



Pilbara Landscape

Beach scene created from shells and encaustic

# Art from the hive

Story and photos  
Marijke Gilchrist





## This artist has revived an ancient art form

Avid gardeners appreciate the important role that bees play in cross-pollination. Without bees, humans wouldn't have very much to eat and there would be fewer plants in the world. And, for this artist, without bees I would have no medium to paint with.

I'm an encaustic artist. I picked up the technique five years ago and fell in love with it. The medium itself has been dated to the Ancient Greeks and comes from the word 'enkaustikos', meaning 'to burn in'. Encaustic is the oldest known pigment binder. Colours are resilient, remaining without cracks and unfaded for centuries, due to the imperviousness of wax to moisture.

Encaustic painting involves using heat to fuse layers of beeswax mixed with resin and pigments. Damar resin (which comes from a family of trees that grow in the East Indies) is used in the medium to harden the beeswax and raise its melting temperature. The medium is heated to 90°C applied to a rigid board, and each layer is fused with a blow torch or heat gun. This results in works that have a deep finish and luminous, ethereal qualities.

I am drawn to create works that reflect my outback travels, ocean scenes, and stylised and semi-abstract studies of flora and fauna. Part of my artistic journey involves incorporating plants and other things from my surroundings to eco-dye silk, which forms the base of some of my works. I often talk about surrendering control; allowing the colours, patterns and forms revealed in the hand-dyed silk to dictate the subject matter, and literally going 'with the flow' of the liquid encaustic medium.

In my Water Lilies series, I dyed the background silk with yellow coreopsis flowers, rose petals, blue irises and red cabbage. In other works I utilised eucalyptus and ginkgo leaves. The plants were bundled into the silk, sprayed with diluted vinegar, bound with string or wrapped around a copper pipe, then steamed over boiling water for at least an hour. For Pilbara Landscape, the silk was placed on an old rusty barbeque lid, and the remaining silk wrapped around a copper pipe. The silk was sprayed with diluted vinegar, wrapped in plastic wrap and then covered with a blanket for two days.

I draw on my mixed media and painting experience to utilise other tools, techniques and materials in my encaustic works. Pastry rollers and dental implements mark the smooth surface of the wax. Alcohol inks are applied to define details, and shellac (the resin from female lac bugs) mixed with methylated spirits is set alight to reveal intricate patterns. Natural found objects - including shells, stones, seaweed - are often embedded in the final layers.

Recently, I have been experimenting with applying encaustic to gourds that I found in the community garden in Yackandandah, Victoria. Some have been left whole and others carved to form shapes.



My studio in Canberra is affectionately known as *The Hive*. This is a tribute to the bees whose wax makes my works possible, and the notion of a hive being a centre of creative industry. My works can be viewed online ([www.fromthehive.com.au](http://www.fromthehive.com.au)) and my next major exhibition will be held from 2 to 18 July 2019 at the Palm House, Royal Botanic Gardens in Sydney.



Dyed silk is wrapped around copper pipe and steamed



Eco-dyed silk with ginkgo leaves and copper



Coreopsis, rose petals, blue irises and red cabbage used to dye silk background



Gourd painted with encaustic medium