

BY SANDRA LEVIS
PHOTOS BY MELODY FARRIN

minding his beeswax

Encaustic painter
Tony Landolina
has found his sweet
spot at last.

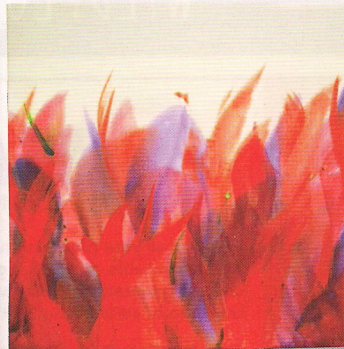
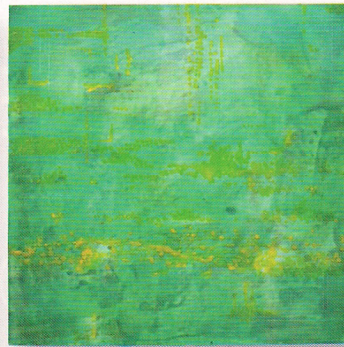
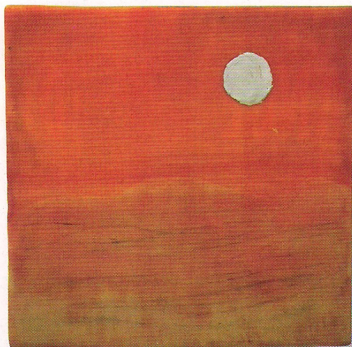


After decades of dabbling in various media, artist Tony Landolina has embraced an ancient medium, beeswax, and made it his own.

by day, East Ender Tony Landolina, 47, is a low-key civil servant, working quietly as assistant director of personnel and finance for the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police. In his spare time, however, he is a compelling new force on the local arts scene, creating radiant abstract artworks using beeswax and a blowtorch. And honey, they're hot.

"We've sold a lot of his works," says Ellen Chisdes Neuberg, owner and director of GalleriE CHIZ in Shadyside, who has represented Landolina since discovering him last year. "Tony's works are new and different," she says. "They are lovely to live with, calming and interesting at the same time. And they have this mysterious, translucent glow."

Landolina, who was raised in Bloomfield and attended Central Catholic High School, says he "grew up in an artistic environment." His mother attended art school, and his great-uncle was Frank DeAndrea, a noted painter of Pittsburgh cityscapes and corporate portraits. But for many years Landolina himself only dabbled in art, working in periodic "creative spurts" using a variety of media. Then one day two years ago, his long-time girlfriend, broadcaster and beekeeper Michelle Wright, presented him with wax from her hive and requested that he create something from it. Researching its uses, he discovered encaustic painting, and his artistic life was transformed.



Four examples of the artist's experiments in stylistic variety.



Using a blowtorch, Landolina fuses together multiple layers of beeswax, rosin, and pigment. Encaustic art takes its name from the Greek term meaning “to burn in.”

“Its properties are everything that appeals to me in art,” he says. “It’s tactile, sculptural, versatile. I really love the opacity of wax, which, depending on the amount of pigment, creates a 3D effect. It’s challenging, which I like, and an unexpected effect is that the beeswax smells sweet when it’s heated.”

Encaustic painting—from the Greek term *enkaustikos*, meaning “to burn in”—is believed to have originated more than 2,000 years ago, when it was used to create vivid, durable panel portraits on hundreds of mummies in Fayum, Egypt, during the Roman occupation there. The process remains unchanged to this day. Beeswax, rosin, and pigments are combined and melted into a liquid, applied to a surface in layers, and fused together by fire.

Unlike the ancient Egyptians, whose encaustics formed lifelike representations of their dead, Landolina prefers to create abstract paintings, which he sees as “metaphors for life,” with “layer upon layer providing depth.”

Because beeswax straight from the hive contains bits of honeycomb, bee fur, and other impurities, Landolina uses only filtered, pharmaceutical-grade beeswax for his paintings. But the endangered insects that produce the product are an essential part of his process, and he is committed to drawing attention to their plight. “People see my art and start to ask questions,” he says, “and it always comes back to colony collapse. Raising awareness is a good thing.”

Neuberg agrees that the issue is important. During the artist’s premiere exhibition in her gallery, she underscored the matter by presenting each client who purchased an original Landolina with a jar of honey from Wright’s hive.

Landolina showed his first encaustic paintings alongside Wright’s honey at a Fayette

County wine and beer festival in 2014. The four early pieces sold quickly, so he made more—many more—and revels in the possibilities that lie before him. “I want to see how many different things I can do with this medium,” he says excitedly.

Working in the spare bedroom of his Morningside home, he uses an electric frying pan and griddle; wide, natural-bristle brushes; wood panels; and a propane torch—with a fire extinguisher kept close at hand, just in case.

He favors a smooth finish rather than a “chunky” effect, and frequently adds texture by scraping the surface with a razor, sometimes filling the resulting grooves with oil paint. He is also partial to vibrant colors—the “richer blues and reds,” along with intense yellows and oranges—that add to the luster of the paintings. “I’ve heard people compare the luminosity of my work to stained glass,” Landolina notes.

“I love his use of color, his proficiency, and his perfectionism,” says Neuberg, describing what prompted her to feature the artist in a show shortly after he wandered into her Ellsworth Avenue gallery in early 2015. Between that date in February and his debut in October eight months later, Landolina worked “fiendishly” after hours each day to create a body of work for display.

“I thought he would have about 15 pieces,” Neuberg recalls, “but we ended up with more than 40!”

Landolina—as busy as any bee—continues to produce work at an impressive rate, running through approximately 55 pounds of beeswax every six months. “I want to push myself,” he explains. “I just want to keep on painting, exploring the medium, doing as much as I can with it.” SA

Tony Landolina’s works are on perpetual display at GalleriE CHIZ, 5831 Ellsworth Avenue, Shadyside. To view a video of the artist at work, visit tonylandolina.com.

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