

# Beasts and Bee's Knees

Encaustic show shines pretty

To make beeswax, the honeybee must literally work its ass off. Produced by thin scales secreted by glands on the surface of the bee's abdomen, beeswax — once collected by the beekeeper — can be made into candles, cosmetics or pharmaceuticals (e.g. that goop that keeps your bones from bleeding). It can also be mixed with pigments and resin to make encaustic paintings, an art process practiced for more than two millennia. The current show at La Follette Gallery is called "Encaustics," but "From a Bee's Butt to An Image of a Bee's Butt" might be more apt of a title, such is the synthesis implied in Portland-based Karen Ehlers' and Jan Cavecche's graphically striking portraits of natural clones. I use "clones" because the mimetic symbolism in their work removes nature from the equation. And yet, this is a show all about nature.

According to Cavecche's artist statement, working in encaustic is a challenge that allows her to "transcend the everyday obstacles" she encounters while making her art. She claims the "happy accidents" of working in a "haphazard and erratic" medium usually yield her best work, and she's not far off the mark. Her series of stone imagery, *armoured with pebbles*, *three agates* and *floating rocks* are the only works in the show that attempt either texture or shading, a painstaking feat to get right in the rather flat encaustic medium. But Cavecche basically pulls it off by half-assing

it, scraping and dripping the hot wax in sloppy gestures to give the rocks actual quality (rather than turn them into mere symbols).

Similarly, Cavecche's *Honeycomb Puzzle* is a loving tribute to the medium. She achieves texture this time by monoprinting honeycomb patterns directly over the brilliantly warm oranges, reds and yellows of encaustic. What we have are snapshots of the beeswax in its prenatal state, half complete but coming together beautifully. Conversely,



**Deer Branches by Karen Ehlers (left) and floating rocks by Jan Cavecche**

Cavecche's series of cross-sectioned plant matter, including *dens leonis* and *lost men*, are nice, simple portraits of dandelions and other weeds. But is art supposed to be nice? In *lost men*, Cavecche tosses in a few toy soldiers under the soil and expects us to contemplate something about post-war renewal. But the toy soldiers are mere symbols (they could



easily stand for childhood), and the gesture feels like afterthought.

Karen Ehlers' work also extensively relies on symbols. Chairs, deer, trees, firehoses, teapots, vases, cut plants and arrows combine in grids of rigid structure that recall stencil designs from 1950s wallpaper and wrapping paper. *Deer Branches* makes good use of spatial arrangement not only on the surface, but with actual depth. Ehlers lays on thick and thin layers of encaustic (including unpigmented beeswax) to show a depth of field that achieves a high level of energy without being too clashing or cluttered.

In a series entitled *Bestiary*, Ehlers relates

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a story (on a cue card) of a rumor she heard in grad school about the trees outside of the National Gallery in Washington, D.C. Apparently the rats, pigeons and squirrels who shared the cavity of the trees were mating, and monstrous crossbreeds were discovered by the construction workers after they cut the trees down. Ehlers illustrates this rumor (and her memory of it) by imaging the creatures: a squirrel with a rat's tail, a rat with pigeon's wings, etc. The creatures are whimsical and cute in that way you see on display at Fred Meyer's mass-produced reprints section. Indeed, there's something a bit *too familiar* about these images, as if I've seen them somewhere before. Like many of Ehlers' pieces, *Bestiary* is well-intentioned, graphically appealing and comes with a rich backstory but is thoroughly uninspiring as anything other than wall art. On her website, Ehlers has a handful of striking mirror-image encaustics, but unfortunately they didn't make it into this show.

"Encaustics" runs through Dec. 31. For more information on these artists, who have priced their work quite affordably, visit [www.cavecche.com](http://www.cavecche.com) and [www.karenehlers.com](http://www.karenehlers.com) **EW**



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