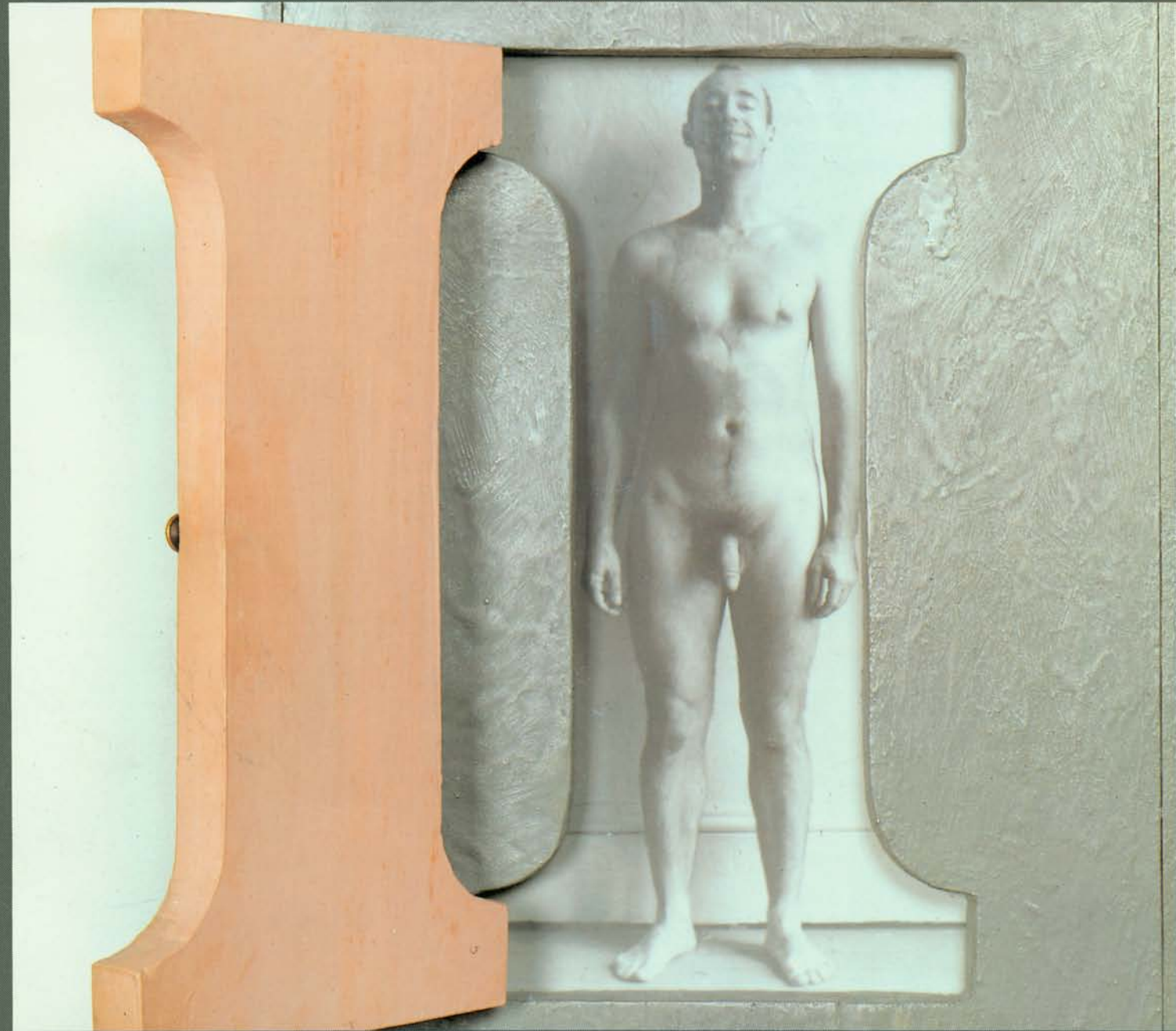


# art press

## 193

*Marc Fumaroli : peinture et rhétorique, Painting and Rhetoric*  
*David Rabinowitch par by Jean-Marc Lévy-Leblond*  
*L.C. Armstrong B. Dimitrijevic C. Deblé D. Mesguich*  
*Dossier : Louis Aragon, relecture, Rereading*

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**Robert Morris**

*Interview R. Krauss*

English edition

BARRY SCHWABSKY

# L.C. ARMSTRONG

## Written on the Body

*Can art that involves marking exist outside an inscription on the body? That is precisely what L.C. Armstrong attempts to demonstrate. For this artist, language is the relay through which painting and sculpture take shape. Armstrong's work forms an allegorical, tactile, occasionally violent oeuvre that has evolved between sight and touch.*

■ It's a remarkable piece of apparatus," one wants to say, just as the officer said to the explorer at the beginning of Kafka's story "In the Penal Colony." Like Kafka's horrific torture mechanism, which slowly killed by inflicting on the flesh of the condemned prisoner an absurdly embellished script of wounds, the judgment that had been passed upon him, L.C. Armstrong's *Dream Machine* (1992) is a bed whose use could only be for the execution of a sentence — in both senses of the word: language as punishment. In Armstrong's work, the bare foam mattress on a folding hospital bed bristles menacingly with some four thousand sharpened pencils. What dreams are to be inscribed upon the body of the one condemned to lay there?

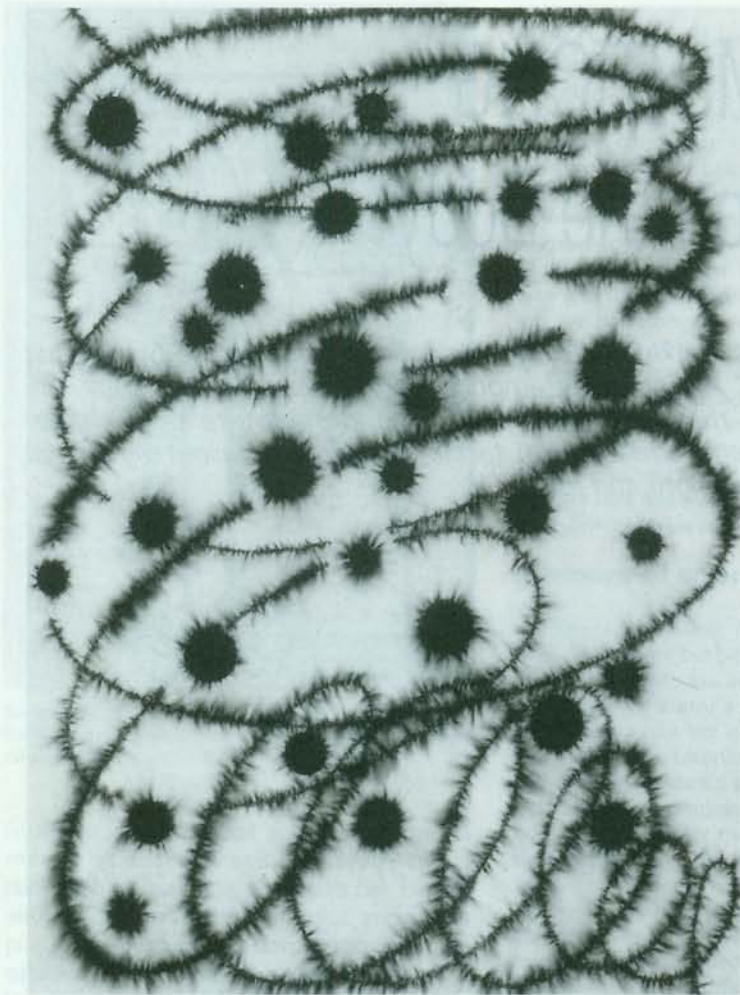
### From Language to Sight

In any case, it is clear that language and its mechanics of inscription, as Armstrong understands them, are not to be considered primarily as a form of mental activity, but rather as something investing the body as a whole.

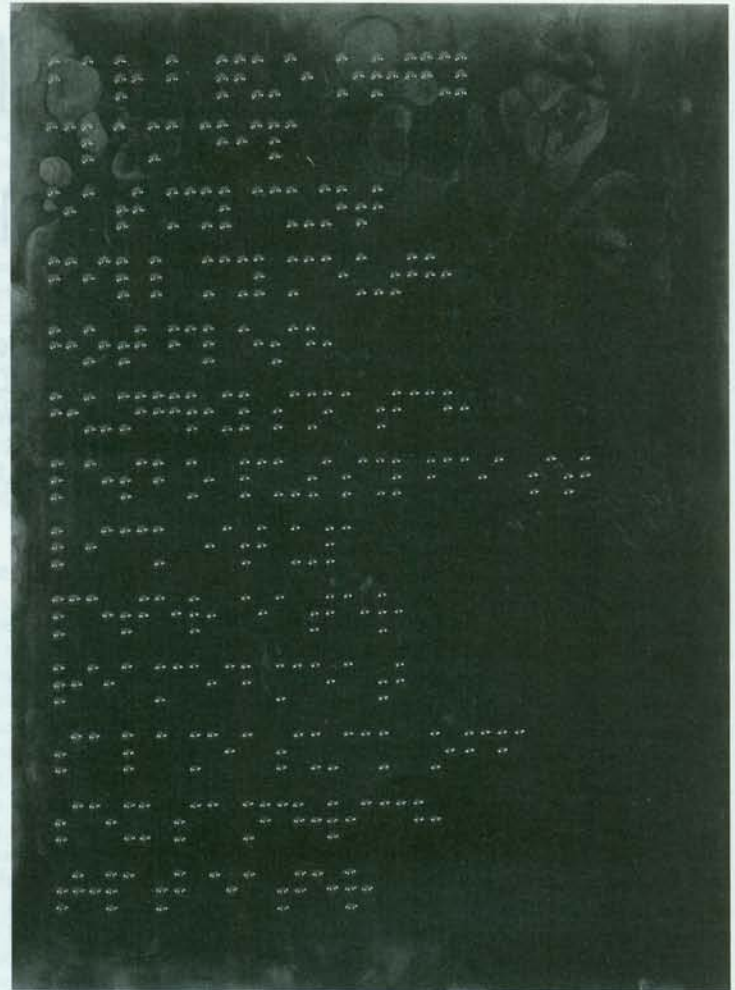
Indeed, Armstrong, an emerging but already mature New York artist with a way of making almost subliminally "hot" sculpture and painting out of cool, severe, industrial materials, is one of a number of artists at work today for whom language is central, but precisely where it lacks the transparency of a legible text. The distinction between notational writing and representational imagery appears to be very ancient as well as deep-seated — the anthropologist Alexander Marshack having distinguished the appearance of both on markings made in French caves 28,000 years ago, and the neurologist Norman Geschwind showed in the seventies that reception of language on the one hand and of images on the other to be localized in completely different parts of the brain. Imagistic thinking and linguistic thinking can never quite coincide. But each would be incomplete or lacking in depth



"Dream Machine". 1992. 192 x 100 x 62 cm. Mobile bed, crayons.



'Black-Eyed Sue', 1992. 200 x 150 cm. Enamel, resin, black smoke on aluminum.



'Menu', 1991. Braille. (Courtesy Gallery Rizzo, Paris)

without being intertwined with the other. Even the most austere and abstract language, with the possible exception of formal logic, includes some implicit or explicit level of imagery, and all visual imagery is dependent on some kind of linguistic coding if it is to be recognized. When Armstrong replicates a text on the surface of one of her paintings with a fuse, which she then ignites to leave rows of illegible burn marks — she has done this with poems, though she won't say which, and with an obituary from a newspaper, though she won't say whose — do we receive the result visually or linguistically? Here writing is just this pure image of itself not as denotative transparency but as something whose content is seared so deeply into memory as to be practically invisible. Writing translates into vision, but vision in turn translates into touch.

This double relay — language to sight, sight to touch — is also the subject of a recent series of works which take the form of square monochrome paintings, each encased in an intensely reflective surface of resin as Armstrong's paintings usually are. In this case, however, the

resin surfaces are beaded to create braille texts spelling the names of the specific shades that make up the color of the painting; for instance a "green" painting bears the words aqua, bottle-green, chromium oxide, cobalt green, duck green, emerald green, thalo green, shamrock green, terre verte, and turquoise. Braille, of course, is the most obvious instance in which writing becomes tactile rather than visual. But for the sighted viewer of these paintings, who must moreover respect the tacit injunction not to touch the work of art (and a finger's imprint would show up patently on these lucent surfaces) and who probably knows no braille, the beaded lettering paradoxically represents a purely visual sign for the possible tactility of language. So it's a triple relay: writing to vision, vision to touch, touch back to the visual impression of touch.

### From Sight to Touch

Language, according to Armstrong's work, is always inscribed within the body. It's retained, a matter of memory. One can imagine Armstrong recognizing her own project in a

certain Nietzschean theme: "If something is to stay in the memory it must be burned in: only that which never ceases to hurt stays in the memory....Pain is the most powerful aid to mnemonics." (*On the Genealogy of Morals*, second essay, section 3). In fact, the stylistic coolness typical of Armstrong's work begins to look all the more uncanny when one realizes that her imagery is a veritable catalogue of violence, pain, and disaster.

At its most remote this violence may be present only through the sense of its bureaucratization or medicalization, as in the hospital bed of *Dream Machine*, or in a number of works that use the device of the clipboard, sometimes oneirically distorted to extreme length or multiplied numerically as if to reach toward a "bad infinity," always gripping "pages" of weirdly flesh-like latex which has been repetitively lined as though with a mute or completely neutral notation. But more often this sense of pain and violence is presented with an all-too-discomforting literalness, as in paintings scorched by bomb fuses or pierced by bullet holes haloed by powder burns, or in

bronze sculptures — *Road Scribbles*, as Armstrong calls them with grim humor — that immortalize the strips of tread that sometimes peel off car tires in accidents. The violence implicit in Armstrong's work is not always so lethal, however; sometimes it may be nothing more than the pleasurable playful threat implied by the knotted and tightly stretched nylon stockings that are another recurrent motif.

### Allegorical Art

Armstrong's is not a narrative art, but only because it remembers stories that are too painful or too private to tell. It remembers them not in the sense that an involuntary memory wells up into consciousness, but rather as a memorization that has wilfully burned its message into consciousness and sealed it off where nothing can touch it. Armstrong once remarked that she has always wanted her art to go more in the direction of music but that it

always ends up tending more towards language; which I take to mean that her art is not symbolist but rather allegorical. In an essay on "Sign and Symbol in Hegel's Aesthetics," the literary critic and theorist Paul de Man tried to make sense of Hegel's famous and enigmatic remark that "art is a thing of the past." De Man observed that "to the extent that the paradigm for art is thought rather than perception, the sign rather than the symbol, writing rather than painting or music, it will be memorization rather than recollection. As such, it belongs to a past which, in Proust's words, could never be recaptured, *retrouvé*. Art is of the past in a radical sense, in that, like memorization, it leaves the interiorization of experience forever behind" — forever behind resin, one wants to amend the text, because the very thing that separates us from the immediacy of experience is what preserves it as a sign, as a warning, as a promise. ❧

*Barry Schwabsky is an art critic and poet living in New York.*

### L.C. ARMSTRONG

Born 1954 in Humbolt, Tennessee.  
Lives and works in Brooklyn

#### Solo shows

1991 Galerie Sophia Ungers, Cologne (and 1992)  
1992 White Columns, New York  
1993 Marsha Mateyka Gallery, Washington  
Mincher/Wilcox, San Francisco  
1994 Galerie Rizzo, Paris 5 May-4 June

#### Collective shows

1991 '42nd Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting,' The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC  
1992 "Transparency and Shape," Elga Wimmere Gallery, New York  
"Technorama," Barbara Toll Fine Arts, New York  
"Standards," Sophia Ungers Gallery, Cologne  
Blum Helman Warehouse, New York  
"Letters S Road," Art/Om, Hudson, New York  
Marsha Mateyka Gallery, Washington DC  
"Update," White Columns, New York  
"Shape Shifters," Amy Lipton Gallery, New York  
"In and Out, Back and Forth," New York  
"Habitat," PS1, Long Island City, New York  
"A Whiter Shade of Pale," Sophia Ungers Gallery, Cologne  
"Reverberations," The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.  
The Biennale of Sydney, North Sydney, Australia  
1994 "Laisser parler les petits papiers," Gallery Rizzo, Paris



"Blowhard". 1992. 200 x 150 cm. Dimensions vary. Fah, paper.



"Um Er Uh". 1992. Dimensions vary. Grilled marshmallows.