the early 1980s, he had discarded traditional canvas and begun painting on supports composed of wood, metal, plaster, and cement.³⁹ During his most experimental period, the mid-1980s, he explored new forms, colour combinations, and mediums, notably encaustic.⁴⁰

This piece, *Surface Events #2* (1984), consists of oil and wax on five vertical panels composed of wood, metal, plaster, and cement. Each rectangle, which varies in height, thickness, and depth, is painted a different colour—brown, yellow, white, blue, or purple—with underlying hues often peeking through scratches and thin layers of paint. Because these panels have distinct textures, sizes, positions, and colours, they repel each other.⁴¹ I argue that the luminosity and volume of encaustic imbues *Surface Events #2* with more energy than other mediums would allow.

Though colour is often the most striking feature of Comtois's paintings, his primary concern and consistent focus since the 1970s was light through colour, or in his own words, "la lumière par la couleur."⁴² Comtois worked with wood, metal, plaster, and cement because each absorbs or reflects light in a particular way.⁴³ This is also true of encaustic. While the acrylic paint he privileged until the mid 1980s is more prone to reflecting light, wax absorbs it, producing a matte finish with a faint inner glow.⁴⁴ This faint inner glow was also one of Comtois's key priorities. After constructing the supports for his paintings, he always applied multiple layers of white primer to make the subsequent colours more luminous.⁴⁵ Comtois likely appreciated the natural luminosity of wax, which made his layering technique more pronounced.

Incisions and visible brushstrokes further enhance the play of light on the surface of this painting. The title of this work suggests that these marks are events, aligning Comtois with process-oriented Abstract Expressionist artists such as Lee Krasner and Jackson Pollock. The thickness of wax gives these scratches more depth and conspicuousness. In addition to wood, metal, plaster, and cement, encaustic is one of many tools Comtois uses to build up the surface of his painting.

Because of its luminosity and volume, the medium imbues the surface of this work with energy and tension. Many artists working with encaustic during the 1980s and 1990s, such as Rachel Friedberg and Hiro Yokose, were similarly drawn to its luminosity, malleability, and bulkiness. Though the particularities of their techniques differ, Comtois saw in wax the same possibilities as many of his contemporaries.

Marc Garneau



Garneau, Marc, *Trinité*, pigment and wax on plywood, 1996, (Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery).

Marc Garneau (b. 1956) was born in Thetford Mines, Quebec. He studied fine arts at the Cégep du Vieux Montreal beginning in 1974, and later completed his bachelor's and master's degrees at Concordia University.⁴⁶ Garneau's most influential professor was Yves Gaucher, who advised him on his choice of medium, preparation of materials, and colour compositions.⁴⁷ In 1976, Garneau started working in carpentry and developed a knowledge of woodworking that would inform his interest in painting on wood.⁴⁸ Though he has aligned himself with Les Automatistes and American Abstract Expressionists, he has also noted that his work “seems to correspond to no particular school, no identifiable current.”⁴⁹ Inspired by the idea of “*revenir à la base*” (“returning to basics”),⁵⁰ Garneau turned from paint to fire in the 1990s,⁵¹ producing little conventional painting during the following years.⁵²

This piece, *Trinité* (1996), features three plywood crosses cut with a chainsaw, then burned, gouged, and sealed. Garneau's decision to use a cross was motivated less by its religious connotations than by what he described as "*simplement la force de la croix*" ("simply the force of the cross").⁵³ When the triptych is displayed as intended⁵⁴—with each arm of the cross touching the adjacent piece—it resembles four thick lines more than three crosses. Garneau's burned works often feature plywood, a material he favours for its commonplace origins, deceptively complex composition, and utilitarian purpose.⁵⁵ Plywood is made of several thin layers of wood glued together. In *Trinité's* lightest cross, the outer layer of plywood has been almost entirely removed, exposing deeper layers through two incised lines speckled with dots of adhesive inherent to the composite material. After burning his works, a process Garneau refers to as painting,⁵⁶ the wood becomes covered in ash, which then rubs off upon touch.⁵⁷ To keep his pieces intact, the artist experimented with various sealants.⁵⁸ He spent about a month working with furniture restorers in Magog who, after understanding he was an artist and not a competitor, explained their technique for sealing wood.⁵⁹ The first sealant he used was acrylic, but he soon abandoned it because it gave the surfaces a mirror-like sheen.⁶⁰ He then turned to beeswax sealants—which he used for the two darker crosses in *Trinité*—but found that it changed the patina of the work unfavourably.⁶¹ Eventually, Garneau tried shellac, which melts completely into the work and is barely noticeable.⁶² The lighter cross in *Trinité* is sealed with shellac.⁶³ While many encaustic artists of the 1980s and 1990s turned to wax to achieve a particular surface quality, here, the conspicuousness of this wax sealant was not a deliberate aesthetic choice but the result of a search for a suitable finish.

Garneau's process of burning wood has been likened to the shedding of skin.⁶⁴ Fire eats through the layered surface of plywood—structured not unlike human skin—leaving behind a dark, cracked, and flaky patch that resembles a scab. Rather than remaining exposed, as the artist initially intended, the surface is covered by a wax sealant. While many works created during the encaustic revival of the 1980s and 1990s mobilized wax for its distinctive texture, this piece accentuates wax's particular surface qualities, but to the detriment of the artist's intentions.

Marion Wagschal



Wagschal, Marion, *Bi-Polar Landscape*, wax and oil on canvas, 1996, (Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery).

Marion Wagschal (b. 1943) was born in Port of Spain, Trinidad to Jewish parents who had fled Nazi Germany. She moved to Montreal, Quebec, in 1951 at the age of nine.⁶⁵ She completed her undergraduate and graduate degrees at Concordia University, where she later became a professor in the Department of Painting and Drawing.⁶⁶ Wagschal's interest in art dates back to her upbringing in Trinidad, and focused first on painting biblical figures.⁶⁷ In the late 1960s and early 1970s, she began painting portraits from life,⁶⁸ becoming less concerned with realism and then with conveying the experience of being with that person.⁶⁹ She is best known for portraits that both attract and repel. While intimate compositions and intricate patches of colour draw viewers in, the brutal honesty with which she renders her sitters' flaws pushes them away.

This piece, *Bi-Polar Landscape* (1996), is composed of wax and oil on canvas. It depicts a field of colour with no discernable foreground or horizon line, marked by a red orb on the leftmost side and a black orb on the right. Wagschal began working with beeswax after developing a sensitivity to the solvents used in oil painting.⁷⁰ She appreciated wax for its thickness, warmth, sensuality, and “full body” presence.⁷¹ She often used wax for landscapes, as she found that the medium was better suited to large-format works.⁷²

Though not one of her typical portraits, this work exhibits a similar tension between attraction and repulsion, which is accentuated by the encaustic medium. Measuring 198.1 x 254 cm, it can only be apprehended in full from a certain distance. At the same time, the red and black circles on the left and right sides pull the eye to each pole. The globs of encaustic that emerge from the work are most conspicuous in the centre of the painting. While the circles command attention because of their colour, the wax sticks out because of its volume. The size of this work asks viewers to step back, while its complexity demands that they step forward. Furthermore, this painting establishes a tension between uncanniness and warmth. The landscape this piece depicts has no real-world referent. Rather, it resembles some nightmarish apocalyptic future or a distant planet unfit for human life. On the other hand, wax is a warm material, not only in its colour, but in its sensuality. According to art historian Brian Foss, “Wagschal is, above all, a painter of touch.”⁷³ The wax globs on the surface of the work index the brush fibers used to apply it, compelling viewers to reach out and run their fingers across it.

Like many artists working during the encaustic revival of the 1980s and 1990s, Wagschal uses wax to generate a textured, warm, detailed, and thick surface. Though she might have been inspired to start using wax for practical reasons—her sensitivity to oil solvents—it ultimately heightens the attraction and repulsion her works elicit.

Tony Scherman



Scherman, Tony, *Napoleon's Last Shave*, encaustic on canvas, 1995-1997, (Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery).

Tony Scherman (1950-2023) was born in Toronto, Ontario, spent his young adult life in Paris and London, and returned to Toronto in 1976.⁷⁴ He first experimented with encaustic at the Royal College of Art in London after a tutor suggested it might renew his waning interest in painting.⁷⁵ Scherman worked with microcrystalline wax, a petroleum-derived material that is more resistant to cracking than beeswax,⁷⁶ using a traditional hot wax technique applied in layers to achieve a mix comparable to oil paint.⁷⁷ His practice often unfolded in series engaging with Greek mythology, Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, popular culture, and the French Revolution.⁷⁸ The work considered here, *Napoleon's Last Shave* (1995-1997), belongs to the *Chasing Napoleon* series.

Surprisingly, Scherman did not enjoy working with encaustic. He has stated that “not a day goes by that I don’t curse it.”⁷⁹ When asked if he had advice for other painters experimenting with the medium, he began his answer with “I think encaustic is the worst medium ever invented.”⁸⁰ Instead, he used encaustic because he had “a very specific purpose in mind.”⁸¹ Scherman, like Comtois, Garneau, and Wagschal, appreciated encaustic for the way it draws attention to the surfaces of his paintings. Because his pieces are realistic, they create three-dimensional space. The volume and impasto of encaustic, however, accentuates the two-dimensional surface of the canvas.⁸² The resulting tension between dimensions—between in and on—lies at the core of Scherman’s practice.⁸³

While he could have achieved comparable impasto with other painting mediums, wax is special not only for its thickness, but because of its longstanding association with skin. Wax’s skin-like materiality also drew other encaustic artists Byron Kim and Mia Westerlund Roosen to the medium in the 1980s and 1990s. Like skin, wax moves, warms upon touch, cracks under strain, and is sensitive to heat.⁸⁴ The association between wax and skin is made explicit through many historical uses of the material. Anatomical votive objects, which originated in Ancient Greece in the fifth century BCE at the latest, are wax objects formed to represent a body or body part that corresponded to a favour being asked of a deity.⁸⁵ In Renaissance Italy, wax was the most common material for anatomical votive offerings because it resembled flesh and could be cast from a votary’s body.⁸⁶ Wax effigies and death masks have existed for millenia. In Ancient Rome, *cerae* (“wax effigies”) originated in patrician funerary observances, where maximum fidelity to life was the “first principle.”⁸⁷ Beginning in the seventeenth century in Europe, wax was used to form anatomical models for medical teaching because it permitted an exceptional realism.⁸⁸ I have laboured on the connection between wax and skin to further complicate the in/on paradox in Scherman’s work. As skin is the surface of the human body, wax is at once the literal surface of this painting, a representation of skin (the surface of the body), and skin-like in its materiality. This multiplication of surfaces and skin heightens the in/on tension in this work. Because of wax’s historical and material connection to skin, encaustic is the ideal medium for Scherman’s “specific purpose.”

Conclusion

Encaustic is a highly adaptable medium. In Comtois's *Surface Events #2*, wax's luminosity and volume brings energy to the surface of the work. In Garneau's *Trinité*, the wax sealant inadvertently obscures the texture of the wood. In Wagschal's *Bi-polar Landscape* (1996), wax attracts and repels viewers. Finally, Scherman's *Napoleon's Last Shave* (1995–1997) employs wax to heighten the tension between two-dimensional and three-dimensional space. Comtois, Garneau, Wagschal, and Scherman were drawn to the medium for similar reasons as other artists working during the 1980s and 1990s encaustic revival. However, these works have distinct effects and formal qualities, demonstrating the incredible versatility of encaustic.

Endnotes

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33. Judith Cotton, Barbara Ellman, and Heather Hutchison consider colour an essential advantage of encaustic (Stavitsky, *Waxing Poetic*, 30–47.).
34. Artists who make use of wax’s luminosity include Robin Rose, Rachel Friedberg, Michelle Stuart, Joan Giordano, Paul Hunter, Hiro Yokose, Cynthia Knott, Joanne Mattera, Heather Hutchison, and Susan Fisher (Stavitsky, *Waxing Poetic*, 36–47; Fluid Studio, “About Susan Fisher.”).
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Isabelle Hawkins is a first year student in Concordia University's Master's of Art History program. Her research focuses on contemporary North American art, particularly wax sculpture. During the Winter 2026 semester, she worked as a curatorial intern at the Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery, where she researched encaustic paintings in the permanent collection. These texts and videos present her findings.