

Cirque du Paradis

BY E. LUANNE MCKINNON

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*

AS IN THE WORK OF THE 17TH CENTURY ENGLISH POET, John Milton, L.C. Armstrong's paradises also expose a lapsed Eden, that first garden, the plot where so many metaphors of western being are want to spring from. In one particular passage of *Paradise Lost*, Milton portrays a young flower that "began to bloom, but soon for man's offense,"¹ became a veritable eyewitness to human folly, infamously known as the Fall. But, "flower" had a pre-existing condition: beauty and perfection, qualities which no doubt made it all the more compelling as a partner to the symbolic lexica of the East and West. To this variegated history belongs the flowerscapes of L.C. Armstrong.

The tradition of incorporating flowers alongside human actions and events—what can be thought of as a metaphorology of florae, of which the practice of assigning meaning and relationships to them is known as florioraphy—begins, according to legend, in the Upper and Lower Kingdoms of Egypt, ca. 3000 BCE, where a lotus garden provided the royal marital bed for Isis and Osiris; the holiest of flowers for Hindus, the beautiful lotus is a symbol of creation, since Brahma, the Creator, came forth from the lotus that blooms from the navel of Vishnu; in western Antiquity, the nymph Chloris² is associated with spring, flowers, reproduction and new growth; in the Judeo-Christian tradition, the Virgin Mary, who as the Madonna, the mother of God, is known as "the Rose of Sharon, the lily of the valleys,"³ was signified by them; and, her pagan counterpart, the Roman goddess of fertility, Flora, was celebrated by Renaissance humanists, most notoriously in Sandro Botticelli's *Primavera*.⁴ Alongside these instances, consider the encyclopedic range of flower paintings within the genre of the modern still life, including the masterful 17th century Flemish and Spanish sprays,

featuring the tulip, of Jan Brueghel the Elder and Juan de Arellano, the Rococo bouquets of the French painter to the court of Marie-Antoinette, Anne Vallayer-Coster, Vincent van Gogh's incomparable irises and sunflowers, Claude Monet's languid and revolutionary water lilies, Odilon Redon's vibrating arrangements which laud the red poppy, and Georgia O'Keeffe's American close-ups of the black iris and the blue morning glory.

L.C. Armstrong's flowers are caught at the apex of their sensuality: effulgent and alive, meticulous and compelling. Her palette of poppies, birds of paradise, hibiscus, iris, orchids, sunflowers, and roses serve as foreground screens or visual preambles through which we peer to see a variety of miniscule figures sparsely populating luscious, imaginary vistas. With an exceptional skill, Armstrong imbues the depiction of flowers with tangible veracity, a quality that in both literature and the visual arts the French literary critic Hélène Cixous termed a "language of nature,"⁵ a type of poetics that brings us close to the living thing in a substitute and epic form. And yet, in all of Armstrong's *flowerscapes*, thorny stems (typical of all varieties of the rose but not the hibiscus or the orchid, for example) dissipate all illusions that beauty reigns without challenge. The stems appear to slash the material surface of the painting and thereby function to upend the panoply of floral perfection in the artist's proposed Arcadia. In effect, this illusory scarification ratchets up the tension between beauty and its betrayal: demise. Such an artifice references Duchamp's *Tu m'*,⁶ 1918, in which a *trompe l'œil* rip across the center of the canvas is held together by the pun of a real safety pin. But in Armstrong's works, these tears are no pun; they function to ensure the sense that the fragility of appearances is reality.

Single-panel works such as *Tornado Over Tulips* or *Orchids Over Ursus*, and the triptychs *Rainbow Over DUMBO* or *Poppy Passion Pyre*, among other recent paintings, demonstrate in no uncertain terms the concept of the sublime as it is defined through the triad of the beautiful, the tragic, and the comic. In these canvases the sublime is represented with a “Kansas” twister perched on a flushed horizon; a bombardment of poppies afire that rain down with force; and, could it be that the tragedy of 9/11, represented by the World Trade Center towers which have appeared in Ms. Armstrong’s earlier works are still *felt* through absence due to her focus upon other New York neighborhoods, namely Brooklyn and midtown? A sense of terror and awe, and a reverence for beauty are requisites of sublimity. Well practiced by the Hudson River School painters—proponents of religious awe caused by the grandeur of immense landscapes unimaginable to any save the traveler who witnessed them—Armstrong’s landscapes also evoke this same sense of wonderment, albeit in contemporary terms.

One of the other signature elements of L.C. Armstrong’s art is the panoply of odd, Lilliputian characters placed on the stage of landscape.⁷ What is to be made of them and of so much fire and water?⁸ We see a Big Top ringmaster who shakes a snap-of-the-whip at a dove aloft (the folly of training the spirit?); many swimmers, none of which appear to be speaking to or playing with one another, paddle about near an obedient fox; lavender, teal, tangerine, and chartreuse nymphs are immersed in vaporous pools that match their hair and swimwear; and blindfolded girls sporting the headgear of a monkey and a bird cage stand stalwart at the very edge of two compositions. Near the Brooklyn Bridge, two girls handle fire in what would be circus acts, the one twirls a ring of fire while standing on the back of an elephant (Ganesha or Dumbo?), the other, a bearded lady who is seemingly afloat in the East River holds two torches; a birthday cake hat on what must be Ms. Armstrong’s daughter’s head features twelve burning candles; and, several young girls, in some instances oracles, wearing plain cotton petticoat-shifts bear large flambeaux in a languid pool as if providing answers to mysteries or guidance for the lost. But we must not be too dazzled by the large flowers in each composition or we will miss these and other symbolic figures.

A correspondence between woman or man and nature, that which is played out again and again in L.C. Armstrong’s art, is no better described than in David Summers’ account of Caspar David Friedrich’s monk in his 1809 canvas, *Monk by the Sea*.⁹ “The monk, small and indeterminate as he is, is essential to the painting’s effect. It is for his absorbed presence and subjectivity that the experience of the immensity of extent and power assumes the value of the sublime. The sublime, gathered from the world and from nature, is the transcendence of nature by the soul and God.... Such sublime landscapes are at once filled with religious awe and with a corresponding dread and solitude of absolute freedom relative to a nature truly only at its ungraspable limit.”¹⁰ It is Summers’ words “absorbed presence” and “effect” that are instructive. For in Armstrong’s frontal plane of super-

sized poppies or sunflowers or roses or orchids, arranged as sentries over the landscapes that exist beyond them, and the absorbed presence of the figures within those, that an effect of the sublime is achieved.

As for technique, Armstrong’s landscapes are painted in a high-pitched chroma, the surfaces are high-gloss almost reflective in their perfected finish which recalls her youth’s workaday roots in Venice Beach’s auto body decoration garages. Taken altogether, color + surface, her environs seem literally sealed as if the fantasies in to which we gaze are both product and crystal ball. In addition to this, it would be remiss to overlook the format of the triptych, a thoroughly charged construction that she so often employs. From an historical perspective—which is defined in part by symbolic function—the triptych was utilized by medieval and early Renaissance artists to elicit time: past (Genesis), present (Life of Christ) and future (Resurrection). When the left and right, or the end panels were closed, in a sense, time stood still. The faithful would then, obedient to instruction, meditate upon scenes of Man’s Fall from grace which was customarily painted in tones of grey.¹¹ When the panels were reopened, as Armstrong only allows us to see, full-spectrum scenes resplendent in reds, blues, greens, and golds emoted the reality of the living and the signification of hope that in some respects only color can carry. And yet, as *if* time stood still, in all of L.C. Armstrong’s paintings there are the flowers, standing over “us,” watching, reflecting light.

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1. 3.353-56
2. from “Khloros” or *χλωρος*, meaning “greenish-yellow,” “pale green,” “pale,” or “fresh.”
3. *Song of Songs* 2:1
4. Coll. Galleria Uffizi, Florence
5. Cixous, Hélène, *IIIa*, (Paris: Des Femmes, 1980).
6. Coll. Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven
7. It should be noted that L.C. Armstrong’s art stands in line with that of the late 19th century American painter, Louis M. Eilshemius, whose work often included small figures performing odd tasks or in odd positions placed in wild landscape scenes.
8. Purification and baptism come to mind.
9. Coll. Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin
10. Summers, David. *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism*, (London: Phaidon, 2003), p. 588.
11. Known as *totmalerei* or “death paintings.”