

# ART MAG

EXPLORING CHARLESTON'S ART SCENE



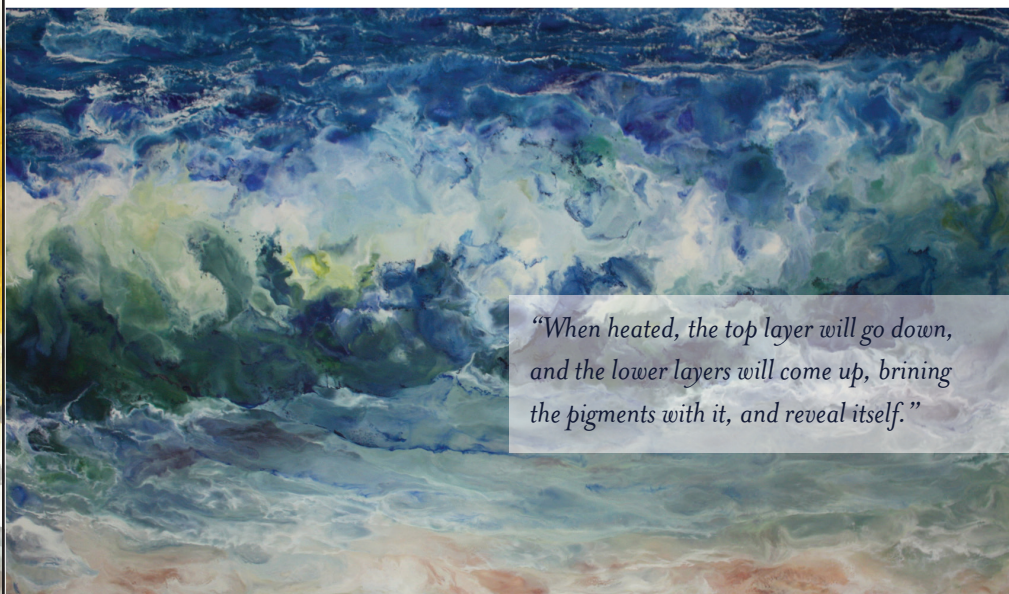
## RUTH HAMILL

words: Elizabeth Bulwinkle

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Ruth Hamill didn't set out to be an encaustic artist. After years of teaching, writing, and graphic design, she decided to finally take a turn at painting. As she says, "It became very serious, very quickly." Hamill tried her hand at oils, her first love, and says, "It became nothing short of an obsession—trying to communicate on canvas that feeling that you get when you're at the shore." She wanted texture and depth that oils just weren't giving her. During a residency at the Vermont Studio Center, where one of her idols, Helen Frankenthaler, served on the board, she was able to see what a time-intensive, focused experience could do for her practice. There she experimented with pouring paint on canvas, reminiscent of artists in the 1950's, but she still



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wasn't fully satisfied, and continued searching. Finally, after being accepted for a residency at the Tin Shop in Breckenridge, Colorado, she decided to try encaustic. And so began her long-term relationship with this 2,000-year-old art form.

Hamill decided to stop her other work to fully explore this new relationship with encaustic. She learned, experimented, and made the process her own.

### THE PROCESS

Hamill starts with a collection of photographs from various locations, many from her home on the Massachusetts coast. "Each wave is different—the colors are different, the texture is different, the foam of the waves, the sky. I start and have a general idea, I have the colors on my palette, I see what emerges, and I go with that." Hamill blows the paint with a heat gun, and watches as it begins to take form. "The chemistry of the paint and the wax and the atmosphere in the room—it's making something, it's making the paint and the wax be grainy, or frothy, or smooth, and since I work in layers, something comes to the surface. So, if that day's work starts to form



a wave that's reminiscent of a picture of one from South Carolina, for example, then I go with that. Sometimes I don't even know where the image is going to take me."

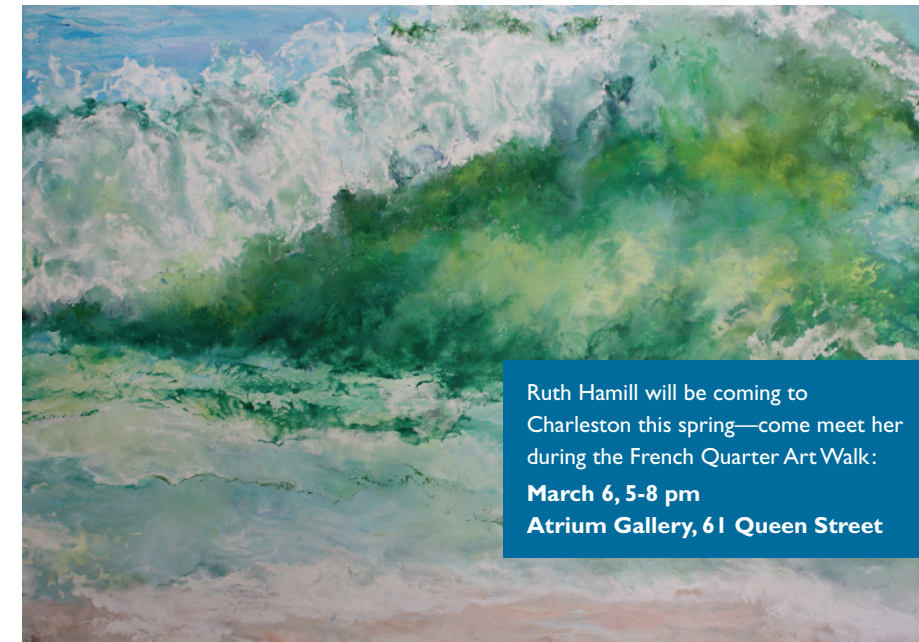
Hamill works over a horizontal canvas to keep the paint and wax from dripping. Often encaustic artists work on wood panels, but Hamill likes the give and texture of canvas. She mixes pigments and wax, and keeps her palette heated, so the waxy mixture is in liquid form as she wets her brush. The moment her brush leaves the palette, the paint begins to harden. She has just enough time to apply her mark to the canvas. Then comes the fun. Hamill takes a hot air gun and blows the area she's working, using gravity and air to move the paint and mold the waves.

For the first few layers, she uses an iron to heat the surface, like Jasper Johns and many other encaustic painters before her have used. As the work progresses, she uses her collection of heat blowers to manipulate the

paint and help it fuse to the canvas and the other layers. "When heated, the top layer will go down, and the lower layers will come up, brining the pigments with it, and reveal itself. So, when I put the next layer on, I'm not quite sure what will happen. What will recede, what will mix, what will stand out."

### CREATIVE FLOW

Like many artists, Hamill has a system to get her in the zone. She goes out to her sunny home studio, pours over her photos, turns on her music, which serves as an on-switch to her creativity, and paints. "I have my five disc turntable and I listen to the same five CD's over and over; until I get sick of them, which is usually about when I finish a piece, so then I switch them for a new piece. I always have to have one classical album, one rap (she secretly loves Eminem), and three other mellow CD's." She often paints seven days a week to maintain her creative flow. "Often times that's when I can go from one painting to the next and the next. Creative flow—it really does happen—the more I work, the faster it goes."



Ruth Hamill will be coming to Charleston this spring—come meet her during the French Quarter Art Walk:  
**March 6, 5-8 pm**  
**Atrium Gallery, 61 Queen Street**

But even experienced artists hit a wall. "Sometimes things will just work and flow and I can finish it in three or four days. And other times, I don't know why, but I can work for a month on one piece. It's not bad enough to cast off, but it just won't get 'there'. I accept both. It really gets to be painful, and once I push through, it seems the next ones goes smoother. I may never love that painting, but I know it will make the next several pieces that much better."

### ARTIST'S TOOLS

When asked what her favorite tool is, Hamill replies, "This may be a weird answer but gravity." Often artists get attached to the tools that help them translate their thoughts to canvas. Hamill has a history with one particular brush, "a natural bristle, #12, long handled—my first favorite brush. I wore it out. The bristles were over an inch long to begin with. And I wore it down to about a ¼ inch. I kept it because it was a physical representation of how hard I'd worked. I learned not to get

attached to palette knives, because they'll just get ruined, and then it's sad," she says.

And for anyone looking to try their hand at encaustic, one great bonus—"I don't have to clean brushes! I can just stop, and walk away. I don't have to do a thing. The wax kind of protects the brushes."

### WHAT'S NEXT?

Hamill's encaustic waves have been shown in galleries from New York to Washington State, and are locally represented in Charleston's Atrium Art Gallery. She's been working this series for more than a year, but when asked what may be coming next, she says "I'm still excited by this. I think I will be working in this medium, in this way for quite some time. I have been experimenting with combining oils and encaustic, and it shows some promise. The next body of work will be a continuation of what I've been doing in encaustic." We can't wait to see what she comes up with next. 🎨