

R.M. VAUGHAN: THE EXHIBITIONIST

## Nava Waxman sculpts wax like a pastry chef builds a cake

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**Nava Waxman at Engine Gallery** *Until Oct. 17, 37 Mill St., Toronto; [www.enginegallery.ca](http://www.enginegallery.ca)*

At an artist party last week, I was asked The Question: What's hot in art?

Just to mess with the questioner, I blurted out: Encaustics - it's all about wax, gobs and gobs of wax. Never mind that artists have been mixing hot wax with colour since before the birth of Christ.

And then it occurred to me that I've actually seen a lot of beeswax on the walls lately. Perhaps the stuttering economy, the omniscience of cold digital reproduction, and the overall sense of exhaustion (ideological, theoretical, and pictorial) that pervades too many exhibitions of late have all combined to make the homey feel of encaustic works more attractive.

Viewers need a hug, and encaustic works, whatever their failings (the foremost being a tendency amongst some purveyors to equate humble wax with greeting-card whimsy), are nothing if not tactile. Sensuality is the new conceptualism, to disrespect The Question.

Nava Waxman (no cheap name jokes, please), is primed to become the queen of the encaustic hive. Her new exhibition at Engine Gallery, *Light of Reverie*, is so sumptuous, so full of warm inner light, standing next to her works is like rubbing your face with a heated towel. Waxman applies wax the way master pastry chefs sculpt sugar, milk, and egg whites. Her works are cake-icing thick, layered as baklava, and luxuriate in an unapologetically decadent application of frosted, dream-toned pigment. You could probably chew them.

In neat counterpoint to all the creamy wallowing, Waxman punctuates her dreamscape canvases with delicate collage (hair-thin, vintage images of birds and animals), bits of jewellery, bright polished copper, shapes and Hebrew text carved directly into the wax, inky calligraphic paintings of trees and landscapes, and block printing that resembles wallpaper. Yet, Waxman's juxtaposition of wavy, pocked swathes of wax with the varied trinkets is unexpectedly formal, and obviously decided with care.

Despite all the textures, colours and image-referencing Waxman employs, her works never appear busy or overdone. Clearly, the secret to working with such a familiar and resonant material (the whole of Engine Gallery smells like a beeswax candle factory, semi-sweet and autumnal), is knowing exactly when to drop the ladle.

**The Grange Prize at the Art Gallery of Ontario** *Until Jan. 2, 317 Dundas St. W., Toronto; vote online at [www.thegrangeprize.com](http://www.thegrangeprize.com)*

I'm not a betting man, but judging from the responses I witnessed to Kristan Horton's work in the AGO's assembly of Grange Prize nominees, the Toronto multimedia artist is about to walk away with the \$50,000 photography prize.

All of the four nominees, Leslie Hewitt, Moyra Davey, Josh Brand and Horton, are worthy, in varying degrees, of the prize - and Davey's gorgeous close-up photographs of corroded Lincoln pennies make her Horton's strongest challenger - but only Horton's work has the necessary popular element to win.

The Grange Prize is decided by you, the public, in an online and in-gallery poll, and I doubt that either Brand's minimalist, nearly invisible images of softly lit surfaces, or Hewitt's oversized photos of domestic objects arranged into temporary sculptures, will speak to a wide audience. They barely spoke to me, and I had to look at them.

Horton's work, however, is relentlessly inventive and wants to reach a large audience. For instance, his remake of Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* - done with food, toys, and cutlery - inspires laughs and amazement in equal measure. Everybody gets it. And his dancing, stop-motion animation of junk found in his pockets would not be out of place on *Sesame Street*. Horton is bringing clever back. Clever, minus the sneer of overinformed irreverence. His work is full of boyish cheer.

But back your own horse. The voting closes on Halloween.

**Iain Baxter at the Corkin Gallery** *Until Nov. 7, 55 Mill St., Toronto, [www.corkingallery.com](http://www.corkingallery.com)*

Unless you're over 50, or attend a Catholic school, you've probably never experienced a good old-fashioned book banning. What would be the point of trying to ban a text today, when you can download *Paradise Lost* onto your cellphone?

Iain Baxter's tribute to Ray Bradbury's seminal anti-censorship novel *Fahrenheit 451* reminds us, with a truckload of shoes, books, and some cement, how fragile our information economy remains - and also how vital.

Baxter's conceit is straightforward, but surprisingly moving. Books, like shoes, propel society forward, and their power reverberates back and forth in an endless loop of shared knowledge. Translating this into an installation, Baxter assembles a 33-foot-long infinity loop on the Corkin Gallery floor; a loop made up of books inserted into dozens of pairs of shoes. Visitors are encouraged to walk around, and in and out of the loop, as one might a maze.

The titles of the books Baxter plunks inside loafers and pumps are revealing as well. I found *The Story of Art*, *Into the Unknown* and *Flower Fairies of the Wayside* (possibly the best book title ever conceived).

Yes, Baxter's metaphors are self-evident, and the installation speaks to the choir (or, in this case, the book club) - but as Toronto prepares to elect an aggressively anti-intellectual mayor, it's worth considering that maybe we're not as smart as we think.

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