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waxing POETIC

Georgia Nassikas uses beeswax to capture nature's beauty in her encaustic paintings



BY CATHERINE FUNKHOUSER

ARCHITECTURAL PHOTOGRAPHY BY JUDY DAVIS

On a sunny day in McLean, Virginia, artist and beekeeper Georgia Nassikas gazes out the tall windows of her second-story studio, taking in the sky, the verdant lawn and her beloved beehives. The moment encapsulates her artistic journey. “One thing that fuels my soul is a respect for nature,” she reveals. “A sense of beauty in natural space is the genesis of what I set out to do in the studio.”

While bucolic views provide creative fodder, the beeswax from

her hives figures prominently in her artwork too. The connection traces back to her childhood, when Nassikas watched as honey was extracted from hives on her family's Rhode Island farm. Decades later, when she and her husband purchased their three-acre Virginia property, Nassikas embraced the tradition and

The renovated studio (above) offers Georgia Nassikas (inset) space for creating and exhibiting her work.

PORTRAIT © HAKAN LONAEUS

ART STUDIO



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started a bee colony of her own. Before long, she began pondering what to do with their growing stockpile of wax.

The answer came to her in 2007 when, while viewing a Jasper Johns exhibit at the National Gallery of Art, a waxy interpretation of the American flag sparked an interest in encaustic painting. Soon after, Nassikas traded her oil paints for a pigmented-wax medium, using her own beeswax to create complex encaustic artwork.

This natural medium often influences the artist's themes. Visual impressions of places and experiences, "seared in [her] mind," ignite an organic process in which creative intentions often morph—through medium or technique—into entirely different final compositions. Nassikas resists putting too fine a point on her subject matter. Landscapes are pared down to elemental shapes; beehives are deconstructed. Through texture, depth and sheen, the artworks convey nature's nuances. Nassikas groups her paintings into series such as "Distant Views" by the feelings they evoke, rather than precise physical locations.

"I like that middle area—the tension between abstraction and realism," she explains. "I'm driven by the place where the two meet. There's a fine bal-



The renovated barn's raised roofline accommodates taller windows (top, right), part of the plan Nassikas and architect Michael Nawrocki dubbed "The Big Sky Scheme." The new windows flood the studio (above) with natural light, while overhead, a cable-mounted system with 24 rotating lights offers maximum flexibility to show works such as Georgia Nassikas's pared-down landscape "Yellow Light" (top, left).

ance between creating a beautiful composition and challenging viewers to look deeper and engage with the work."

Painting with molten wax helps her achieve that balance. The term "encaustic" originates from the Greek word meaning "to burn in;" the ancient art form uses heat to melt, manipulate and fuse layers of wax, typically to a board. Melted beeswax is mixed with damar—the resin from fir trees—and powdered pigments to create a paint medium.

Nassikas primes a birch board and then brushes on multiple layers of the waxy paint, wielding a heat gun and

blowtorch (images incongruous with the slender, blond-haired woman demonstrating in a cotton dress) to fuse each new layer to the one before. An array of tools—from kitchen spatulas to dental instruments—creates different textures. "I'm pursuing a luminescent quality, applying wax and then scratching and scoring to reveal what came before," Nassikas says. "Again, there's a tension between smooth and rough. It invites another kind of conversation."

Another dialogue she hopes to encourage is one about environmental responsibility. "Using my own beeswax adds

meaning," Nassikas explains. "There are messages about sustainability and respect for the environment. It's part of my story."

And indeed, hers is a colorful story. The daughter of the late John Chafee, who served as a U.S. senator and the governor of Rhode Island, Nassikas experienced political life early on but admits that her "rhythms weren't in sync with politics." Those rhythms were oriented, instead, toward art. Nassikas says she inherited her artistic gene from her maternal great-grandfather, George de Forest Brush, an American painter who died before she was born



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Reclaimed wood from the barn's exterior was used inside to create a rustic sliding door (right) that opens to reveal the stairway and a glimpse of the gallery and studio space just beyond. Inside, Nassikas creates luminescent paintings such as "Rising" (left) using layers of paint containing wax produced by a bee colony on her property.

(The National Gallery of Art exhibited his work in 2008).

"Art is something I've always done," Nassikas notes. She studied classical painting in Florence, Italy, after high school and took occasional art classes throughout college and graduate school. Though her career initially took a different direction—interior design—years later she decided to "dive into" her earlier passion.

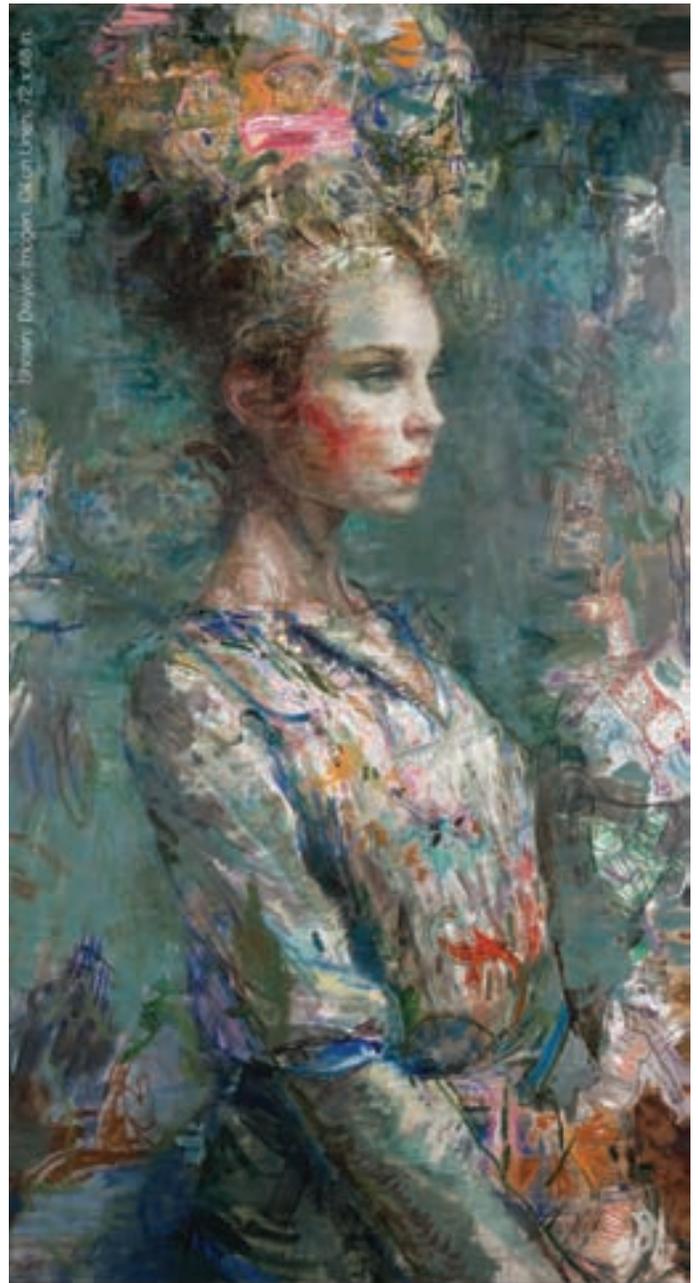
But she needed more efficient workspace than her dining-room table. The search for a property that would offer a country lifestyle as well as suitable studio space led Nassikas and her family to a McLean lot with a Civil War-era farmhouse and a board-and-batten barn, where the artist saw potential for her studio.

They bought the property in 2001. An initial bare-bones renovation of the dilapidated barn addressed immediate safety concerns, but Nassikas ultimately craved enhanced functionality and a better view, so in 2012 she called on McLean architect Michael Nawrocki to design a bright, lofty studio within the original structure. Nawrocki Architects and Bowie, Maryland-based

Tobin Construction raised the roofline and installed new windows to improve the views. "I needed to see the sky without ducking down," Nassikas says. The project also added a new HVAC system and suspended-cable gallery lighting.

Drawing on her design background, Nassikas fashioned a gracious sitting area in the space, juxtaposing refined pieces against the barn's humble heritage. The ground floor and exterior got character-preserving updates. "We purposely kept the lower level rustic to create an element of surprise when you enter the clean, serene studio. Again, there's that push-pull. It's in my art and it's in my studio space," says Nassikas with a smile. "It's what keeps things interesting." ❖

Writer Catherine Funkhouser is based in Arlington, Virginia. Georgia Nassikas's art is on permanent exhibit and sale at Touchstone Gallery in DC; touchstonegallery.com. The gallery will feature her work in a solo show, "Raw and Pure: Encaustic Paintings by Georgia Nassikas," October 3 to November 2. Visit georgianassikas.com



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