The Five Metaphors

"The greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor. It is the one thing that cannot be learned from others; it is also a sign of genius, since a good metaphor implies an eye for resemblance.”
Aristotle, De Poetica, 322 BCE.

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I. Introduction= Thesis Exhibition

"It's All in the Details" is a visual message presented as 18 fossil-like forms, each floating on its own unified panel. These are placed at eye level, so that an intimate view of the details can be seen.

The message is about my personal reflections regarding the interconnectedness of all living matter and the cosmos. The imagery that I created to convey this message were impressions of what ancient fossil-like forms may have looked like during a specific period in Earth's history.

Fossils were chosen because they provide man with glimpses into the ancient past. They show us what was living, thus providing a key to understand the Earth's timeline, and our own human history. They also provide Man with physical proof of the passing of time and a shared essence. At some time in their lives, most people have visited a museum, or seen images of ancient dinosaurs and other ancient fossils. This common experience provides the viewer with a sense of familiarity about seeing ancient fossils, and more importantly, stimulates human curiosity about the origins of life on Earth.

The pictorial work is meant to stimulate this interest in human perception, thus inviting the viewer to reflect on the resemblance, origin, and nature of ancient fossils and man.
Discussion will focus on five specific aspects of my work, which is heat, wax, imagery, pigment, and texture.

These five elements will be compared with the creation of the cosmos, and Earth using the rhetorical device of metaphor.

In order to guide the reader through this paper I will discuss the five metaphors in the following order:

II.  The First Metaphor “Heat=Genesis=Encaustic Process”
III. The Second Metaphor “Wax=Water=Emergence of Visual Thought”
IV.  The Third Metaphor “Ancient Fossils=Preservation=Interconnectedness
V.   The Fourth Metaphor “Pigment=Layers of the Earth=Time”
VI.  The Fifth Metaphor “Texture=Geologic Processes=Graphological Marks”
II. The First Metaphor. “Heat=Genesis=Encaustic Technique”

Heat is the essential element used to create encaustic artwork. Pigmented wax is heated and applied to the surface of wooden panels. It is then heated again, and fused.

Heating pigmented wax is an ancient method that was used by Greek artists during the 5th century B.C. Pliny, a Roman historian writes of this method in the 1st century A.D. He mentions that this technique is used to paint ships, sculptures and portraits, coloring marble and terra cotta for on ivory. The term used to describe this technique is the Greek word “enkaustikos,” which literally means, “to burn in.” (Mattera, 2001, p. 9).

The use of heat metaphorically represents the genesis of the universe. Heat is the basic force of nature and the cosmos. “14 billion years ago, all space and matter and energy of the known universe fit within a grapefruit. The universe was a roaring $10^{50}$ degrees and just 10 seconds old when it merged into a single unified force.” (Tyson & Goldsmith, 2005, p.25). “It was an explosion of space itself that happened everywhere infinitely.” (Lineweaver and Davis, Scientific American, March 2005, p.38-40)

The actual process of working with pigmented wax is quite simple. “The wax is heated and kept in a molten state for application to a rigid wooden support.” (R&F Handmade Paints, 1999, p.1-2)

The wax is heated, and each layer is fused to the previous one, using a
variety of tools. Fusing each layer is critical to maintaining the strength and the
enamel like quality of encaustic panels. The kinesthetic process of this work is
dynamic, and pivotal to the creation of each individual panel. The spatial area in
which I work is small, which limits and defines physical movements. I sweat, I
drip, I burn myself, I am uncomfortable, and it consumes a lot of energy and
time. There are periods of intense forceful activity, and then resting phases,
while gathering strength to create more imagery. There is a constant state of
motion and change when working with this medium. There are also deposits of
myself embedded in the molten wax. Hair, skin cells, and sweat have merged
into each layer of applied and fused wax. This encapsulation of human cellular
matter forms a part of the fundamental traits, which have been found amongst all
living species on Earth. It seems that all living matter is bound up in a “genetic
unity of life.” (Wilson, 2004, p.133)

Another special quality of the encaustic process and work is its
luminosity. “This is the only process in which light passes through the layers and
is reflected back up to the surface of the last layer.” (Mattera, 2001, p.100).

Hot wax is initially opaque, when applied to the substrate. As it cools it
loses this quality, and then appears transparent. This allows the substrate to be
seen. Subsequent applications of molten wax; create layers, which reveal a
reflected luminosity.

This light can be compared to what happened to the universe during its
beginnings. It was not bathed in light, rather, “somewhere around it’s 380,000th
birthday, the temperature dropped below 3,000 degrees Kelvin, which finally allowed photons to run free without bumping into other electrons. This is when a cosmic background of visible light was set free. This can be seen today as a luminous background glow." (Tyson & Goldsmith, 2004, p.26-28).

I have tried to maintain and encourage this luminous background glow from the waxes in each of my panels to symbolically reference the cosmic background of the universe.

For particularly luminous panels, please look at Plate IV, “Intensio”, and Plate V, “Natu maximus avis.” In Plate IV, the luminosity is gentle, yet persistent, with shades of pearl, nuances of grays, hints of greens, all wonderfully backlit, through the use of multiple glazes of pigmented waxes. Plate V has an overall quality of pearl-like luminescence, with a creamy, smooth surface, similar to the inside of a shell.
III. The Second Metaphor. "Wax=Water=Life"

Beeswax is the organic medium that is heated. Depending on the amount of heat applied, wax can have a lipid quality. It can also look warm and fluid, viscous, thick, opaque, murky, or thin. This medium can be sculpted, modeled and carved, or it can have an ice like quality to it.

Gail Stravitsky, Curator, of the Montclair Art Museum, in her paper, "Waxing Poetic: Encaustic Art in America during the Twentieth Century" refers to Leah Stoddard, who curated the House of Wax for the Contemporary Arts Center of Cincinnati in 1998, who metaphorically said the following about wax "it has attributes that are primordial, a skin like substance able "to evoke many things at once: sensations, emotions, memories, history, the passage of time."

Contemporary artists who work with this medium, such as Judith Cotton, who in 1993 had to relearn the motion of swimming, found that encaustic allowed her to express the following: "it can be both translucent and opaque." In her words, " have a distancing blankness or be peeled open to bring the viewer close." (Stravitsky, 1999, p.2) (http://www.tfaoi.com/aa/2aa/2aa626c.htm. P.2)

Oceans, living matter, blood. Fluids represent the embryonic beginning of life forms.

"Can you imagine a world in which the atmosphere is almost unbreatheable? A world that is mostly ocean, and where days are just 21 hours
long? A world in which North America is tilted on its side and the continent straddled the equator? Can you imagine that the terrain that is on top of the Rocky Mountains is at the bottom of a warm sea, which is only 100 feet deep? An ocean, however, that is a nutrient laden soup, and probably nourished the first forms of animal life.” (Anderson, Ross, The Seattle Times. January 9, 2005, Section L).

The quality of heated wax reminds me of these origins.

I swam in fluid as an embryo; as a woman I have carried others as embryos to swim within my fluid, so that they could be born. My body is a vessel filled with fluids, whose feminine rhythms respond to the tides and the moon.

This affinity for the oceans predicated dating these ancient fossil forms from the Ediacaran and Pre-Cambrian periods because there was an explosion of watery life forms. (Ediacaran Period – “This is 50 million years before the Cambrian Period, when the fossil record shows that there was an explosion of life.” (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/3776853).)

The morphology of these imagined fossils have aspects that resemble present day animals. There was a purposeful visual integration of the familiar and a sense of fragility, so that they would look as if they are perhaps suspended, not quite dead or fossilized, but encased and inscribed out of the watery wax element.

Or perhaps, they have been caught in that moment in which they are moving across the strata and are just about to disappear beyond the edge,
continuing, as if uninterrupted in their struggle for survival.

Please refer to my examples in Plates VI, VII, and VIII.

Plate VI, "Putamen coleus," is my vision of a seed with a wing like aspect. It is momentarily at rest, but ready to disperse and propagate. In Plate VII, "Osseus piscatus" presents two fish like fossils. They look as if they are still swimming in the ocean going about their daily business. I think that the best example to found is in Plate VIII. "Spina" is resembles an Ediacaran life form. It is a spiny, urchin like creature that seems to be moving across the panel in search of its dinner.
IV. The Third Metaphor “Ancient fossils=Preservation=interconnectedness”

The 18 encaustic fossil assemblages look similar to organisms that have been found during the Ediacaran and Precambrian eras. These two eras are boundary time periods, which represent life cycles of extinction and renewal, when “much of the living world was replaced by new and different organisms” (Fortey, 2004, p.31).

About half of the fossil forms seem to resemble the Ediacaran time period, which is defined as follows: “This term refers to the unique and distinctive assemblage of enigmatic organisms best known from the Ediacara Hills of South Australia, and characterized by problematic oval, frondose, and spindle-shaped forms of unknown affinity.” (http: www.peripatus.com).

The other half could be compared to Precambrian life forms, whose name Cambria takes its name from a British area. Cambrian is from the Latin word for Wales.” (Fortey, 2004, p.29).

Precambrian life forms resemble bacterium. They look like simple rods and spheres, and are called “prokaryotes.” These fossils have been found in rocks as old as 3500 millions of years ago. The impressions left behind show a multilayered structure similar to stromalites.” (Fortey, 2002, p. 123-124).

The ocean floor sediment became the vehicle that preserved and recorded the existence of these ancient life forms for eons. It was during the Cretaceous period, that “It accumulated as a pure, lime ooze, largely formed by
the microscopic remains of minute algae,” (Fortey, 2002, p. 149-150).

Limestone is composed of these ancient shells of foraminifera, the planktonic species, which lived floating in the upper levels of the oceans.

The Earth, itself has preserved and left a record of the origins of living matter. It is Man alone, out of all of the organisms, which is able to comprehend, compare, and identify this ancient evidence. It provides Man with a key to understanding Earth’s timeline, and our own human history, as well as other physical specimens, who all share a “genetic unity of life.” (Wilson, 2004, p. 133). Chalk, a byproduct of limestone is used as the ground on all eighteen wooden panels. It is commonly known as “Gesso” which is Italian for gypsum. Gesso is made up of glue and gypsum/chalk. It is applied to the substrate in thin layers. Each layer is dried and then methodically sanded down to an enamel-like base, prior to the next layer being applied. The goal was to build an absolutely smooth and absorbent base for the work that was to be created. I used this material to provide an absorbent base to preserve and record the images made from pigmented wax, just as the ancient ocean sediment preserved and recorded living organisms.

Plates I, II and III provide examples of Ediacaran, and Precambrian images. Plate I, “Formica originalis,” Plate II, “Primero adventus,” and Plate III, “Cella novus,” were all found fossilized in the various layers of sediment. They are wonderful example of how this silty, sedimentary matrix of chalk provided an impression base to record these imaginary life forms.
V. The Fourth Metaphor “Pigment=Layers of the Earth=Time

A critical component of the images and their background was the use of pigments applied in multiple glazed layers. The various color choices are intended to convey a sense of distant time, and ancient life unearthed from the strata. The panels were made to look as if they had just been extracted from a section of the earth. Pigment is added to the binder, which in this case is wax to lend color to each layer of fused wax. There are gradations in tone, which has an overall optical affect of heightened luminosity, which is visible in each panel. The time period for the placement of the visual imagery is an unimaginable 450 million years ago. In order to enhance the illusion of distance and time, I used predominantly lighter colors.

The multiple glazed layers of pigments can metaphorically be compared to the successive stratigraphic layers and levels of the Earth. Stratigraphic levels refer to successive layers of earth, i.e. one level might be a layer of wind blown sand, the one below it might be a thin deposit of burnt earth et cetera. The evidence of the construction of the Earth is found in each uncovered layer of the strata.

The origin of pigments comes from a vast array of minerals that crystallized out of the heat of the Earth and its magma chamber. The various reds, blacks, and yellow are mineral oxides. These come from limonites and hematites, which are reddish browns and yellows. Shades of red and mauve
were perhaps a product of the natural peroxide in iron, which transformed these colors slowly and naturally.

The wonderful limestone at Solnhofen has a well-established fossil record, which is embedded in its limestone. The colors vary from white to yellow. Plate IX, is an example of limestone. This piece is called “Aeschynomene naturae,” it reflects the use of various hues of white, grey, gold flecks, and carbon black. It represents the fluid, multi-layered, stratigraphic metaphor, and the fossil is embedded in a chalky, limestone matrix. Plate X, “Emergere musca” is a fine example of the mineral olivine green. This is a simple silicate of iron and magnesium, which crystallized out of a magma chamber. Plate XI, “Novus piscatus arma” uses dense black chromite, with flecks of mica, silver, and bronzes in this fossil. The background is sandstone.

The reds are from limestone and Eocene rock seen in Colorado. Plate XII, “Summus aqua” is a great example of a petrographic slice of a fossil that was embedded in limestone rock, or in a coral reef.
VI. The Fifth Metaphor “Texture=Geologic Process=Graphological Marks”

The surface of the earth is constantly undergoing change. "To date it has been recorded that there were four Precambrian super continents 2500 million years ago; then again at approximately 1 billion, and 80 million years, and 625 million years ago. 1/8th of the history of the rocks on the planet existed during Pre-cambrian times." (Fortey, 2004 p. 310-311).

There have been at least fifteen glacial phases during these epochs. Each phase is recorded in the rocks. Glacial movement is responsible for repositioning huge amounts of geologic matter. Masses of rock are carried along by a substrate of crushed sand, scraping and leaving a record of the movement in the layers. My geological scratch marks resemble quite clearly something called "glacial pavement, which is the name used for the marks left behind by overriding ice-sheets and looks like city street pavement." (Fortey, 2002, p.47).

My textural integration in each panel stems from my cellular memory of the imprint of these geologic processes. The youngest earth layer covers the older layers of earth, hiding or encasing ancient material, until it becomes disinterred and is revealed. The textural marks of my panels approximate the same geological processes as that of the Earth, each layer of pigmented wax is fused on top the older layer. Once these layers are fused in place, I start to build, excavate, and scrape back previous layers in order to uncover the ancient
treasures of the past.

For example in Plate X, "Emergere musca," I imagined that rocks were enclosed in the glacier surface, as it scoured and scraped the underlying surface to produce the set of marks observed in Plate X.

As the Earth's crusts moved and adjusted, and temperatures contracted and expanded, huge landmasses moved and slid, collided, submerged, or were thrust skywards. Rocks, after millions of years, were honed into sculptural formations. In Plate XIII, "Aegrotus osseus insectum," there is a general build up of calcified deposits, and a multitude of scratch marks and pitting, as well as scraping back of layer after layer. The textures that I have created are reminiscent of the diverse and multitudinous types of textures that are a part of the Earth.

All of the panels have edges that have been made in a similar geologic process. They are worn, folded, smooth, uneven, and round. Each panel is a representation of the geologic processes of the Earth.
VII. Exhibition

The exhibition space was minimalistic and its purpose was to display eighteen square panels at eye level. The area of the exhibition space was kept open and clear of any non-essential architectural elements. The only visible structure were planks of unfinished wood, used as shelves for the 18 panels. The shelving extended the length of two walls in the exhibition space, in one uninterrupted continuum.

The panels were placed with their base resting on the shelving and leaning against the wall. These panels were meant to be viewed in one unbroken line. The consistency and rhythm of placement contributed to the way the viewer would see the work.

Controlling the exhibition space with the use of shelving, and placement at eye height of the panels gave the viewer an opportunity to closely look at the construction, sides, and surface textures of the panels. The design of the exhibition space also made it possible for the viewer to inspect the intimate details of each panel. This fostered a sense of informality and familiarity with the ancient fossil assemblages on view. Please see Plates I and II, Plates III and IV.
VIII. Conclusion

Change and evolution are the hallmarks of the artistic process.

I have been obdurate and incessant in pursuing the exploration of form, content and material, and the exclusive use of intuition to govern the process of my art making.

This is not an easy task. It is a constant struggle to remain singular and focused on one’s intuition, when there is a constant bombardment and cacophony of noise in the form of critique, judgment and academic value systems that seem to be in direct opposition to this pursuit.

However, in spite of this opposition, the Graduate Fine Art Program and the artist do pursue the same objective, which is art making and artistic maturation. The results of this process may take a while to surface in the artist, and will have a decidedly different outcome in both quality and perceptions. The task of academia is completed upon the graduation of the artist, who has met the requirements of a terminal graduate degree.

As the artist, my work is just beginning and the academic opposition has inspired me to vigorously protect my intuitive creativity.
APPENDIX A: PLATES

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<th>Plate</th>
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APPENDIX B: PLATES

Plate I  Outside view of Commons Gallery Exhibition space
Plate II  View of Exhibition Space with Panels
Plate III  Close up of panels – leaning adjacent to wall
Plate IV  Close up of panels on continuous shelving
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Plate II  View of Exhibition Space with Panels
Plate III Close up of panels – leaning adjacent to wall.
Plate IV Close up of panels on continuous shelving.
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