Mary Armstrong

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Front: Detail of *Arrival*, 2019 (plate 3)
Back: Detail of *Troubled Waters*, 2016–19 (plate 2)

Designer: John McCoy
Editor: Kate Shugert
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Nature and memory are the major source materials for my paintings. Over the years I have trusted my *plein air* efforts to yield to memory and imagination in the studio. I never work directly from the images gathered outside, on the spot. Rather, I put them away, and turn to the larger paintings to work with the power of memory to enhance my imagination and, thus, to discover something I had no idea about. For me, the act of painting is a search, to explore the relationship between the physical surface and the illusion being created and to establish a dynamic visual space where they will exist together.

I have been painting the landscape on the coast of Maine and the deserts of Southern California for years. In each case, the sky and the earth converge and the relationship between them becomes intimately linked. I am, in every moment, in awe of the dance between earth, water, and sky. The paintings *Icarus* (plate 4) and *Estuarial* (plate 15) are examples of trying to express the deep spaces that contain these dynamic forces.

I am striving, in my daily practice in the studio, to continually improvise from my perceptions; this makes the process very active, containing many layers of oil paint and wax (on wood panel). I never know where I am going to go, where the painting will take me. This is always my first thought. I hope that the process will become fundamentally kinetic, a series of moves and counter moves...a state of responding physically to what is developing, moment by moment on the panel.

Though the studio is primarily a place of solitude, it is not a place of isolation. Sometimes the news that filters in seems so dire, so urgent, that the paintings begin to respond to it. When this happens, the dynamic shifts a little. The image of the dark wave, *Tsunami* (plate 1), was inspired by the news coming out of Egypt during the Arab Spring and the horrific images from the devastating tsunami that smashed into Japan in March 2011. Various commentators described the protests in Egypt as “a wave.” A wave seemed to me to be a perfect visual metaphor for change, both desired and feared, destructive and regenerative, personal and political. As I worked with the image I came to see it as the best way to work with a painting process deeply rooted in improvisation.

I hope I am creating a space for the viewer that reenacts the process that made the paintings. Delivering an experience more akin to dance and music than to storytelling. If what it depicted gets in the way of the physical experience of the object then the viewer is robbed of the best that a painting has to offer, being swept away into a rhythmic contrapuntal dance of this and then that and then...!

Mary Armstrong taught painting in Boston College’s Department of Art, Art History, and Film from 1989 to 2019. She divides her time between Georgetown, Maine and Newton, Massachusetts and exhibits throughout the United States.

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Mary Armstrong: Letting in the Light

Suzette McAvoy

“The greatest of human discoveries in the future will be the discovery of human intimacy with all those other modes of being that live with us on this planet, inspire our art and literature, reveal that numinous world whence all things come into being, and with which we exchange the very substance of life.”

—Thomas Berry

We live in an anxious time. Our planet is warming at an unprecedented rate; our democracy is in chaos, tribalism on the rise, technology unrelenting, and facts malleable, constancy a thing of the past. Against this background of creeping fear and uncertainty fueled by worldwide political and cultural strife, artist Mary Armstrong offers an antidote. It is Conditions of Faith.

In this latest body of work, a series of fictive seascapes painted in oil and wax on panel, and a group of oil pastels on paper depicting scenes of the Borrego Valley in California, Armstrong conjures a numinous world. A world of shifting seas and ominous waves, of trembling skies and dark divisions, an unsettled, shaken world to be sure, but in which an ascendant optimism persists. The waters will calm, the skies will clear, and the hills remain, nature the balm that heals.

“We are still in Eden; the wall that shuts us out of the garden is our own ignorance and folly,” wrote the father of American landscape painting Thomas Cole in 1836. Cole’s forging of the European Romantic tradition with imagery of the American wilderness laid the course for generations of artists to follow. His trip to Maine in 1844 was prophetic. Seeking the “silent energy of nature,” artists flocked to Maine, helping to transform it from unsettled woodland to a popular tourist destination by the turn of the century. The “iron bound” coast that Cole described was never to be the same. This is the duality of consequences—celebrate the glory of nature and others will come to trample it.

Armstrong has been painting in Maine for decades. She attended the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture as a student in 1977 and later returned as co-dean with her husband-to-be Stoney Conley in 1980. That year, the couple purchased a small house on the coast at Georgetown, an island community accessible by bridge to the mainland. Bracketed by the Kennebec River to the west and the Sheepscot River to east, Georgetown is one of those distinctly ragged landforms that make up Maine’s Midcoast. This bucolic, water-bound setting has been Armstrong’s summer home for years, providing a respite from teaching duties in Boston and offering long days spent in the studio.

3 Cole, 8.
For years, she says, “We lived a very solitary life of work. The only socializing was the occasional visit to Skowhegan for visiting artists’ lectures. Gradually we got to know some of the locals here in Georgetown. But, coming to Maine still means removing from the world, to focus, to work.”

Politics and current events, though, have a way of creeping in, bubbling up, and disturbing the peace, despite best efforts and the remove to Maine and the studio. The uprising in Egypt that led to the Arab Spring and the tsunami that devastated Japan in 2011, prompted Armstrong to employ the image of a dark wave as a metaphor for the human condition. We read the troubled waters in these recent works as a reflection of our time. The three-panel *Tsunami* (plate 1), which she worked on from 2015 to 2017, is a tour de force. The turgid waters roll upward, creating a band of deep blue across the overall horizontal composition. The sky is reduced to the top one-third of each square panel. Against the dominant dark water, the light sky offers relief, and a sense of hope.

*Icarus* (plate 4), a large square painting from 2017, merges sky with watery landscape, the whole animated by the artist’s restless hand traveling across the surface, scratching, seeking, letting in the light. As with many of Armstrong’s works, the words of Leonard Cohen’s “Anthem” come to mind:

> Ring the bells that still can ring  
> Forget your perfect offering  
> There is a crack, a crack in everything (there is a crack in everything)  
> That’s how the light gets in

In *Arrival* (plate 3), a large horizontal seascape from 2019, the sgraffito in the sky and on the cresting waves activates the nearly monochrome composition. The atmosphere is palpable, diaphanous clouds float above the sea’s surface ascending to a line of gathering darkness at the painting’s top edge. On second glance, the expanse of rough water filling the lower foreground can read as landscape, the waves akin to distant mountains.

*Seek Alt. Route* (plate 6), a vertical composition from 2019, is divided almost equally between sky and water. The title signals thoughts of the international refugee crisis and the trajectory of our politics, tacking right. The image reinforces the warning, a deep trough lies midway between the foreground and the horizon—the course ahead leads to unnavigable waters.

By 2019, when Armstrong completed *Troubled Waters* (plate 2), a large horizontal painting that she began in 2016, we are in uncharted territory. The composition is again divided top and bottom, the sky and sea meeting at an unresolved central horizon line. An impenetrable darkness pervades the watery lower half. The worried sky, shrouded in purple-tinged clouds is pierced here and there by rays of light. The tone is somber; a condition shared with Richard Blanco’s poem, “Cloud Anthem”:

> Until we are clouds meshed  
> within clouds sharing a kingdom with no king,  
> a city with no walls, a country with no name,  
> a nation without borders or claim. Until  
> we abide as one together in one single sky.

At far remove from Maine is California’s Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, which Armstrong first visited in 1991, while having a show at the California Center for the Arts (then the Felicita Foundation) in Escondido. The vastness and beauty of the desert landscape “astonished and inspired” her, and she has been returning ever since.

The magnificent starkness of the region is conveyed in her recent series of oil pastel diptychs. Each work portrays the far mountain range across two vertical sheets of paper, creating a single horizontal image. The implication being the scale is too grand to capture in a single frame.

As in many of Armstrong’s seascapes, the sky dominates and is alive with “incident.” Clouds the color of steel wool hover over the forbidding ridge of ink-dark mountains in Escarpment, Borrego Valley #2 (plate 18), giving way to high, roughly sketched golden swirls. In Escarpment, Borrego Valley #3 (plate 19), the sky is lighter and the clouds dispersed, a thin line of gossamer pink brightens the mountains below. Others in the series, collectively titled Borders, Borrego Valley (plates 20–22), similarly bring together two halves to make a whole. The artist seems to infer if nature can do it, might we not also?

Channeling artistic forebearers such as Caspar David Friedrich, who advised, “Close your bodily eye so that you may see your picture first with the spiritual eye,”7 and other poetic landscapists such Albert Pinkham Ryder, Ralph Blakelock, and George Inness, Armstrong wrestles with reconciling the world without with the world within. In this she shares company with contemporary Maine landscapists such as Emily Nelligan, Dozier Bell, and Dennis Pinette, artists who carry forward the Romantic tradition laid down by Cole, and who are similarly concerned with expressing the physical and the metaphysical, the earthly and the ethereal.

“There is an important balance between the world and the work,” says Armstrong. “But, ultimately, the deeper wells of inspiration come more and more from simply being…in the light of Maine and my imagination.” In her most recent work, Armstrong gives form to the unsayable. Concerned with the condition of the world, she conveys her anxiety in the form of troubled seas, darkened mountains and restless skies, her unwavering belief in the redemption of nature—and by extension humanity—wrought by her searching hand, letting in the light.

Suzette McAvoy is executive director and chief curator at the Center for Maine Contemporary Art in Rockland, Maine.

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7 Quoted in William Vaughan, German Romantic Painting, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 68.
oil and wax on panel, 24 x 72 in.
oil and wax on panel, 36 x 46 in.
3. *Arrival*, 2019
oil and wax on panel, 36 x 48 in.
4. *Icarus*, 2017
oil and wax on panel, 45 x 45 in.
5. Last Wave, 2018
oil and wax on panel, 44 x 46 in.
oil and wax on panel, 42 x 36 in.
7. *Bellini’s Landscape #1*, 2013
oil and wax on panel, 12 x 12 in.

8. *Little Icarus #2*, 2017
oil and wax on panel, 12 x 12 in.
Oil and wax on panel, 12 x 12 in.

Oil and wax on panel, 12 x 12 in.
11. *Maine!,* 2019  
oil and wax on panel, 12 x 12 in.

12. *On Coming #2,* 2013  
oil and wax on panel, 12 x 12 in.
13. *Bellini’s Bay*, 2019
oil and wax on panel, 12 x 12 in.

oil and wax on panel, 12 x 12 in.
15. *Estuarial*, 2017
oil and wax on panel, 32 x 36 in.
16. *First Light, 6:30 AM, 2018*

oil pastel on paper, 12 x 16 in.
17. *First Light, 6:30 AM, February 6, 2018*

oil pastel on paper, 12 x 16 in.
18. Escarpment, Borrego Valley #2, 2018
oil pastel on paper, 16 x 24 in.
19. *Escarpmont, Borrego Valley #3, 2018*

oil pastel on paper, 20 x 28 in.
20. Borders, Borrego Valley #1, 2018
oil pastel on paper, 16 x 24 in.
21. Borders, Borrego Valley #2, 2018
oil pastel on paper, 16 x 24 in.
22. Borders, Borrego Valley #3, 2018
oil pastel on paper, 20 x 28 in.