

L.C. ARMSTRONG
The Paradise Triptych

L. C. ARMSTRONG *and the*

A Flow'r which once

In Paradise, fast by the Tree of Life

Began to bloom, but soon for man's offense

To Heav'n remov'd, where first it grew, there grows.

— John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (3.353-56)



Pale Male Over Pink Pastorage, 2006, acrylic with bomb fuse and resin on linen, 60 x 48 x 2 inches, 144 inches total, in three panels
© 2008 L.C. Armstrong. Courtesy of the artist and Marlborough Gallery, New York.

The cinematically scaled triptychs by L. C. Armstrong are fantastic, precisely rendered paintings in which woman and man are secondary to paradises where flowers matter most. In the four tour-de-force works of L. C. Armstrong: *The Paradise Triptychs*, miniature meta-narratives are carefully configured into the wondrous sublime of her sunrise and sunset landscapes. In Armstrong's compositions — which could stretch from panel to panel in a continuous panorama—a network of stunning *florae*, sensuous in coloring and execution, ground the symbolic tone of her work. Flowers serve as screens or visual preambles through which we peer to notice somewhat comic, isolated figures dotting the artist's imaginary scenes. As in Milton's 17th century masterpiece, *Paradise Lost*,¹ Armstrong's

gardens are also inhabited with the conflicts of a lapsed Eden; and yet, flowers are agents of love existing before the Fall. In Milton, flowers are present at Eve's creation; her first memory is waking "Under a shade of flow'rs," and her daily labor is described as "Among sweet dewes and flow'rs." Flowers are considered sacred in their innocence and perfect beauty, and they do more in Armstrong's hands than serve as adornment and distraction from the worlds of folly and decline, which she also describes. Her birds of paradise, hibiscus, iris, orchids, sunflowers, and poppies all bestow an insight into the artist's concern for substance through the symbolism of a life form that indeed teems with the spirit of the divine in nature. So it is for example, that against the metaphorical heritage of

Language of Flowers

the rose and the lily as utilized by medieval and Renaissance artists to signify the purity of the Virgin Mary, Armstrong's roses and lilies, as with her entire palette of flowers, perform other functions.

Through her gift as a realist painter, she imbues her flowers with a tangible, near photographic reality that the French literary critic Hélène Cixous terms a "language of nature,"² a kind of poetics that calls for a view of nature as Origin. Yet, Armstrong also introduces "doubt" into her compositions. The stems of the flowers, created by a technique which employs

ignited bomb fuse to sear the surface of the panels, form arcs of thorny tears or violent scars that seem to cut through the actual linen canvas. This device recalls Marcel Duchamp's *Tu m'*, 1918 (coll. Yale University Art Gallery), in which a jagged *trompe l'œil* rip across the canvas is held together by the joke of a real safety pin. Likewise, Armstrong's "tears" create disbelief through a tense dynamic drawn between reality and symbol, perfection and ruin.

Taken together, the elements in L. C. Armstrong's paintings create works of art that are American in tone and delivery, and



Poppy Passion Pyre, 2007, acrylic with bomb fuse and resin on linen, 48 x 48 x 2 inches, 144 inches total, in three panels (detail shown on cover)
© 2008 L.C. Armstrong. Courtesy of the artist and Marlborough Gallery, New York.



Romantic Landscape, 2000, acrylic with bomb fuse and resin on linen, 48 in. x 48 in. x 2 in. inches, 144 inches total, in three panels
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Rainbow Over Dumbo, 2008, acrylic with bomb fuse and resin on linen, 48 x 48 x 2 inches, 144 inches total, in three panels
© 2008 L.C. Armstrong. Courtesy of the artist and Marlborough Gallery, New York. Photography by Jean Vong.

are a continuum of the genre of landscape painting. The focal points of a setting or rising sun, a rainbow, or a fully opened orchid imbue each of her works with statements of promise that echo the monistic tone of certain 19th century paintings by Thomas Cole, Frederic Edwin Church, and Martin Johnson Heade. And, in sheer imagination and technical bravado, Armstrong rivals the early 20th century landscapes by Louis M. Eilshemius and Joseph Stella. The Hudson River School painter Frederic Church found abundant confirmation for his grand depictions of the Americas as an incitement to the viewing public to keep the faith in nature amid the rise of a Second Industrial Revolution that began to sweep the United States in 1850. Armstrong recognizes this tradition. Yet her keen sense of the sacred and profane leaves room for whimsy. Armstrong depicts a pair of snowmen melting in the tropics, for example, and a mermaid wearing headphones looking toward evening; girls sporting boxing gloves or a bird cage join the panoply of characters that also includes part-Ganesha, part-Disney elephants at play below the Brooklyn Bridge, the modernist icon made famous in paintings and photographs by Georgia O'Keeffe, Joseph Stella, and Alfred Stieglitz, among others. In Armstrong's grand *Pale Male Over Pink Pastorage*, the subject of the painting, a New York City red-tailed hawk, descends toward the sun in the middle panel. The hawk is a veritable likeness of the Holy Spirit as dove who deftly holds the symbol for infinity in its beak.

As for technique, L. C. Armstrong's flowered landscapes are painted in a high-keyed palette that takes a note from the commercial neon of Los Angeles' Sunset Strip and reproductions of flowers in *Jackson & Perkins*® gardening catalogues. The glossy finish of her paintings is a hardened resin that recalls her roots as a Venice Beach auto body decoration artisan.

These elements of high and low are presented in the triptych format that holds her conflation of isolated follies set amid seductively beautiful, if not delicious, landscapes. From an historical perspective, the triptych, or three-panel painting, served Renaissance and Baroque artists commissioned by the Roman Catholic Church to portray scenes of Genesis, the Life of Christ, and the Resurrection. Three panels served to elicit time—past, present, future—and when the end panels were folded inward and closed shut, in a sense, time stood still. The faithful would then meditate upon the closed panel's scenes of Man's fall from grace painted in tones of grey, known as *totalerei*, or "death painting." When once again fully opened, the three interior panels, painted in full color, signaled that everlasting hope and life were possible.

— E. Luanne McKinnon
Director, *The University of New Mexico Art Museum*

1 All references to John Milton come from *Milton Studies*, vol. XLVII, ed. Albert C. Labriola, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press), 2008.

2 Hélène Cixous, *Ille*, (Paris: Éditions des femmes, 1980).



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L. C. ARMSTRONG *The Paradise Triptychs*

September 20, 2008 – January 4, 2009

The four triptychs in this exclusive CFAM exhibition are representative of the most recent work by L.C. Armstrong (b.1954), who was born in rural Tennessee, studied art in Pasadena and San Francisco, and resides in Manhattan. Working with a vivid natural and synthetic palette, Armstrong seduces the viewer into crystal-clear fantasy landscapes where lush exotic flowers dwarf seemingly whimsical characters.

Armstrong's paintings can be considered surreal in the most literal translation of the overused and misunderstood French term. That is, these landscapes are "more than" reality (*sur* = above, therefore "super-reality"). The seductiveness of Armstrong's work comes, in part, from the jarring recognition of familiar elements—a bird of paradise, a snowman, a dove, a lion tamer—set in unfamiliar contexts. Why are the flowers the size of mountains? How can a snowman exist in tropical heat? The tension between what we know (or think we know) and what we know to be impossible belies the first look's allure and forces us into a realm of perceptive instability. Armstrong populates her canvases with juxtapositions inspired by current events and her own world, as when she references New York City's famed pale-colored, red-tailed hawk in *Pale Male Over Pink Pastorage* and, in *Rainbow Over Dumbo*, with its bathing elephants and Brooklyn Bridge detail, alludes to the beloved Disney character as well as to the area of Brooklyn known as DUMBO (Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass).

Idyllic images and ironic references aside, Armstrong's work often exudes a sense of menace. In *Romantic Landscape*, a couple picnics

by the water, a mermaid listens to music through her headphones, a dog gazes into the distance; all seems right on this warm summer day. Yet, upon closer inspection, we see a shark's fin heading toward a man's legs emerging from the water (a reference to Pieter Bruegel's painting *The Fall of Icarus*, ca. 1558), a young woman wearing boxing gloves sits, exhausted, and volcanoes in the background smoke ominously. *Poppy Passion Pyre*, despite its alliterative lilt, depicts a woman bound and blindfolded, seemingly ignorant of the vast flaming flowers threatening to engulf her. According to Armstrong, she may be read as a reference to the "burka-clad women in the Mideast [who] carry birdcages and just about everything else on their heads," but she is also linked visually to a long lineage of imagery associated with Surrealists such as Max Ernst, René Magritte, and Salvador Dalí, among others. While not referencing a specific object, Armstrong notes that she has "a vast library of art images in my subconscious that bubble up."

The media that Armstrong employs further subvert the seeming idyll. Her trademark technique of burning bomb fuse to produce flower stems incorporates a substance synonymous with destruction and extreme manifestations of dissent, giving her paintings an undeniable emotional and political charge. We are caught off guard in our perceptions and forced to recognize, time and again, the razor-fine line between paradise and peril.

— Matthew D. McLendon
Curator of Academic Initiatives

Gallery Talk: *The Paradise Triptychs*

L.C. Armstrong, a Thomas P. Johnson Distinguished Visiting Artist
October 30, 6:00 p.m.

The artist will discuss her original vision, working method, and subject matter in an informal gallery talk with Q&A. Ms. Armstrong is represented by Marlborough Gallery, New York, and her work has been included in exhibitions at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; the Brooklyn Museum of Art; Van Abbe Museum, Eindhoven, Netherlands; and P.S. 1, Long Island City, NY.



Studio images courtesy of Jesse Winter Photography.


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