

Resounding Silence: The Work of L.C. Armstrong

L.C. Armstrong's work defies categorization. She distances herself from codified systems of art making by interchanging the syntaxes of painting and sculpture. Flat surfaces are punctured and marked by burns, smoke, bullets, stains, or enamel and then coated in resin, sealing the evidence of their making within a seductive film. The reflective gloss of the resin invokes the subjective nature of viewing. Her sculptures, assembled from synthetic or industrial materials, employ isolated painterly tactics. The cool detachment of the object is interrupted by touch, questioning the status of representation.

Categories divide, separate, and establish oppositions. Armstrong's process, both materially and mentally, is one of synthesis. The vocabulary of Abstraction and Minimalism fuses with Conceptual and Process Art. The state of suspension marking Minimalism's position between grounded experience and ephemeral transcendence merges with a base desire to express. The analytical reticence of Conceptual Art mixes with an intuitive drive fueled by an attention to process and physicality.

An important marker for Armstrong is American artist Eva Hesse, a sculptor working under the 1960's tenets of Minimalism. Although emptying metaphorical content from form was the central project of Minimalism, Hesse injected it with a powerfully expressive charge. That charge came in part from an inquiry into the interplay of dualities such as light and dark, rigid and soft, order and chaos, fragility and permanence. The tension inherent in Hesse's pairings is a source of implicit content. Hesse's investigation of these material divisions, informs Armstrong's synthesizing of both material and mental oppositions. Hesse's materials, often latex and resin, are integral containers of meaning - latex breaks down

quickly while resin, a synthetic polymer, endures. For Armstrong, the physicality of her materials has a similar significance and status.

Armstrong is making a new visual language while unmaking the already encoded dictions of her predecessors. For her it is a continual cycle of making and unmaking that has at its core an exploration of the very nature of expression, communication, language, and representation.

The binary model which forms a paradigmatic basis of meaning, that something cannot be this and *not* this at the same time, is a source of perpetual investigation for Armstrong. She seeks to blur the lines that bisect Western thought into bipolar categories. She treads the wasteland between opposites to expose the concept of absolute dichotomies as a fiction. Writing is both verbal and visual. Re-presentation is a presence that points to an absence. Making is also unmaking.

This essay presents Armstrong's work as a cycle of recombinant strategies that continually return to the sites of ambiguity and loss built into language and representation. It proceeds as a series of associations and links made to her work.

Making

Making present. Making sure. Making-up. Making clear. Making is a process, that as Elaine Scarry says in *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, "entails two distinct phases - making-up (mental imagining) and making-real (endowing the mental object with a material or verbal form)."¹ The interior activity of making is imagining, while the exterior activity is reproducing, either materially or verbally, the mental object. In the movement from interior to exterior, an economy of loss comes into play because the external artifact, verbal or material, becomes a copy of an imagined original and part of the self becomes translated into an object in the world.

Pain may accompany that loss, generating an anxiety and ambivalence present at the threshold of language and expression.

This anxiety is embodied by Armstrong's *Dream Machine*, 1992. A metal, adjustable hospital bed holds a raw foam mattress punctured by nearly four thousand sharpened silver pencils. The bed - a site of creation, birth, and recuperation, as well as death. The pencils - a bed a nails inscribing a sentence, for a crime of language, onto the body. Language is both productive and destructive.

A small bronze and steel creature titled *Mutant*, sits on the gallery floor ready to be propelled into language by its twenty-six tentacle-like legs, each marked by a letter of the alphabet. The alphabet is a tool by which making moves from interior to exterior; it is a tool of representation. But it also mutates and alters as one tries to match verbal expression to experience, a Sisyphean task. Armstrong thus invokes a painful anxiety associated with man's will to communicate, the desire to articulate, the bond to language.

Verbal and Material Expression

The voice is fluid, unanchored, and an extension of the self into the world. Writing is solid, static, and containing. Verbal expression is based on temporal arrangement and appeals to the ear, while writing/material expression is based on spatial arrangement and appeals to the eye. Susan Stewart relates, "The space between letters, the space between words, bears no relation to the stutters and pauses of speech. Writing has none of the hesitations of the body; it has only the hesitations of knowing."²

The gap between the poles of speech and writing closes within two constructs of language that are bound to the body, and are critical elements of Armstrong's work - braille and poetry. Within these systems, she explores language as a visual and tactile as well as aural experience.

In a similar work, *The Silence*, 1993, Armstrong employs line breaks from the poem by that title by Anne Sexton. A modern American writer, Sexton is regarded as a confessional poet who persistently fought for a voice in the face of mental illness. Another work replicates Sylvia Plath's *Fever 103*. A persistent struggle for voice similarly epitomized Plath's battle for existence, since for her, silence was tantamount to nonbeing, invisibility. Each of these three poems also reference heat, fire, and burning.

Armstrong executes her controlled burns by tacking fuses equivalent to the length of lines and the structure of stanzas or paragraphs to wood supports. She ignites the fuses, tracing absent texts. Wounded by words, the lines resemble cauterized gashes. After, she coats the scarifications in a membrane of resin, a salve to soothe the burn or a coating to trap the meaning. As she makes the visual language of poetry present, she unmakes its verbal counterpart. The fuse never reaches the bomb. The bang is silenced.

Silence

The silent presence of Armstrong's material signifiers underscores their communicative power. *Autumn in New York*, 1993, freezes the blast of bullets striking aluminum in resin and inscribes the event only in the star burst patterns left by the gun powder. Across the two aluminum panels, lyrical lines deliberately mar the accumulated layers and intersect with what appear as scattered blank sheets of paper that are punctured by bullets and washed with a thin veneer of gray paint. Sterile resin coats the scene. The image functions as a voiceless record, an accumulation of circumstantial evidence that does not quite fit its technically and visually refined presentation. The silence is elevating.

Silence, like writing, is a container. It is the opposite of the voice, which is a vehicle of self-extension.³ The blank page as silence in a material form is a subject of *Overflow*, 1993-94. This installation

work assembles seven elongated aluminum clipboards, akin to those carrying medical charts, outfitted with small reading lamps casting red light on gray latex skins clenched by a metal clip and trailing onto the floor. As they lean against the gallery wall, the lamp pours red light across the sheets lined like notebook paper in red ink, blood lines spilling from surrogate hearts onto prosthetic skins. The imagery is sterile and painful as the sheets await prescription.

That pain silences because it resists verbal and material objectification is the subject of Elaine Scarry's book *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Scarry's central premises is that to have great pain is to have certainty, while to witness pain in another is to have doubt.⁴ From this, her text establishes critical links between the status of pain, the imagination, and expression, links which seem to be elucidated by L.C. Armstrong in her material studies of the capacity of language to make and unmake.

Unmaking

By unmaking the encoded structures of language and representation, Armstrong makes her own language. Through tactics of displacement and synthesis, she sets in motion a transformative process, which does not destroy or repress language but reveals its expressive potential. Unmaking is making.

Kelly Bousman

¹ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1985, 21.

² Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1984, 31.

³ As Elaine Scarry recounts, "Through his ability to project words and sounds out into his environment, a human being inhabits, humanizes, and makes his own a space much larger than that occupied by his body alone." (*The Body in Pain*, 49)

⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.