

December 31, 2006

Creating Unusual Paints, and Teaching Artists How to Use Them

By [MICHELLE FALKENSTEIN](#)

KINGSTON, N.Y.



Librado Romero/The New York Times

Matthew Kelly, senior paintmaker, mixed a preparation at R&F Handmade Paints.

THE production department at R&F Handmade Paints contains enough color-flecked cooking equipment — hot plates, ovens, huge pots, industrial mixers, blender jars and baking pans — to turn out dozens of multicolored cupcakes. But it is encaustic paint and pigment sticks (R&F's brand name for oil sticks) that get cooked up at R&F.

According to Richard Frumess, its founder and co-owner, the business produces about 100 cakes of encaustic paint and 300 pigment sticks every day, in two or three colors out of a possible 89, with names like dianthus pink, alizarin orange and Prussian blue. Even at these quantities, he said, R&F is the main manufacturer of encaustic paint in the world. It is also one of the only manufacturers.

Since very few people know how to work with encaustic paint, an ancient material that requires special equipment, a heating system and ventilation, R&F began a workshop program in 1995 that offers classes around the country in the use of encaustic and pigment sticks. Besides

Kingston, the workshops are given in Atlanta; Boerne, Tex. (near Austin); Chicago; New York City; San Francisco; Seattle; and York, Me. Around 400 people take the workshops each year, many of them art educators who go on to instruct others.

R&F also promotes encaustic through exhibitions. The company has organized an encaustic biennial since 1997, which was presented most recently at the Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art at SUNY-New Paltz in 2005. In October 2007, the biennial will open in R&F's Kingston gallery and travel to Ball State University in Indiana, one of only a few schools in the country that teaches encaustic. R&F also presents bimonthly exhibitions: on view through Jan. 27 is "Give & Take," featuring the work of Kim Bruce, Valerie Hammond, Judith Kindler and John Maul.

"This business is as much about the revival of encaustic and its transformation into a contemporary medium as it is about the manufacturing and selling of the paint," Mr. Frumess said.

Encaustic paint is made from filtered beeswax, Damar tree resin and pigment. While it has been used since the 5th century B.C., its most famous use was perhaps in Greco-Roman Egypt from 100 B.C. to A.D. 200, in portraits on mummy casings. A number of these lifelike paintings, known today as the Fayum portraits (for the region in Egypt where they were unearthed), are on view at the [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#). A well-known contemporary encaustic painter is [Jasper Johns](#), who used it to create his iconic flags, numbers and targets.

"More than any other paint, encaustic is a collaborative medium," Mr. Frumess said. "It enhances and transforms other media and gives them another dimension of luminosity and opulence. It both obscures and enhances. And you can come back 10 minutes or 10 years later and rework it by adding heat."

Mr. Frumess, 59, started R&F Handmade Paint in the basement of his Brooklyn apartment in 1988 after learning to make paint at Torch Art Supplies in New York. His first oil stick molds, now fabricated by a company in Hackensack, N.J., that makes lipstick molds, were made from plumbing pipes. He moved his business to Kingston in 1990 and began working with Jim Haskin, who became his business partner in 1998. "He's calm and thoughtful, and I'm impulsive and enthusiastic," Mr. Frumess said.

All 10 employees at R&F, including the owners, are artists. "It's hard for artists to get meaningful day jobs," said Mr. Frumess, who established a four-day workweek so his employees have time to make art.

Ross Bleckner, Toba Khedoori, Richard Serra, Amy Sillman and many other well-known artists use R&F's pigment sticks, encaustic paint or both. "I pretty much spend all of my money there," said Ms. Sillman, a pigment stick aficionado represented by Sikkema Jenkins & Company who was featured in the 2004 [Whitney Biennial](#). "I literally don't make paintings without them."

This past spring, R&F relocated to a 7,000-square-foot building next to freight train tracks. The original part of the building was constructed in the 1890s by Standard Oil. Mr. Frumess estimates that trains pass by around 10 times a day, blowing their plaintive horns and rattling the windows. Everyone has gotten used to it, he said.

The process of making encaustic and pigment sticks is complicated. All of the pigments are toxic because of their chemistry and/or particle size, and some, like the cadmiums and cobalts, are highly poisonous. The paint makers look like astronauts when they put on their Tyvek suits and respirators to work with the dry pigments in a sealed room. Each pigment is added to its medium

and milled for a different length of time, depending on its graininess and the desired quality of the paint.

“There’s a lot of science in it, but there’s a lot of art in it for us,” said Mr. Frumess. “We’re going for undertones as well as top tones.” He regularly invites an industrial hygienist from the Occupational Health and Safety Administration to analyze R&F’s paint-making process.

Matthew Kelly, 29, the senior paint maker, has been working at R&F since the spring of 2002. His favorite color to make, as well as to use, is cobalt yellow, which he describes as transparent and on the cool side. His least favorite is phthalo blue, which he calls an electric blue with no subtlety at all. “It’s like a virus,” he said. “If you have a spot of it on your clothes, it gets everywhere. I’m not allowed at my friend’s house in my work clothes because I got it on his pit bulls.”

John Maul, an artist whose sculptures with encaustic are currently on view at R&F, is chairman of the department of art at [Oregon State University](http://www.oregonstate.edu). He saw an R&F demonstration at a College Art Association conference around seven years ago. “They were working with this stuff and it smelled great,” he said. “I got totally seduced by the medium. Then I took a three-day workshop in Seattle in 2000. There’s something about it that makes you feel good.”

Fawn Potash, who lives in Catskill, N.Y., went from being a photographer to working almost exclusively in encaustic after a workshop at R&F in 2001. “I took it on a lark and I never turned back,” she said, recalling how she immediately purchased the equipment and dismantled her darkroom. “It has to do with the sensuality of the medium. Photography is very thin and two-dimensional. Encaustic has body to it. It feels fleshy.”

Donna Sharrett, an artist who lives in Ossining, said, “You feel when you’re using it like it’s something ancient.”

R&F Handmade Paints, 84 Ten Broeck Ave., Kingston, N.Y.; (800) 206-8088 or www.rfpaints.com. Exhibition hours: Monday to Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Saturday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.