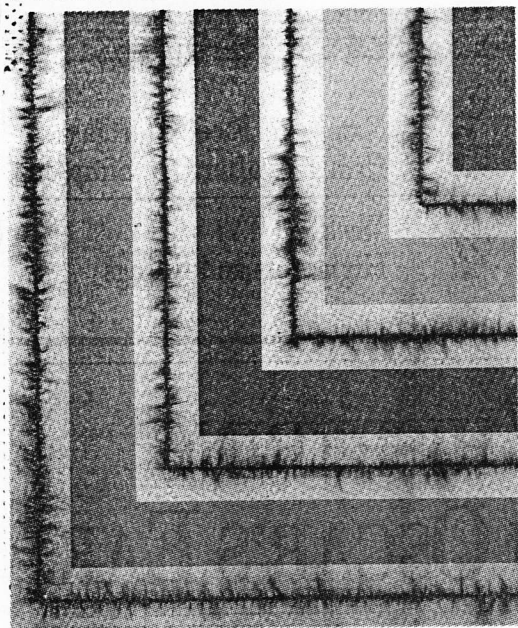


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COURTESY OF THE MARSHA MATEYKA GALLERY

L.C. Armstrong's "Stripe-Tease" (1996), composed of burned and painted stripes, evokes the geometric forms found in the work of Frank Stella.

Galleries

Business Is Booming

Bomb Fuse Ignites L.C. Armstrong's Imagination

By Ferdinand Protzman
Special to The Washington Post

L.C. Armstrong was poking around in a junk store on Canal Street in New York City one day in 1988 when she found a material that sparked a dramatic change in her art: bomb fuse.

"I'd gotten really blocked about painting," the 42-year-old artist says. "I was spending lots of time creating really smooth surfaces on the canvas by applying layers of gesso and sanding them down. But when I would get the surface ready to go, I couldn't do anything; it seemed too precious. So I told myself, 'I need to defile this.'"

To that end, she started painting her surfaces on paper, then burning the paper. That proved cathartic, but impermanent. The volatile bomb fuse, however, let her burn a unique kind of line on a surface, which she then painted and sealed with coats of clear resin. Armstrong's first attempts were on aluminum. Later she

developed a technique for burning the fuse on acrylic on linen.

Creating a hard, shiny finish for her painted works was not a problem. To make money while attending art school in Pasadena, Calif., Armstrong used to do custom airbrush painting on vehicles, boats and aircraft, protecting the work with a final, crystal clear "fetish finish." After graduation, she had a successful career as an illustrator before turning to painting and sculpture.

When Armstrong began making paintings using bomb fuse, she consciously abandoned her commercial background and training. "I didn't want anything to do with those techniques," she says. "I wanted to make totally abstract art." For the next six years, she produced fairly complex paintings suffused with the tension between the burned and painted areas.

"I developed this approach that has inherent contrasts," says Linda Christine Armstrong, who has always been called L.C. "There is construction and destruction. I'm scarring the surface with the bomb fuse, which is destructive, then painting and sealing it in resin, which is like healing. I attach the fuse to the surface to control the line, but I can't control how the fuse burns, how it marks the surface. There's also a contrast between the sweet, cloying, subtle colors and harshness of the burn."

Those contrasts still power her most recent work on exhibit at Marsha Mateyka Gallery. But these paintings seem even more concentrated than her previous efforts, the jagged scars, the painted lines and fields of soft, supple color pared down to their essence. Beneath the resin's mirrorlike finish, which gives the paintings remarkable depth and fleetingly superimposes the viewer's image on the picture, there is a more lyrical, even whimsical feeling. The paintings are priced from \$4,000 to \$8,000.

Many of Armstrong's works are intentionally evocative of other artists' styles. "Stripe-Tease," for example, is a series of burned and painted stripes forming right angles, which echoes the early stripes and

geometric forms found in Frank Stella's work.

"It's a take on Stella. Other paintings in the show were inspired by Agnes Martin and Barnett Newman," Armstrong says. "I own up to that. What I do is referential without being appropriative. Sometimes it's deliberate and sometimes it's intuitive; the imagery just comes from my visual memory while I'm working, which is fine with me. I think former styles and movements have lain fallow long enough that they are ripe for re-exploration. What I do is recombinant and reclaiming, it's enriching to use things like this."

But using things like bomb fuse and resin presents certain problems, such as toxic fumes and smoke. In developing her painting process, Armstrong was forced to find ways to safeguard her health. She wears a mask, chemical-resistant clothes and hood, two pairs of protective gloves and has a special ventilation system in her New York studio.

"It's almost like I'm wearing a spacesuit," she says. "But I have to do it because the materials are volatile and toxic. The whole time I was doing the work for this show I was pregnant and the baby's doing fine and I am, too, so I feel pretty safe."

Clark and Hogan

Michael Clark and Felicity Hogan have been painting collaboratively since their marriage in Tijuana, Mexico, in December 1995, and judging by their new paintings of oranges, pears and George Washington on display at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Georgetown, the tag-team approach is working well.

"NAFTA Oranges" is a series of more than 50 small paintings of one Mexican orange posed against a variety of imaginary backgrounds. While the format is constant, the painting style varies from Clark's trademark pointillistic figurative approach to a more tightly brushed abstract mode in which the fruit and background become a study of shapes and colors. The element of abstraction comes from Hogan.

"We both work on each picture," she says. "It's not like we plan it out and one of us does the fruit and the other the background. We just pick them up and do whatever we want until they're finished."

That spontaneous method has caused friction in only one instance, according to Clark. "There were a bunch of paintings sitting there, probably more than 40. I went over and picked up one sort of at random to work on. And Felicity gave me this shocked look and said, 'What are you doing? That one doesn't need anything else.'"

The paintings sell for \$1,200 each.

L.C. Armstrong, at Marsha Mateyka Gallery, 2012 R St. NW, Wednesday-Saturday, 11 a.m.-5 p.m., 202-328-0088, through April 19.

Michael Clark and Felicity Hogan, at Museum of Contemporary Art, 1054 31st St. NW, Wednesday-Saturday, 1-6 p.m., 202-342-6230, through April 12.