

Art in America

January 1994

L.C. Armstrong at John Post Lee

Nothing is explicit in L.C. Armstrong's paintings and sculptures, where suspicious objects and marks merely suggest the residue of violent events. Even where the materials are quite literal-

ly explosive—bullets, bomb fuses—they have been subsumed within cool formal concerns. Armstrong knows that in order to connect back to the suffering body, the evidence must come as a surprise. A ground of raking rectangles in gold, white and gray, looking like a '50s linoleum kitchen floor (*Autumn in New York*), has been shot at with bullets, some of which remain embedded in star-shaped holes. Look carefully, the artist suggests in *Faux Pas*, and you will find traces of misdeeds: droplets of deep red, for example, splattered near a collaged bathroom drain. Bullets, details of domestic interiors and stains become clues to an irrecoupable narrative caught within transparent resin surfaces.

Faux Pas has been trodden upon by the artist's paint-soaked soles and splashed by the artist's coffee. She is everywhere restlessly implicated, and she brings the viewer along for the indictment. At the center, near the drain, is a sheet of carbon paper. If I stand just so, my face is reflected in the dark blue, further embedding subjectivity in this already intensely personal work. The glassy surface, however, along with a wintry palette and an overall formal rigor, seems to place feelings at a remove. "Without being silent, I was elsewhere," writes Genet.

Emotional disassociation prevails, even as witnessing is unavoidable.

Armstrong is freshening the lessons of abstraction, like a number of other painters who showed last season (Cora Cohen, Byron Kim, etc.) From a distance, the delicate silver loops in *Autumn in New York* play Pollock; the indigo carbon paper of *Double Take*, Reinhardt. It doesn't always work. *Double Take*, with six rows of eight sheets of carbon paper, offers a shifting, liquid grid inside the resin, but lacks the visceral impact of other paintings. Through her bodily habitation of abstraction Armstrong challenges modernism, even as she fashions a not unadmiring continuity. *Broadway Doggie Woggie*'s brown-smeared surface doubles as Ab-Ex homage and, you guessed it, New York's summer pavements. Armstrong shows some ambivalence toward her admitted inheritance.

Armstrong has been as much shown as a sculptor as a painter in her relatively new career. *Dead Lock* is a wheeled aluminum dolly carrying two stacks of latex sheets striped like notepads and tied down by two stockings, one black and one beige. Armstrong used the lined

latex sheets in a number of previous works (*Leda*, *Seven Times Seventy*). They feel like skin, suggesting a passive body awaiting its inscription in language. The knotted stockings intimate sadomasochism. Her "Road Scribbles" are retreads cast in bronze and subtitled for the location where they were found—Pulaski Bridge, Williamsburg Bridge. Funnier than the other work, their wit is nonetheless hedged by fatalism.

Armstrong is too savvy to take a literal route, as she eschews the sensational tactics of other contemporary artists who address issues of violence and the body (Kiki Smith, for example). Instead, her work maintains that the unspeakable is not representable, at least not directly, and that abstraction, once ladled with content, can serve up a powerful testimony.

—Faye Hirsch



L.C. Armstrong: *Faux Pas*, 1993, mixed mediums, 48 by 34 inches; at John Post Lee.