

## Personal Vistas (Review)

*Kim Flora's large-scale encaustic paintings embrace turbulence and chaos*

By Matt Morris



### Critic's Pick

For more than 20 years Cincinnati has subsidized its local artists through funding for large and small organizations as well as competitive individual artist grants. That is, until this past December, when City Council approved a budget for 2010 that eliminated all funding for the arts.

Little has been said of this, but both the practical and symbolic significance of this move are horrific. On as little as \$35,000 in 2009, these grants supported emerging artists as well as special projects that enriched our city. Shame on City Council.

One of the last artists to benefit from the grants program is Kim

Flora. In 2008, she was awarded \$6,000 to support the creation of the large-scale encaustic paintings that grace her exhibition *Personal Vistas*, opening this Friday at PAC Gallery in East Walnut Hills. Encaustic (paintings in melted wax) is an expensive, involved medium to work in; this exhibition would have been nearly impossible at Flora's career stage without grant support.

Flora typifies the hard-working, multi-tasking model of a young, ambitious artist. She is one of many young creatives who came to the city to attend the Art Academy of Cincinnati and have stayed because of the palpable sense of potential around town. By day, she works as a preparator at the Cincinnati Art Museum. Her art-making takes place in the in-between hours. If such a hectic lifestyle inspires desperation, fragmented trains of thought and emotional spikes, Flora makes good use of them in her work.

There is real turbulence splashing about in this new series, like a Gericault shipwreck. I returned over and over to the brooding "through the thickening," a blackish painting with a wave of milky wax smeared through the center of the panel. Snipped-up photographs and other collage elements are scattered between layers of oil paint and wax. The painting's beauty is enhanced by the wear and struggle it withstood in Flora's studio. Jagged extra hues, scuffs and scrapes court the accidental along with all-out chaos.

Most of the works are colored by a bevy of blues: the colors of bodies of water, melancholy and night skies. Flora tames the chilly depths of transparent wax with elegantly shaky drawings across the painting's front, as in "starlight and the harbor," where four lines suggest a whale-like immensity drifting in front of the rough surface.

In the related painting "distant galaxies," a drawn shape sits beside areas where Flora carved and broke wax away. Intensely bright hues from underneath shine out suddenly, almost as if the painting's soul was escaping. These are physical rather than cerebral maneuvers — one can see that for Flora, the studio is a place for action.

Standing out from the indigo crowd, "California on fire and the ice plant dew flower" is a marvel of fruit-pulp red, spicy violet and opaline haze. This work is a home base from which viewers might start to notice little shards of warm orange and scuffs of melon in many of the other panels.

I'm left struck by how deep and juicy wax and paper and paint can be. But I'm also worried about the state of our modest arts community. As I write this, we are all living in a city that has withdrawn a key financial incentive that tangibly supports the arts.