



"Winter Solstice"

# Layers in Time

*Bozeman artist Sara Mast charting history*

**In the studio**

BY MICHELE CORRIEL

Thumb tacked across the wall of her Trail Creek studio several new pieces — portals into encaustic artist Sara Mast's explorative narrative — point to both the past and future, a view from above and below. Each piece, consisting of more than 20 layers, follows inroads carved out of

our collective memory.

Mast moves from surface to floor to wall, each step requiring hours of patient solitude, hand to mind to palette, each piece a slate of civilization probed. The process of encaustic entails layers of wax painted, heated, smoothed, scratched and in Mast's work, collaged. The end result is a dense painting with many transparent layers, each one pulling for attention. It is a place where getting lost is a must. Finding the way out a pleasure.

**In the studio**

"For me, the translucency of the wax records time better than oil paint," says Mast, who teaches art at MSU, dipping a spongebrush into a molten wax filled crock-pot. "The viewer can see the earlier layers whereas in my oil painting the paint just got scraped off and thrown away. When I put down layers, it's like looking through time. It's very archeological."

Mast's new series of paintings appropriates ancient star charts with modern astronomical trajectories of orbiting bodies, overlaid with primitive symbols and long-gone alphabets. Grids of the earth bend across the canvas, bowing and questioning the feeling of surface, of dimensional flatness. The top-most region is splattered with thick globules of paint that end up looking like stars, the dirt she spreads out, soil she's culled from the earth and saved in baggies, sprinkled from a spoon and moved within the painting with her heat gun, look like celestial clusters, clouds of forming suns.

She starts out by slowly covering the handmade paper with a coat of white wax. Sometimes she uses unrefined beeswax and a honey-glow simmers her studio in summer. After the wax application the paper is irregular and bumpy. The waxed paper, attached to a plywood board sheeted in plastic to keep it clean, is taken to the heat gun where, on a low setting she'll fuse the wax to the paper. It doesn't take long, and she puts the piece outside to cool, like a pie on the windowsill.

"I'm trying to explore my experiences of the awe and wonder at the night sky while still staying quiet and letting the viewer form their own meaning," says Mast, laying her



artist portrait by Thomas Lee



"Apollo's Path"

fingers across the waxen images, pointing out Xeroxed runes she's embedded in the pieces. "What I'd noticed is if I'm lying in bed at night I can see the stars change position from season to season. I get caught in the circular movement of it. So I started looking at time in a cyclical, rather than a linear, way."

Charting something that is always moving interested her. In the past, she'd always taken tokens from her own life and placed them in the pieces — bottle caps, tickets, items of cultural refuse — telling not only a story of existence but a societal comment. Now she's moved beyond the everyday and taken on concepts of time and space. Standing before one of Mast's pieces is like tilting the earth, like looking at the heavens through your feet. Grounded in the terrestrial while touching the galaxies.

Fellow artist Jerry Rankin has been watching Mast's work for a long time.

"I'm really intrigued with the whole space/time metaphor she's dealing with, she's bearing in on grids with numbers," Rankin says. "The planet is becoming so tiny and she's extending that into the universe. The whole

spatial/celestial paradox. What I find really captivating is the darkening, the idea of shadowing positions from painting to painting like a sun dial."

Rankin appreciates the feeling of constant flux Mast manages to convey with these pieces.

"I felt like a child being able to venture into this universe, to play my own time games with it," he says. "With her suggesting various positions of time in each painting she sends me into a different kind of awareness, into my own mortality. I feel like a voyager. But she also leaves it open to our own experience, honoring that. I'm relieved to think I can put my own experience and timeframe and stories on these. For me that's wonderful."

Mast's group of new paintings reflects a limited palette. Rather than the boosting of vibrant colors, she's opted for the white, black, gray and iron-earth tones of soil, shadows of the sky. Which makes these deeply quiet and reflective pieces.

"I want people to experience disorientation, and to question ... what is my place? Where am I standing?" Mast says. "I'm interested in dissolving boundaries. A lot of us



"Summer Solstice"

## In the Studio

think we stop at our skin, but where do we stop? At the edge of our social group? There is an ecological way of thinking that influences this work the idea of interdependence — how everything we do affects everything else. I'm searching for common ground."

Stacks of books scattered in piles on her work table delve into subjects like eco-psychology, neuroscience, the theory of networks and the origins of the alphabet. These are almost a cipher to the encaustics. Copied from one of the books, ancient Babylonian alphabet characters, derivative of the constellation's locations in the night sky, are burnished onto layers of wax and included in these pieces. Just the depth of each piece is astounding.

Elizabeth Guheen, curator of collections at Roswell Museum in Roswell, N.M., met Mast through the Yellowstone Art Museum when she taught at Montana State University in Bozeman, where Mast now teaches.

"I was drawn to the work before I ever met Sara. What attracts me to her work is her ability to walk a line between abstraction and reference to imagery," Guheen says. "You might think you're looking at a painting that's red, but then there are actual objects embedded, shapes, and messages that are evocative of other things."

For example, Guheen compared Mast's work to the eastern textiles and the patterns they use in their fabrics.

"Embedded in any culture's fabrics are the codes of their history," she says. "Sara is taking the idea that on a flat surface you can embed deep cultural references. It's using your own personal history in her paint. Her work reads slow. And I think work that slow reads makes



"Journey"

you want to spend time with it, as the painting reveals itself over a period of time."

Which is exactly the feeling of standing before one of Mast's new pieces. In *Apollo's Path*, which is currently hanging at Soucie Salon, on East Mendenhall, Mast's only Bozeman venue, the thick clouds of soil flip into star clusters by juxtaposing themselves within the painting. The layers reinvent space, offering information that may contradict the grounding references. By using imagery of both earth-maps and sky-charts a sense of place is fully enveloping, while disorienting, it creates instead a true sense of displace.

"This is a challenge for me," Mast says. "I have a strong modernist background and I'm

trying to open that up to engage the peripheral, the personal, the non-human — to build upon and transform my modernist training. I'm trying to find a way beyond static forms to the dynamic processes of lived experience." 📍

*Michele Corriel is a frequent contributor to At Home.*