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SATURDAY, JANUARY 17, 2004

The Washington Times

Art / Joanna  
Shaw-Eagle

## Fusing beauty with danger

Armstrong's intense vision

**T**he tropical lagoons in the Marsha Mateyka Gallery's "L.C. Armstrong: Recent Paintings" exhibit are a big draw for winter visitors. The lagoons' intense hues are a definite contrast to the drab cold outside.

Yet Miss Armstrong's mixed-media paintings hold more than the romance of warm, watery vistas.

The New York artist, 49, aggressively superimposes huge, sensuous flowers such as orchids, irises and sunflowers across the waterscapes. She supports the flat-ish blooms with mossy stems. Shiny colors look lacquered.

The images could be dream worlds, and Miss Armstrong effectively and intensely expresses the beauty of those worlds throughout the show.

By contrast, tiny figures often run from waves lapping a shoreline or teeter precariously on sailfish. The sunsets are almost too brilliant, the upcoming storms overly vio-





lent. Miss Armstrong's vistas of paradise show both the beautiful and the bizarre, mystery and menace.

Viewers need only examine "Approaching Storm — Windsurfers" in the gallery's middle room to begin to understand these contradictory works and their inherent mystery and theatricality.

Onlookers see the back- and middle-ground landscape and tiny figures of the painting through a dramatic screen of carefully rendered orchids, sunflowers, an iris, a bird-of-paradise and a day lily. Obviously, the flowers represent the "beauty" of the composition.

Not so with the stems — the torn, "bizarre" part of the artist's acrylic-on-linen painting.

Miss Armstrong draws the stems with bomb fuse sets, ignites the lines and burns them into the painting's surface, she explains in a recent phone interview from her studio.

"They're gunpowder

"Approaching Storm — Windsurfers" shows a screen of flowers on stems made by burning bomb fuse lines on the work. A detail of a burned portion in "Approaching Storm Over Bathers" is below. "Fiery Sunset" is at left.



wrapped in cords that are set away from the people lighting them," she says. The identifying labels of the works say "resin over acrylic and bomb fuse on linen on wood."

"I had started to burn my canvases with cigarettes and

see ARMSTRONG, page B2



"Flowers in a Skull Vase" (detail) is a dramatic example of L.C. Armstrong's juxtaposition of the beautiful and bizarre. "Approaching Storm Over Bathers," seen in part on the cover, is below.

## FLOWERS

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wanted to get rid of the habit and find a better burning instrument. When I found the sets in a little store on Canal Street [in New York], I knew I had found what I needed. It's the residue of the burn line that forms the stems," Miss Armstrong explains.

These lines have a different meaning from her drawn or painted ones, she says. The artist likens the burned lines and their flowers to the Grecian myth of the phoenix rising from the ashes to live again. Death — the lines — give way to life — the blooming plants. She wants these burned lines to carry a more intense message.

As the last step in creating "Approaching Storm," the painter laid the painting flat and poured resin over it. She says she did this originally to protect the flaking, burned areas of the acrylic paint but found the resin gave the work a shininess that she liked.

In "Fiery Sunset," her aims become less clear. She swirls the rising, calligraphic stems, with their orange and yellow flowers, across the picture's surface but also connects them to the golden sunset.

The impression is more ambiguous than with her "Approaching Storm." Viewers will find there is always a certain amount of obscurity and mystery in the depictions, and these are part of the fascination.

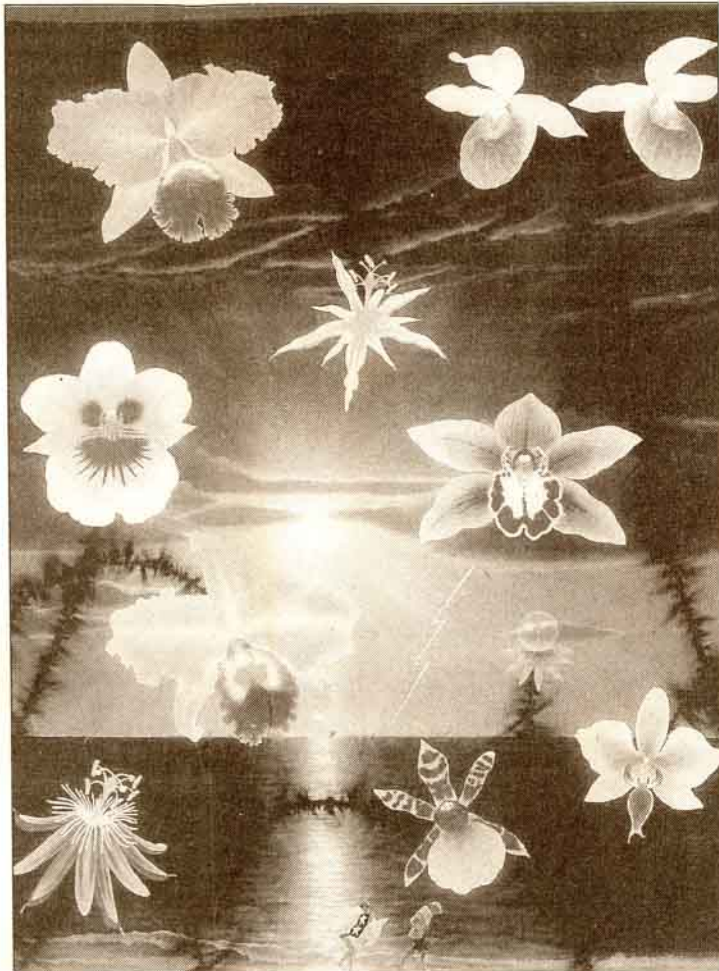
themselves slowly and for visitors to bring something of their own interpretations to the paintings," she says. "I paint intuitively, let the paintings grow on their own and let the color and images grow on their own as I go."

For a maker of fine landscapes and flowers, Miss Armstrong began in an unconventional way. Living in Southern California and earning money for school in the 1970s, she decorated cars and motorcycles in Venice Beach with the idealized "landscapes" her customers requested.

The painter remembers creating the gleaming car surfaces popular in the car culture of the time, using blended colors and downplaying brush strokes. Looking at her art, it seems these techniques are still very much alive in her current painting.

In the 1980s, she received a classical art education and bachelor of fine arts degrees at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, Calif., and the University of California at Los Angeles. The artist says she studied figurative art intensively, even taking a UCLA extension art-medical course in which she drew from cadaver models.

It was not until 1990, however, while suffering an uncomfortable pregnancy, that she did a lot of walking and became interested in flowers, she says. The artist found, also, that she loved their shapes and colors and discovered that flowers represent the life-death-resur-



philosophical traditions.

Miss Armstrong says she only became aware of the painters of the 19th-century American Hudson River School — Thomas Cole is the most famous of its artists — when admirers compared her art to

right, that the works of the Hudson River School had a sense of uneasiness underneath their romantic landscapes that paralleled the menace underlying the beauty of her own work.

Surprisingly, the dichotomy may have come down to her

movies and advertising billboards, the artist says. She illustrates this kind of split most clearly in the small but handsome "Flowers in a Skull Vase," in which gorgeous orchids spill out of a container shaped like a skull.

The idea that loveliness and danger, good and evil, can coexist is nothing new for Miss Armstrong. The artist says she has undergone many traumatic experiences that contain both. She mentions that going through September 11 from her downtown New York City Tribeca home was the most searing.

Without knowing the artist's symbols and the contradictions in her art, visitors will find much to appreciate. That she can combine the pop-art technique of painting 1970s California cars with inspiration from the flowers of 17th-century Dutch paintings is quite a feat.

This show confirms the excellence and originality of her previous four exhibits at the Marsha Mateyka Gallery.

**WHEN YOU GO**

**WHAT:** "L.C. Armstrong: "Recent Paintings"

**WHERE:** Marsha Mateyka Gallery, 2012 R St. NW

**WHEN:** 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday, through Jan. 24

**TICKETS:** Free