

WOMEN IN THE ARTS

NATIONAL MUSEUM
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Blue Shift

L. C. Armstrong



L. C. Armstrong, *Autumn in New York*, 1993; Enamel, smoke, bullets, paint, resin on aluminum; 60 x 120 in.; Collection Philip Epstein, New York, New York

Editor's Note: *L. C. Armstrong's background airbrushing vans, motorcycles, racecars, and hot rods in the early 1970s influenced her current aesthetic of exuberant landscapes. Armstrong (b. 1954), who is trained in color theory and classical drawing, initially explored conceptually based abstraction but in 1995 turned her attention to flowers and floral panoramas. Armstrong creates her colorful compositions using acrylic paint, layers of shiny resin, and burn marks from bomb fuses. Her "flowerscapes" are reminiscent of a post-apocalyptic Eden and serve as metaphors for the human spirit and the cycles of birth, death, and renewal.*

Where do artists come from? Everywhere and nowhere. When he learned that I was born in Humboldt, Tennessee, art critic Robert Pincus-Witten drawled, "Yew don't git he'ya from the'ya." It's been a hard row to hoe. In 1963 my father and mother remarried each other (for the third time) in Alabama on Route 66 heading toward California with three kids, a dog, and two pickup trucks; camping most of the way and frying potatoes (once in a sandstorm). In 1970 my seventeen-year-old sister was accidentally killed, and for two years my world was veiled in gray.

I left home at age sixteen. I had worked in my father's neon-sign business since I was twelve, so I used my training to start my own business lettering signs. I painted on walls, trucks, boats, airplanes, and racecars and airbrushed murals on vans. This paid for my college education.

After receiving a BFA in illustration from the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California, in 1981, I moved to New York and worked as an illustrator. The money was good, but my heart wasn't in it. I found myself at the San Francisco Art Institute majoring in sculpture and video, although I later switched

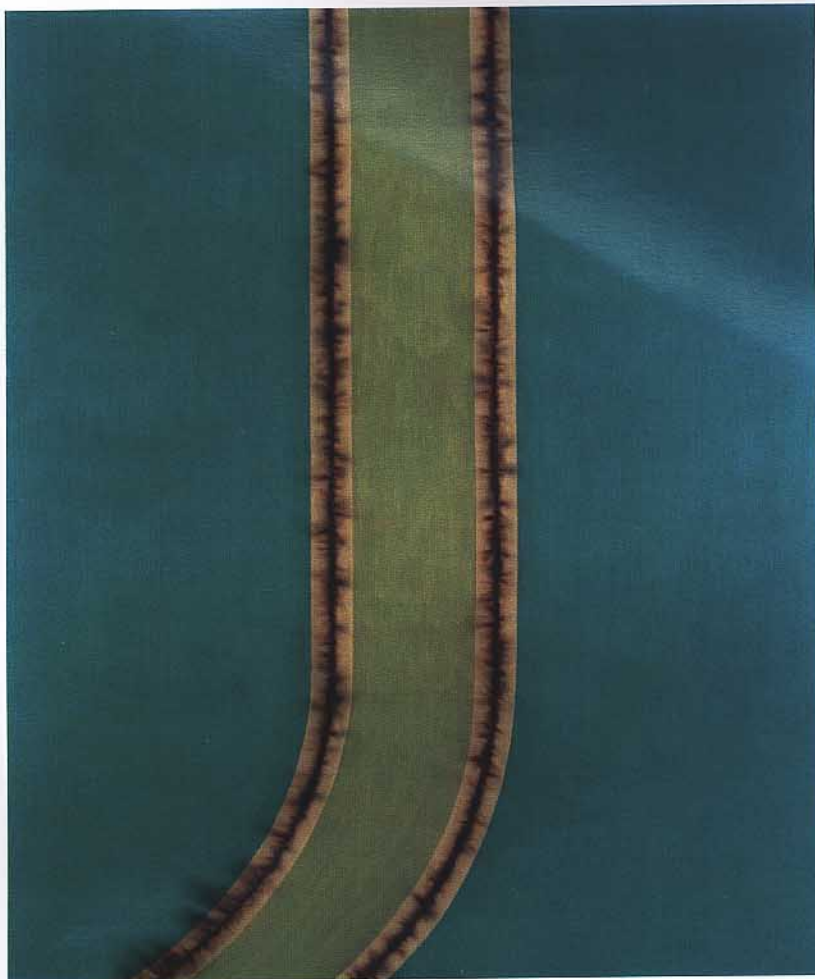
to painting. I spent my last semester in New York working as a studio assistant.

The vibrant New York art scene was exciting but also confusing and I suffered the equivalent of writer's block. Abstraction and minimalism offered no refuge, as they had morphed into a language that was easily read: stripes referred to previous painters, horizontal bands belonged to Agnes Martin, 90-degree angles to Frank Stella, and vertical bands to Barnett Newman. I attacked the narrative head on by painting on 8 1/2 x 11 sheets of paper and "shooting" (drilling and smoking) them with bullet holes. To add content to my work, without using a conventional narrative or referring to established stripe painters, I started burning lines on my paintings with cigarettes. Burning a line implies a different content than painting a line. Burning is both destructive (clearing a hillside) and constructive (cauterizing a wound).

The cigarettes were expensive and didn't make good-looking lines, so I started searching for a new method. In 1987, I was nosing around a war surplus store on Canal Street and happened upon a small coil of bomb fuse. The edgy barbed line left by the smoke residue proved potent on the canvas. Using bomb fuse, I burned stanzas of poems by Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and



L. C. Armstrong, *Tinder Offers*, 1996; Acrylic and bomb fuse under synthetic resin on linen on birch plywood; 48 x 40 in.; Collection of Robert Wylde, Monte Carlo, Monaco



L. C. Armstrong, *Blue Shift*, 1996; Acrylic and bomb fuse under synthetic resin on birch plywood; 48 x 40 in.; Gift of Heather and Tony Podesta Collection, Washington, D.C.

William Carlos Williams onto wood panels. A resin finish added a layer of salve and appealed to my background in Southern California's car-fetish finish culture.

Nineteen ninety-four was a tempestuous year for me: my mother died in January, my grandmother in July, and my younger sister in December. My divorce papers blew in under the door in September along with the dead leaves. I no longer cared about art or my career. I wanted a less stressful life, so I gave up painting and took a job.

But the following year I met my now-husband and I had a baby girl at age forty-two. My daily walks past the community flower gardens lightened my pregnancy nausea and inspired me to adopt this simple subject (flowers) for my new paintings. Soon the urge to paint returned and I made a personal vow to paint from

my heart. Minimalism still had a pull on me, but my world had been rocked hard and I felt the swell of a sea change.

I conceived of *Blue Shift* in 1996, exactly at the tipping point of my struggle between abstraction and figuration. I had already made forays into representational painting, notably a series of skyscapes with Braille in 1994, *Black Eyed Sue*, 1992, summons the image of white-on-white daisies trapped in a vortex of barbed wire. My exhibition in 1996 at Bravin Post Lee in New York was half abstraction and half flower paintings. *Blue Shift* symbolized the emerging shift in my work and life. Out of the blue, a rainbow of blooming color and full-throated joy had come into my life! The flowers had arrived, and they are welcome to stay.

—New York, New York, July 2009