

Galleries

Landscapes That Burn Into The Imagination

By FERDINAND PROTZMAN
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When L.C. Armstrong last showed in Washington, her paintings were big, dramatic abstractions made by affixing lengths of bomb fuse to linen and igniting them, creating simple compositions of jagged, seared lines. She then encased each picture in thick, clear resin. It was rather conceptual art, as much about the idea of what constitutes a painting as the actual image.

So her new work, crammed with pristine flowers, spectacular sunsets, dramatic landscapes and just a smattering of fuse burns, may appear at first to be a radical step away from ideas and toward more traditional painting. But it isn't. Instead, the New York-based artist is playing with a far bigger and infinitely more elusive concept: life in millennial America.

For any artist, bumping around the vinyl-encased myths and realities cluttering the great room of the American psyche is an ambitious and dangerous business. So many things can go wrong. We live in narrow-minded, single-issue times. Generalizing about national tendencies is a sure way to offend somebody. Attempts at social commen-



tary frequently miss the mark. Ditto for humor. Whimsy isn't hip. Cynicism is. Meanwhile, daily life moves faster and faster.

"The world strikes me as a hurdy-gurdy, over-pressurized with trite rechurning," German artist Max Beckmann wrote that in 1935.

Now we're dancing to digital tunes delivered at light speed. You can't blame artists for looking inward and dwelling on issues of race, gender and identity. The big picture is a scary blur.

Armstrong succeeds because she

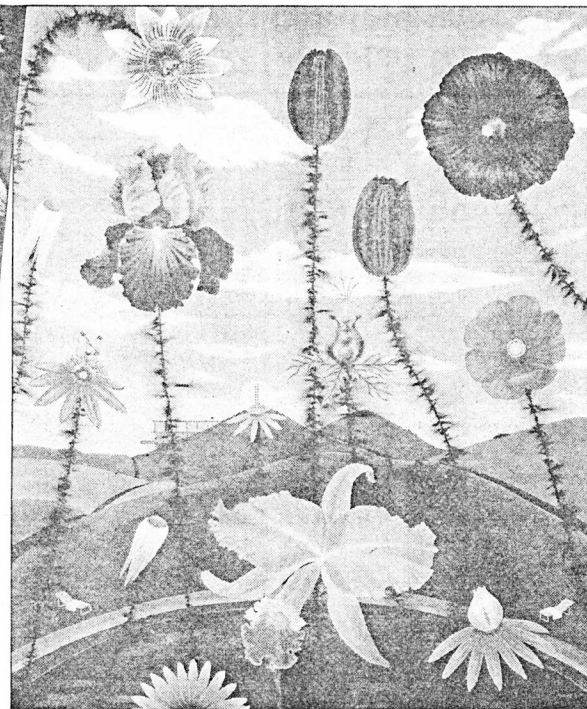


PHOTOS COURTESY MARSHA MATEYKA GALLERY

L.C. Armstrong embraces the beauty of representational art in, clockwise from left, "Sunset Over Lake Champagne," "Blue Moon Over Miltonia" and "Passion Flowers Over Paradise Motel." The spiky flower stems are created by burning bomb fuse cord on the paintings' linen surface.

carefully balances the universal and the personal and embraces the beauty, the grandeur, the glossy appeal, the ominous vacancy, the banal horrors and the self-inflicted contradictions of American life. Her paintings, executed in acrylics and bomb fuse and that thick gleaming coat of resin, seem like impeccably preserved snapshots of a long journey through a strange but familiar land.

Like life, the paintings have multiple levels of imagery and meaning. Armstrong starts by painting a landscape scene on the linen, using a mix of radiant, slightly metallic colors to depict sunsets and sunrises, and duller tones for earth and water. The landscapes are lovely, posses-



sing the warm glowing colors and dramatic vistas that characterized the Hudson River School of the 19th century.

But her lakes, hills and skies are clearly of today. In "Sunset Over Lake Champagne," painted this year, two kitschy critters—lemmings, monkeys, who knows?—cuddle on a rock in the middle of a pond, watching the spectacular sunset. The rock turns out to be the top of a skull. In the foreground, a little girl wades along the pond's edge, wearing a life preserver. Nearby, a bikini-clad woman is washing her long blond hair next to a drainpipe spewing some purple liquid.

On top of that Hieronymus Bosch scene, Armstrong laid the fuses. In these paintings, however, the burn

marks serve a more literal function; they become the spiky stalks of lovely flowers, some of which are exacting depictions of real blooms, while others are pure inventions by the artist. An example of the latter is the white blossom in "Sunset Over Lake Champagne" which has a human figure as its pistil.

The flowers float like a curtain in front of the landscape creating a strong sensation of depth. Most of the blooms seem to be at their absolute peak. Nothing is blooming or growing in the background. It's as if they were pressed up against a hot-house window overlooking a ruined ecosystem.

The floral layer is topped with the resin. Its mirror surface, a tribute to Armstrong's early days doing cus-

tomized scenes on vans and cars in California, brings yet another party to the picture: the viewer. Your reflection floats like a ghost on the shiny surface. The only ways to disengage are to lose yourself in the strange beauty or move away.

That's a Brechtian theatrical trick, turning the mirror on the audience, involving and implicating them. But by filling the picture plane with so much action—flowers that explode like skyrocket, sunrises, moonrises, sunsets and those weird but compelling landscapes—you are included rather than indicted. The message, if there's one, seems to be that we're all in this together.

Using such simple techniques and straightforward imagery, Armstrong conjures up myriad metaphors for contemporary American life. Start with the yawning gulf between the celebrity-strawn glitz and glamour pouring from the mass media and the often grim realities of daily existence: school kids' shooting each other at the drop of a Nike.

Exploring the difference between the way things appear and the way they are isn't new. But Armstrong does it so well. We're an of-the-moment society. We like new things, or things that seem new. And we're willing to go to great lengths, such as encasing comfortable furniture in uncomfortable plastic, to retain that sense of newness. Armstrong captures that sense of an action-packed moment. But she injects an ominous note. Blooming is followed by withering. Light gives way to darkness. Wrapping our country's paradox-pocked soul in plastic only highlights the transitory nature of human life and weirdness amid America's tarnished but still awesome physical beauty.

L.C. Armstrong at Marsha Mateyka Gallery, 1012 R St. NW, Wednesday-Saturday, 11 a.m.-5 p.m., 202-328-0088, through May 20.