

## RAPHAËLLE GOETHALS: DUST STORIES

WILLIAM SIEGAL GALLERY  
540 SOUTH GUADALUPE STREET, SANTA FE

### ENCAUSTIC, A TECHNIQUE OF PAINTING WITH

heated beeswax and resin, to which colored pigments are added, has seen a resurgence in popularity among artists since the 1990s. But the technique has been dated to as early as the fourth century BCE. The examples most of us are familiar with are the haunting Fayum mummy portraits, from second-century Greco-Roman Egypt, done in encaustic on wooden coffin covers.

For the past fifteen years Raphaëlle Goethals has worked in encaustic as her signature medium. *Dust Stories*, on view at William Siegal Gallery, represents her body of

work from the past three years. In *Poetics of Relation*, the Caribbean poet Édouard Glissant invokes the ocean by speaking of an illegible "alternation between order and chaos... a constant movement between threatening excess and dreamy fragility." In a way, Goethals' recent output embodies this contradiction. Glissant further writes, "We clamor for the right to opacity for everyone." Goethals is staking her claim to this right in these works. Perhaps because of their many layers, they manage to be monumental in their presence but are not overbearing; on

the contrary, they are rather reticent. It is necessary to be physically next to them for some time to experience, gradually, the timeless and silent realm which it is the goal of their creator to induce. The pieces in this show are all done on wood panels. The use of materials secreted from a living creature, whether beeswax or tree resin, seems to endow these compositions with both density and a diaphanous quality. Resin is notoriously resistant, wax cools fairly quickly in a normal environment, so both determination and a certain spontaneity are demanded by the medium itself. Of course the artist can use

various heated tools to shape the paint before it cools, and may, in a kind of sculpting process, manipulate the wax once it has cooled. There is also the option of encasing or collaging other materials into the surface before it solidifies, and of leaving marks, treads, and splotches between the layers. This allowance for the hidden to be made partly visible, and the visible to be partly obscured provides a singular opportunity. This is like looking at one's own veins through the skin, generating a reminder of the multiple processes continuously happening within our bodies. In Goethals' work the layered, multiple processes have already taken place at the hands of the artist and we are left with their traces.

Goethals brushes, scrapes, and otherwise treats multiple thin layers of encaustic paint, then burnishes it all to a smooth, semi-transparent finish suggestive of immersion. This labor is expended in the service of a search for balance and stillness; there is a clear intention towards a classic composure in the final product, and certainly the way the colors are muted in this medium gives the finished work a contemplative feel. Many of the pieces have a milkiness or an inky semi-darkness as the primary tones on the field, which suggests a murky counter-world of hints and veiled allusions. A different reading might conclude that seeing something through a medium other than air—underwater, frozen in ice, or through dust settled on a glass surface—can be suggestive of obscurity, or even suffocation. Still, as we are forced, globally, to accept that there is a basic disorder in all natural systems, we may learn, once again, in the words of scholar Steve Mentz, "to love the illegible while still deciphering it, partly."

Standing in front of these luxurious evocations of imagined worlds suffused with the yearning for stillness and clarity, a sense of unease and dissatisfaction came through to me as strongly as did the quest for purity.

—MARINA LA PALMA