

L.C. Armstrong's Floral Paintings

L.C. Armstrong's new series of vibrantly colored floral paintings is an intriguing departure from her widely acclaimed, and considerably more minimal and austere, past work. Starting from a deceptively simple and straightforward core—namely an engagement with a seemingly timeworn subject (wonderful flowers) and with issues of bursting lyricism and beauty per se—these works then veer in all sorts of surprising and disconcerting directions, in the process accruing a reeling assortment of psychological and cultural associations. It seems to me there are clearly Edenic connotations, or intimations of paradise, going on, as well as something jazzed-up, ecstatic, and at times downright cosmic. You especially see this in *Hidden Agenda*, where your gaze is turned through and upward a gorgeous assortment of flowers (although a decidedly quirky assortment—and more on this in a minute) to a vast cloud-filled sky with a shimmering sun in the upper left corner. Still, as frankly transcendent as this painting seems, it equally suggests the kind of cheesy, low-culture wall posters or airbrushed nature vistas on the sides of vans that pick up—vaguely—on romantic inclinations and transform them into a kind of queasy escapism. Armstrong, by the way, has a background in sign painting and car customizing, which she draws on for the disturbingly metallic, automobile colors that you find in this series, especially in the backgrounds.

These car colors are just one of many ways by which Armstrong seeds her paintings with jarring elements that juxtapose nature and artifice, and that elicit a bristling malevolence, at times a palpable eroticism, and in general a human edginess that you would not normally associate with still-lives of flowers. With *Mixed Messages*, there are two sunflowers in the middle, one upright and the other drooping, a half-shot of an inexplicably red sunflower near the lower left corner, and various other flowers all angling upward in their twining, extra-vigorous way. Perched at the top of absurdly elongated stems, most of the flowers seem distinctly precarious: they're higher than they should be, they've reached some kind of visionary pinnacle, but they also seem poised to collapse from their own weight. The stems were not painted, but instead were made by laying bomb fuse cord on the surface of the painting, igniting it, and holding it in place while it burned. This stage of the process occurs in a sealed off, ventilated room where Armstrong works in a protective suit, gloves, and mask, which is about as far from one's

expectations of a painter gently and meditatively working away on floral compositions as you can get. As such, the stems (and they have their own raw beauty), are actually scorch marks, suggestive of violence and explosions, and all this floral loveliness is strewn with what looks suspiciously like a cross between whiplashing bomb fuses and ominous barbed wire. The same goes for the other paintings, but with this one it's exceptionally pronounced.

Throughout this series there is a thorough confusion between what's a representation of a real flower, in nature, and what isn't. Going back to *Hidden Agenda* there's a mix of recognizable flowers—a sensual, multi-layered pink rose near the center, a purple iris on the left—but others concocted by Armstrong herself which don't occur anywhere on the planet. These „flowers of paradise“, so to speak, constantly fluctuate between convincing verisimilitude and blatant, over-the-top artifice, and here, one guesses, Armstrong again draws on her own background in California—home of bountiful nature on a vast scale, but also home of the parallel universe of the movies, of theme parks big and small, of man-made things masquerading as wonders of nature, of fakery in its many guises. The exorbitant Technicolor quality of the paintings also points to films, for instance with *Paradox*, where a sunset sky in the background looks a lot closer to digitally colorized black and white movies from the 1940's than to anything you could actually see outside. In any event, a lush familiarity morphs before your eyes into an equally lush simulation, which is accentuated by the way the paintings are sealed behind glassy and transparent resin.

The fundamentally weird, reality-bending quality of the works is also reinforced by the choppy way in which the flowers are arranged: different kinds together, such as would never occur in nature, and of impossibly distorted heights and sizes. It makes them seem hallucinatory, and it makes them seem dangerous, although in a way that you can't exactly put your finger on. They're closer, in fact, to bizarre hybrids growing out of some radioactive mess or toxic catastrophe than they are to wildflowers in nature or to hothouse perennials, yet they still manage to retain a residual aura of innocence and beauty. With *Garden of Babel*, several different pinkish blooms, once again some invented and some not, burst from the tips of long stems in a manner that's at once wavering and orgiastic. There is something lovely and tender about them, but also something forced and restricted, as they're unnaturally packed into the same circumscribed zone. Always there is a roiling

exchange occurring between the flowers. Here, the whimsy of the small flowers in the center is undermined by the looming appearance of a quite different flower near the bottom left corner—a spiky ‘Green Wizard’ which seems monstrous and nightmarish. With *Constant Comet*, this roiling quality gets pushed in a different direction, as flowers, bursting every which way, assume the whirling tumult of a meteor shower.

In all of the paintings, you can detect the ground beat of a nature-based, spiritually-charged tradition that goes way back in American art and literature, for instance back to Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and 19th century New England Transcendentalism; the Hudson River School romantics; and the Luminists such as Martin J. Heade. At all points, however, Armstrong’s expansive floral vistas get infiltrated by decidedly non-beatific things, which make them both ecstatic and conflicted, simultaneously rough and exquisite. They also seem intensely personal, filled with a complex range of the psyche. For all the willful artifice going on, I find these new paintings by Armstrong very honest and humanly eventful.

Gregory Volk