

Apocalyptic Sublime : On L.C. Armstrongs New Work

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"I will tell you in a few words who I am: lover of the hummingbird that darts to the flower beyond the rotted sill where my feet are propped; lover of bright needlepoint and the bright stitching fingers of humorless old ladies bent to their sweet and infamous designs; lover of parasols made from that same puffy stuff as young girl's underdraws." So begins John Hawkes novel *Second Skin*, first published in 1964 and since revered as a groundbreaking example of what has been termed 'postmodern' or 'meta' fiction.

"Lover of the hummingbird" indeed, LC Armstrong's practice might stand comparison to the domain of literature rather than the usual list of her artistic peers, from that appropriately named flower-painter Frans Floris to Balthasar van der Ast and Johannes Bosschart, through Bolognietti and van Huysum to Redouté and Audubon.

For Armstrong, like Hawkes, has taken a traditional skill, the perfect rendition of flora, fauna and the animal kingdom, but used it for an altogether more ambiguous purpose, both critique and celebration of our contemporary landscape in every sense. Just as Hawkes uses his talent as a writer to conjure what seems a historical, perhaps Victorian, atmosphere whilst telling an ostensibly modern story, so Armstrong's paintings exist in a curious zone of temporal dislocation, utterly current and ultimately timeless.

Reading a work of 'meta-fiction' whether the New York trilogy of Paul Auster or Georges Perec's masterpiece *Life A User's Manual*, it is the technical dexterity of the author that remains all important, their ability to sustain an addictive narrative drive, worthy of Dickens or Conan Doyle, whilst deploying this storytelling skill for an entirely different purpose far more complex and sophisticated than mere page-turning pleasure. Adapting narrative techniques from the 18th century picaresque through to 19th century potboiler, the 'postmodern' writer, as opposed to previous avantgarde practitioners, relishes the challenge of matching their predecessors in technique and expertise whilst producing something which is neither pastiche nor parody but a work of its own distinct value and identity. The effect, as with Armstrong, is deliberately disorientating if not destabilizing, for though lured by the pleasure of the surface grace, pull and undertow of the plot, one is always aware that something is not quite right, that the established order which this work apparently parallels, the sanctity of the narrative device itself, has been subverted, infected perhaps, by an entirely contemporary disquiet or doubt.

Yet these writers who initially felt obliged to signal their difference by overt distancing devices, eventually found themselves so taken with the actual act of narration that they became committed to the process of fiction in itself. Similarly, many artists who embarked on figurative painting from a metaphoric or parodic position discovered over time it was so rich a form to not require "quotation marks" or qualifiers; now they just wanted to paint, and get better at doing so, deeply hooked by default on the craft. Whilst the subversive subtext of Armstrong's work used to be signalled by her use of real bomb fuse, a literal trace of danger which always added some frisson to the seeming arcadian idyll, it is notable that this device has gradually faded from her *œuvre*, her most recent paintings eschewing its presence. Likewise the gloss glaze which used to separate

spectator from spectacle (rather as Francis Bacon used specially reflective glass to keep the viewer at one further remove) has also dissolved away. These two 'signature' elements of Armstrong's work, the gunpowder trail and reflective varnish, are no longer necessary to make clear her own originality, her place within art history, the distinction of her vision bolder without such distractions.

In their place comes an even more heightened palette, an almost hallucinatory intensity of light, a distilled essence of luminosity which grants these last works their own uncanny aura, some stained glass apocalypse forged from the strange drugs of Odilon Redon, a spectacular *fin-de-siècle* finale worthy of Fantin-Latour, ecological endgame.

Do these brooding clouds signal a classic Hudson River sunset or Three Mile Island nuclear meltdown? Is this the accidental beauty of toxic waste or last flourish of a final sun? Even the still wonder of a winter park comes freighted with the menace of another Ice Age, the snows not of "yesteryear" but of some truly chilling tomorrow.

To finish with such literary associations, these recent works by Armstrong surely have something of the spirit of Blake in their fiery brilliance and visionary potency. But finally perhaps this is not so much the Romanticism of Blake as the 'Neo-Romanticism' of an entire generation of writers and artists who came after, their most famous exemplar being the poet Dylan Thomas;

"The force that through the green fuse drives the flower
Drives my green age; that blasts the root of trees
Is my destroyer.
And I am dumb to tell the crooked rose
My youth is bent by the same wintry fever. "