



# SOUND WAVES

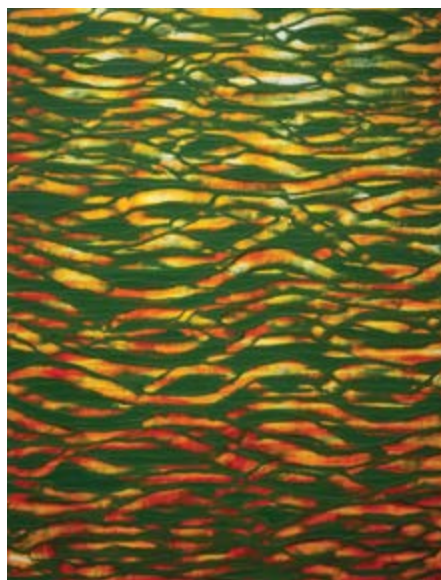
*Robin Rose's luminous, abstract art reforms an ancient technique with contemporary rhythm*

Text by TINA COPLAN  
Portrait by MAX HIRSHFELD

**L**ike an alchemist at work, artist Robin Rose stirs a cauldron of hot beeswax in his inner sanctum beside Washington's Rock Creek Park. He mixes in damar crystals derived from natural tree resin, adds carnauba wax made from the leaves of a Brazilian palm, then blends in powdered pigment of a soft rose-madder hue. "One thousand one, one thousand two," Rose intones, expressing the brief time it takes for the hot wax to harden.

With a sure, steady hand, he glides the edge of a brush across a linen panel, repeating the movement in a staccato style to form thin and weightier horizontal lines and splatters. A delicate salmon-colored abstraction emerges, gently molded in wax relief. As he brushes the surface with a pearlescent coat, he observes, "I'm allowing these topographical points to capture the paint and build up the surface, in the same way that sedimentary rock builds up on the bottom of the ocean, as sand piles up until all the layers fuse together."

Rose turns the painting to determine its ideal orientation. Suddenly it seems right;



scattered dots take on the appearance of bubbles rising underwater. The painter decides to wait before tackling the next stages—building up layers, then melting, scraping or carving them down to rebuild again. "I started the painting so I could mutate it," he explains.



Robin Rose (top) sits pensively in his basement gallery among the encaustic paintings he creates in his adjacent studio. Part of the artist's latest series, *Dissonance* (above, left) and *Cake* (above, right) throb with rippling patterns and complex layering. Both pieces are 24 by 18 inches.

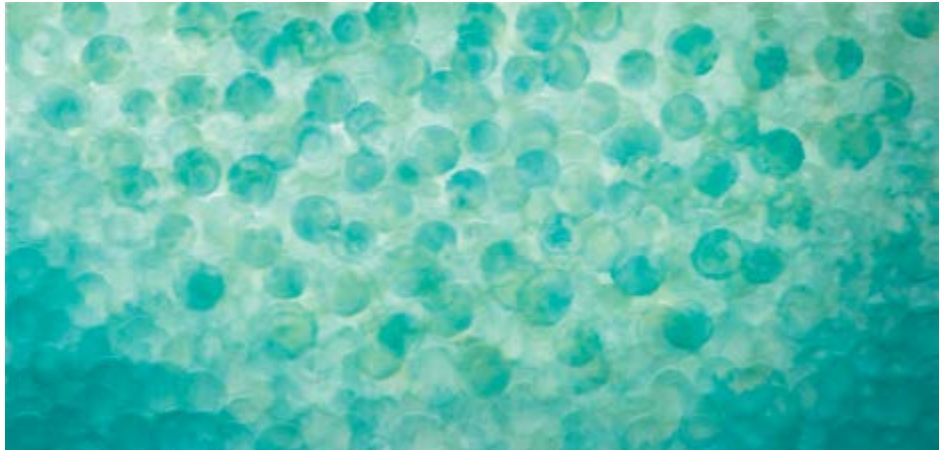
This quick, intense technique is encaustic, an ancient painting method that predates European oil painting by at least a thousand years. Instead of mixing pigments with oil, the binder is beeswax, and the drying time is seconds rather than possibly weeks as it is with oil. “I’m capturing that real-time experience,” says the artist. “It’s a very different way to paint.”

Luminous colors and sculptural dimensions distinguish the encaustic process. Rose carries it further. After nearly a half-century practicing this formidable art, his abstractions communicate a primal sense of earth, water and air, as if seeing nature’s patterns and richness magnified. At the same time, an elusive mystery pervades each piece: Why do those gemlike and earthy hues appear to shift color as the light changes? Are the shining surfaces opaque or translucent? What is that spectral haze rising among the crisp, white-on-white waves? “I want my paintings to be enigmas, releasing their information very slowly,” the artist suggests.

What’s clear is that Rose brings boundless experience to the task. If ripples in his paintings resemble sound waves, that’s not accidental, since he sees an internal musical mechanism at work. “When I’m painting, I know there’s a certain conveyance of rhythm, there’s a beat,” he says, blue eyes sparkling. “I’ve always done both—painted and played music.”

During high school in Ocala, Florida, Rose was in a rock-and-roll band. Soon after arriving in Washington in 1976, he played guitar and synthesizer as a member of the Urban Verbs, a new-wave group that recorded two albums with Warner. His basement studio is bounded by a collection of vinyl records, played on a vintage turntable as he paints. While the largest work he ever produced was a commission for IBM—a pair of 16-by-16-foot paintings—one of his favored formats now is a 16-by-16-inch square—about the size of an album cover.

Even today, Rose associates his art with music. He compares the layers of encaustic to multi-track recording, where separate tracks for each instrument are combined. Plus, he notes, “encaustic is additive, just like music. I can keep coming back to experience it anew.”



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Water themes also splash against the shores of his art. As an only child, Rose was immersed in nature. “I loved scuba diving in rivers, looking for artifacts,” he says. “I was always collecting something—fossils, sharks’ teeth, rocks.”

While attending Florida State University, Rose started out experimenting with reverse painting on the backs of Lucite panels, following a high-school hobby of lacquering cars, surfboards and water skis in glowing colors. He went on to receive a master’s degree in fine arts at FSU under Karl Zerbe, who is credited with reviving encaustic art in the U.S. His student still uses the formula Zerbe perfected in the 1930s.

These days, Rose may be found painting in his cabin studio near the ocean in Rehoboth. There during the tumultuous early months of covid, he experienced a kind of mystical epiphany. “I’d wake up

Triggered by word associations during the pandemic, *Release* (above) imagines effervescent, seafoam-soothing bubbles, while the hot-tempered oranges of *Vex* (left) crisscross and steamily glow.

in the middle of the night and there was a word in my head,” the artist remembers. The first one that came to him was “breath.” Over the next three intense days, Rose completed a two-part painting based on that word. Of its cool, Caribbean light-blue color, he says, “It’s purifying. You can almost breathe it.”

On subsequent nights, other words appeared: *Nestle*, *Dissonance*, *Lull*, *Spin* and more, until the last, *Release*. All were created between March 12, 2020, and January 20, 2021, the date of the presidential inaugural. “The word was telling me what the painting wanted to be,” Rose explains. Hemphill recently exhibited the series of 19 works—not a coincidence, the artist believes, given covid-19 and other symbolic meanings of that number in the Bible, Koran and numerology.

He reflects on the long narrative that is encaustic painting, dating back to ancient portraits painted on wood panels attached to mummies in Egypt’s Fayum region. “Those painted masks were like a calling card to the afterlife,” notes Rose, whose own work imparts a timeless quality. “It’s kind of like, when did my paintings occur,” he muses, perhaps in response to the beat of a distant drummer. “Ten thousand years ago or yesterday?” ■

Robin Rose’s art is available through Hemphill; [hemphillfinearts.com](http://hemphillfinearts.com). For more information, visit [robinroseart.com](http://robinroseart.com).