

VISIONARY ART

The Art of Deborah Standard

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Encaustic painting is the creative method of choice for Deborah Standard. Encaustic consists of pigment, available in powder form or in wax sticks, that's mixed into molten beeswax. Carnauba, a vegetable wax, can be used in addition to beeswax, and demara resin is often added to the mixture to raise the melting temperature and add sheen.

The hot mixture can be applied with a brush to almost any surface, such as wood, canvas, ceramic, or glass. Layers of wax can be applied to give the work more texture and depth.

For her encaustic paintings, Ms. Standard mixes her own pigments and builds all of the wooden panels. The rituals necessary for her art—melting wax, adding and straining the resin, choosing and mixing dry pigment, building the wooden supports—are labors of love, because she defines herself through her art, said Ms. Standard, who is 56 and started working as an artist about 30 years ago. She earned a certificate of completion from the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia.

"I was pretty successful," Ms. Standard said, referring to her early days as a full-time artist. "I was doing a lot of group shows. My work was very abstract landscapes—a lot like what I'm doing now, but a little looser.

"How would I describe what I do now? I would say it's very controlled. The color is the most important thing. The medium—the encaustic—is very important."

After a few years, Ms. Standard decided to attend nursing school, partly because she thought that nursing would give her the flexibility she needed to continue to create. She joined the military and worked in oncology. But her experience in the military proved horrible, and she was diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder with major depression and "heavy anxiety."

Ms. Standard's latest works appear geometric and spare, but closer inspection reveals richly textured layers in bold, striking colors. In several paintings, for example, one surface with cracks and crevices is positioned next to its creamy smooth counterpart, bringing together two views of color.

Her most recent exhibition was with artist Anthony Newton at a Landair gallery in Manhattan in February. Her paintings are displayed and sold through the Fountain Gallery in New York, a creative outgrowth of Fountain House. ■



Red Oxide-Pozzuoli Earth, 2004

COURTESY DEBORAH STANDARD

The Artist's Reflections

I had some troubles as a kid. I would be paranoid, but my parents never really picked it up. They thought I would get over it, even though I come from a medical family. My father was a doctor—a general surgeon—and my mother was a nurse. I think they realized there was something more to what was going on, because I was having trouble in school and [trouble] making friends. Then when I got to adolescence, they thought it was just what you go through in adolescence. I also had severe learning disabilities. I'm terribly dyslexic. I thought the voices were part of the dyslexia. I didn't read until I was 16. I faked it a lot. I could do no math at all. I still can't. I could not make change. That's how I've always gotten along—having the skills to fake it.

I learned [encaustic] in art school. It's working in wax that has demara resin in it and pigment. It means "burning in." I have griddles—you know like sandwich griddles, pots and pans, and a Crock-Pot. In the Crock-Pot, I put the demara crystals, and the wax from the hive, melt them together and that's the base. Into that I put different pigments. It has to be between 175° and 200° F. You have different pots of color, and then I put the pigment in the medium—the demara and the wax together is called the medium. Then you stir and you have colored wax. I keep it melted. You have to work very fast, cause it sets fast. Then I brush it on. I'm very careful. I have good ventilation.

When I joined the military, I was 40 years old. I joined from nursing school. In the military, I had a breakdown. I was an oncology nurse, and it was extremely stressful. You work night shifts—12 to 14 hours shifts. And then I started acting sort of strange, thinking I could cure everybody by giving them medication. That's dangerous. So I went to my supervisor and said: "I'm having a problem. I'm scared. Can you help me?" Instead of helping me, she got the military police, and they took me to the hospital. So much for the military. It wasn't nurturing at all. They didn't help at all. I think they made the situation worse.

I was totally freaked out. I got no assistance, although later I was able to get a military disability benefit. I have a sister who's a psychiatric nurse, and she came to the Washington area for a visit. I realized I needed help; otherwise, I was going to lose everything. I didn't have a job. I was paying real high rent. I had a car. She decided I should move to New York to be closer to the family. I was born in New York, then my parents moved to Connecticut when I was 8 years old. My sister said: "We're going to figure this out. I think you need medication." She worked with a psychiatrist who was kind enough to interview me and medicate me right away.

I went on Risperdal. I liked it up to a point, and then it didn't work anymore. I was on it for almost 3 years, and immediately I could feel the difference. For a while, I didn't hear the voices in my head. The voices started interfering and held me back a lot. Then my sister said, "We have to get you a psychiatrist." We found a psychiatrist who's also a consultant to Fountain House and a friend of my sister's. We really liked his philosophy. I've been with him for 6 years; it's a very good relationship.

My sister introduced me to Fountain House, and my doctor suggested I apply. I was legally considered homeless at that time. I was living with my sister's friend temporarily. After 3 months at the friend of my sister, I was accepted into Fountain House. I spent every day there for at least 3-4 years. I volunteered around the house. I started to paint again. I was 42 when I was diagnosed. It never occurred to me go see someone sooner. I just thought the voices in my head were just the way I was. Some of the voices were very distinct; others were just sort of mumbled. It's like overhearing somebody talking.

I am particularly close to my sister. We see each other at least once a week; we're like best friends. I've never been married and have no children. My sister has three children, so I consider them like my own. And her husband, I love him a lot. They're both very supportive. They have a lot of my work.

I think what's helped me is medication. Right now I'm on Geodon. I haven't been crazy about it. I've been on it for about a year. I've got no symptoms, but it makes me sick to my stomach. [My doctor] is weaning me off of Geodon and back onto Seroquel, which I liked. I did have a good experience on Seroquel, but we went up so high that I started to trip and fall down. We're going to try again, and maybe I don't need to go as high. I'm also on Wellbutrin now. I just started this week. I had been on Zoloft. I don't feel nauseous anymore. And I'm on Klonopin, too.

I go to therapy every other week—one-on-one with a psychiatrist, and he's also a psychopharmacologist. It's really good therapy, very holistic. My psychiatrist saw my one-woman show at Fountain Gallery, and he loved it. He's an old-school sort of psychiatrist. He respects my work. My show was exciting and stressful. It took me a year to do 13 pieces.

It was good stress, and I dealt with it. I was proud of the show. I had breakthrough symptoms in the middle of it, and my doctor just upped the medication. I was still working full time, so I was painting on my days off and evenings. Then it got close to the show, and I got really sick. I didn't know what to do. The work was all done. I wanted to be at the opening and to be in good shape. We adjusted the medication, and I felt 100% better.

I work full time at Pearl [art supply store]. I've been there for 5 years, and I manage their watercolor and oils department. I came out to my employers. In my interview I told them I have a mental illness and a severe learning disability, and I'm on medication. They've been very accommodating. When I've had periods of difficulty, I would tell them.

The right medication and a supportive environment are the most important things. More doctors should know about Fountain House. Thanks to medication and my doctor, I'm able to work in a really difficult medium. My work doesn't sell as much as other people, but it sells. At the gallery, I do a lot of teaching of art—whatever needs to be done.

As told to Deeanna Franklin by Deborah Standard.