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In The Gallery

By Joan Baum

"This that and the other thing:
Paintings by Andrew Nash," Boltax
Gallery, 21 North Ferry Road, Shelter
Island

Though the title of this fine exhibition might suggest a casual potpourri of subject matter or media, Andrew Nash's oil and wax paintings, opening Boltax Gallery's 2006 season, more than suggest that the artist would like viewers to see how his art has evolved in response to his changing interests over the last decade. He would also like viewers to appreciate what has remained constant. "This" may be a black bird, "that" a sepia-toned bent-over figure, "the other thing" a green tree, a smoke swirl or one of his ink and charcoal on paper studies, attractively grouped on a wall in the gallery's second room. All together, the over 40 paintings and nine drawings testify to Nash's distinctive and recognizable style: semi-abstract, waxy, highly textured paintings that rely on surface backgrounds built up with such meticulous applications of wax and pigment that they become in a sense the foreground.



Jersey Bather 4 by Andrew Nash.
(click for larger version)

Nash's subjects, whether natural objects, such as birds, flowers, trees or, typically, figures on the brink of motion, seem embedded in a ground flecked with the same basic color. Though it's tempting to say that Nash prefers earth tones and dark amber on off-white, the exhibit also includes a few works in primary colors, clearly the result of Nash's generous use of pigment. Several works are repeated in different colors, suggesting Nash's affinity to (and experience with) printmaking, but essentially, Nash's use of color has to do with his layering technique. Looked at closely, the canvases reveal undertones of hues from previous applications of wax and oil. Think "palimpsest," a manuscript that has been written over previous text but that shows glimpses of the earlier work. The analogy is not inappropriate since "palimpsest" comes from a Greek word meaning scraped again and Nash does a lot of scraping.

Although "encaustic" doesn't adequately describe a Nash painting, it certainly defines the medium. "Encaustic" (the etymology dates to a Greek verb "to burn"), sometimes defined as "hot wax painting," can be used to refer to the product, the painting, or the process, using pigment and heated wax. The key word is "use." Nash applies beeswax and a lot of oil paint, which he feels generates a more vivid effect than were he only mixing wax and pigment. Older than oil painting and dating to ancient Egypt and Rome, encaustic was made popular in the '50s by Jasper Johns. The technique attracts him, Nash says, because of the "juxtaposition of ancient and modern." Malleable, generating translucent effects, encaustic allows him to keep building up layers, scraping down (razor lines are discernible in many of his pictures), painting over, pressing, scouring, sanding, brushing on contoured forms, with the result that earlier bits show through, if only as little marks, like filings (particularly effective in the graffiti-like Notes from the far1). The completed painting is thus both representational and abstract. Nash says that he likes to think of his work as where "drawing meets painting," but since hot wax, cooled, can be shaped, a Nash picture can also take on a sculptured look. Indeed, the raised surfaces of many of the paintings here with their "pushed out" dots invite touching, and the ink and charcoals were done on "cold press bumpy paper" for similar reasons..

Though Nash says his recent work has become more realistic and figurative — bathers, dancers, small groups — he concedes that one of his own favorite pieces is "smoke," a black spiral on creamy white that Boltax has imaginatively hung in the sparkling gallery bathroom — a good place to contemplate, Nash laughs. Part of earlier shows at Boltax Andrew Nash has earned this solo show.



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"This that and the other thing" runs through May 29.