

arts wednesday

Encaustic art on view at Mills Gallery

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"The Future of the Past: Encaustic Art in the 21st Century," an expansive show at the Boston Center for the Arts' Mills Gal-

GALLERIES lery, stands on a firm foundation. Curators Barb Cone and Harriet

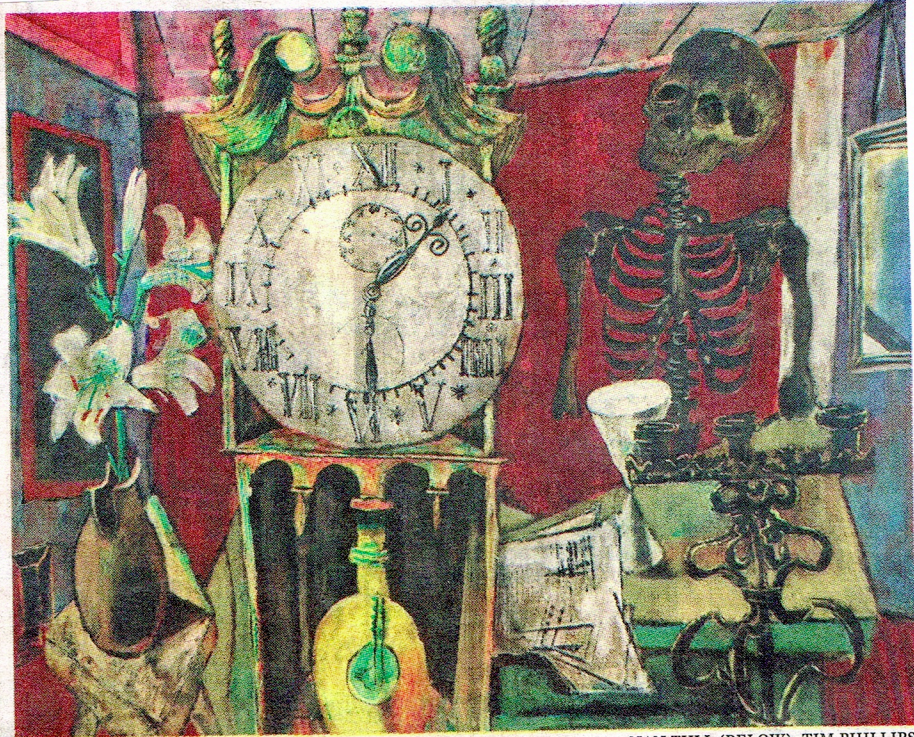
Chenkin reach back to mid-20th-century Boston as a seminal moment in the US for encaustic — that is, painting with pigmented wax. Encaustic has been around for two millennia, and artists continue to explore its possibilities. Wax can be layered, fused, chiseled, and otherwise manipulated.

Karl Zerbe, the legendary head of the painting department at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, began investigating the medium after he emigrated from Germany, in the late 1930s. Two of his students who went on to notable careers, David Aronson and Esther Geller, have also worked with wax for decades. Encaustic paintings by each of these artists root the exhibit.

Zerbe's "Time Piece" (1940) is fraught and surreal — he was one of the original Boston Expressionists, many of whom poured their neuroses into their work. In it, the space skews to feel claustrophobic. A candelabra has no candles, a dark skeleton evokes death, and a clock thrusts into the foreground, its pendulum glaring yellow and green. Given what was going on in Europe at the time it was made, no wonder the painting reads like a time bomb.

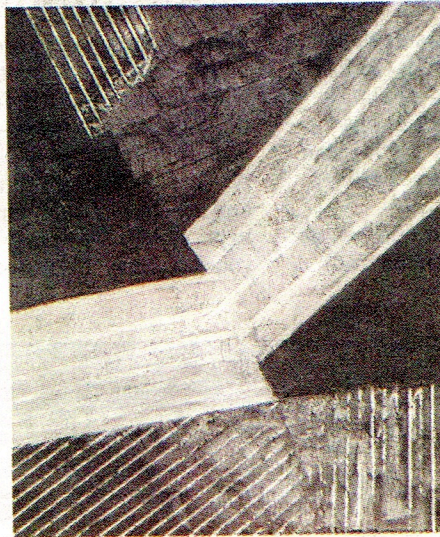
What of the 21st century? The exhibit is largely juried, but includes a handful of invited artists, totaling 37. Some move intriguingly into the sculptural realm — such as Cari Hernandez, with her wax-coated books in "An unfolding relationship," the pages rolled, or stilled in mid-air. But "The Future of the Past" feels more 20th century than 21st. The art here does not prod at the edges of painting's meaning, nor does it strive for conceptual rigor. The work may be beautifully made, but it's often merely that — gauzy, pretty, embodying the haze of memory — but not particularly revelatory or, like Zerbe's "Time Piece," challenging.

There are exceptions. Zane Turner's "What do you mean it's going to



NAN TULL (BELOW); TIM PHILLIPS

Above: "Time Piece," from Karl Zerbe, one of the original Boston Expressionists. Below: Nan Tull's abstract "Night Vision 3."



crumble" is an in-your-face portrait of a frantic man, his skin painted over in yellow and turquoise. Nan Tull's refreshingly abstract "Night Vision 3" is bold, gritty, and black and white, with jagged diagonals colliding. James Meyer's "The Path of Thought," in which a loosely sketched artist draws over a canvas that is the night sky, presents in both its narrative and its execution a satisfying Mobius strip of a

question: Which is the creator, and which the created? But there are too few meaty works such as these, and too many in which the artists are more captivated by their medium than their message.

Uncovering the many layers of wax work