

4. MAGAZINE INTERVIEW AND REVIEWS, 1981-1982

THE ART ANGLE

By Ron Jarvis



Michael Tracy, "Pieta de la Passion", 1982, 33 x 26 x 8. Acrylic, wood/iron spikes. Photo by Tony Armento. Courtesy of Hadley/Rodriguez Galleries.

Religious passion and suffering resonate from the work of Michael Tracy, shown at Hadley/Rodriguez Galleries (20 Pinedale). "Pieta de la Passion": Over a wood triptych altarpiece edged with ornate molding and mounted on a central base, Tracy has laved acrylic paint and pierced its skin with iron spikes. The doors — flung forever open — and the central panel bear witness to an eruption. The convulsive, flowing gold has congealed, and here and there turquoise scabs encrust it.

Tracy achieves a Baroque pitch of passion through a contemporary idiom of abstract expressionism. The point of reference is Christian iconography — the triptych, the crucifix, the pentagonal icon — which provides the context for the expressive abstract surface. The tragic vision that Tracy convincingly puts forth welds the heated intensity of a primitive Mexican sensibility to the sophistication of an atomic age man. Tracy's works powerfully embody a terrible beauty.

At the Graham Gallery (2411 Bartlett) paintings by Ron Hoover are on view until November 10, and works by Terrell James are shown from November 12 through December 1.

After underpainting his canvas, Ron Hoover layers his paintings by throwing pigment at them; the result is a surface of tiny flecks of color. Within the overall

pattern he discovers his imagery much as the Surrealists created their automatic pictures, as Leonardo developed certain landscapes and, probably, as cave artists found animal images by torchlight on the walls of their caves. Hoover then develops the image more distinctly, yet he maintains an ambiguity. An image is more than one thing, often it is several images at once.

The more overt figures in Hoover's paintings are dark suited businessmen, policemen, women, houses. Each of these concrete figures is multiple in aspect. The figures surface from the flickering color background where more obscure imagery lies waiting to be discovered by the viewer.

Hoover's most obvious subjects are caricatures, social satire and political criticism. He takes the stance of an alienated artist. The strength of his work comes from his conviction. The spirit of the naive folk artist or the primitive artist vitalizes his canvases.

Terrell James creates totemic reliefs and abstracted architectural sites. The media used for the works on paper are gouache and pastel. Low-key reds, oranges, yellows and turquoise conjure up subdued visions of tropical shrines. She composes her work of free-form

columns and rectangles. These forms suggest Mayan shrines, Stonehenge, Greek temples and contemporary cityscapes — that is, monuments on holy ground or exalted secular structures.

Certain shapes emit a glow. Between columns the space radiates, setting up an interplay and tension between prominent positive images and their negative field.

James cuts the totemic reliefs from wall board and builds up the surface with stucco. Subtle color glimmers beneath the patched covering. Notches and cut-outs in the columnar reliefs create tension between the three totems. Interactions, paralleling those that occurred in imaginary space in the works on paper, happen in real space between the columns. Terrell James's art captures the viewer in a realm of mysterious vibrations.

Martha Armstrong pursues the poetics of photography in 29 Type C color prints, which are exhibited at McMurrey Gallery (One Chelsea Place) from November 3 through November 27. Armstrong isolates close-up views of sections of cast off objects. Concentrating and abstracting, she defines the texture, pattern and color relationships of detritus.

She evokes phantom visions and singles out symbolic forms, such as doors, windows and other openings — passageways to an unknown world. In a singularly arresting photograph a weathered blue door floats on a pond amidst water-lilies; a hazy glow of light envelops the scene. In another, light glints on the cracks of a broken window; beyond this web of reflected light, color patterns dematerialize. Z



Photograph by Martha Armstrong at McMurrey Gallery.

ARS BREVIS



Donald Roller Wilson, *THE TRANSFORMATION OF HELEN'S BROTHER LARRY*

by Chris Alexander

Roller Wilson and Martha Armstrong, both painters, appear anything but kindred spirits. As often happens, a closer look at their March exhibitions reveals that they have much in common.

Roller Wilson or Donald Roller Wilson — who prefers to be called simply "Roller" — is a Houston-born painter now working in Fayetteville, Arkansas. On March 6 he returns to the *Moody Gallery* (2015-J West Gray) where he last showed in 1977.

For several years now, Roller has been painting a twilight world in which ordinary objects are assembled in bizarre tableaux peopled by various human and animal characters. Together, the paintings comprise a body of work that describes a realm of non-ordinary reality where laws of time and space, life and death do not function quite as we expect. Yet this world has an order of its own, not so much to be understood as to be felt.

Over time, certain images appear repeatedly in Roller's paintings, then disappear to be replaced by new icons. Dominating the Moody show, for instance, is the kitchen match. It is everywhere: as detail in large paintings; as a greatly magnified icon, alone or paired, and set apart; and as a peripheral image set into the frame of a larger picture. There is even a

painting in which matches swarm like bees in a bottle.

Roller explains that matches are insignificant objects until they are struck; only then can they cause destruction. (He paints beads of water on some of the match tips to indicate that they cannot be lit.) He also points out that matches are a simple representation of the temporal quality of objects: a match is made to be destroyed, and matches as a class of objects will someday be obsolete.

Roller Wilson explores the ways in which ordinary appearances embody and reveal the supernatural; Martha Armstrong is after the same thing in modernist terms, in two shows running concurrently this month. At *Louisiana Gallery* (2625 Kipling) a show of her paintings on canvas and paper opens with a preview March 3, and at 3221, an experimental gallery at 3221 Milam, a show of lithographs and monoprints is in progress. These are Armstrong's first one-woman shows.

Her subject is the supernatural in its modern form, the psyche. Her images of overall ambiguous pattern and indeterminate depth embody and reveal the psychic patterns of order that structure her experience and ours.

The 13 large canvases at the Louisiana Gallery are painted with up to 15 layers of acrylic color that suggest veils before a great depth. On paper the

approach is different. There are many layers, but the paint is applied in small gestural marks so that some of the color of each layer is visible.

In these, it is as if Armstrong were looking at Roller's surface through an electron microscope or tracing the energy that lights his tableaux. She talks about the influence of her study of particle physics, and it is in that subtle realm that she finds a theoretical reference point.

Not that these images are mere intellectual rhetoric. Dry analytical exercises could not possess the life that these works have. Their eye-tickling surfaces and colors hold and transmit the vital energy with which they were made. They are pictures of action, and they act in turn on us as we encounter them. The artist has discovered images and surfaces that evoke immediate response.

Now, none of this is new stuff in art-historical terms. Action painting and the metaphysical properties of color field abstraction are territories well-mapped by such New York School painters as Pollack, Rothko and Tobey. Armstrong turns what could have been imitation into a fresh synthesis by charting a more personal territory.

The lithographs at 3221, both in edition and monoprint, are the most successful in that regard. They are the most cohesive realization of her vision; in them she has found the place where action and contemplation meet on her terms.

Both Armstrong and Roller are on courses of reconciliation. In their separate ways, they are bound to the task of pulling their psychic and physical worlds into an embrace, where ink or paint and the phantoms of the mind become one thing.

If their images appear a little crazy, it is because those images are outside our definition of the sensible. They are not crazy for Roller Wilson or Martha Armstrong, but are instead images that make a newfound sense of the world. That we may find them irresistibly intriguing indicates our hesitant longing to share in that sense.

That the work also contains unresolved tensions and confusing visual signals may indicate that these two artists have still more work ahead of them. The future is open territory, and Roller and Armstrong are anxious to cover new ground. As they continue to hone their powers of attention and expression — and to take chances — they will be well-equipped for further exploration. Getting there is at least half the fun. ★

The Arts and the City: Interviews with Martha Armstrong and Joanne Adams

10



W. Williams

Martha Armstrong is president of the board of directors of the Cultural Arts Council of Houston. She is also a painter and photographer. Mrs. Armstrong studied art at Converse College in Spartanburg, South Carolina and also at the Heatherly School of Fine Art in London. Her work is in a number of public and private collections in the United States and abroad. In 1981 she had three one-person shows of her work: lithographs and monoprints at 3221 Gallery, paintings at Louisiana Gallery and color photographs at McMurtrey Gallery. Martha and her husband Tom have lived in Houston eight years. She was elected to the board of the Cultural Arts Council in October 1979 and served as vice-president in 1981. Following are excerpts from a conversation with Mrs. Armstrong in which we asked her about her involvement with the arts in Houston and about her experience on the CACH board.

CACH: How did you get involved with the Arts Council?

MA: I knew when it was founded and was very excited about it. I really believe that it's one of the best things that has happened in Houston. Without the arts, where would Houston be? As for how I got involved, I have been on a lot of boards and committees. As a painter and photographer, I have always been involved in the visual arts and performing arts wherever I have lived. I guess I felt that I owed something. I wanted to make a contribution to the arts in exchange for the pleasure I get from them.

CACH: You were elected by the individual membership of the Arts Council to serve their interests and to oversee the administration of CACH funds. What is it about you that qualifies you for this role?

MA: For one, my involvement with the community. I've been very active with the Opera and with the Ballet, the Asia Society, the Contemporary Arts Museum, the Museum of Fine Arts, and with Channel 8. I was head of the Channel 8 art auc-

tion a few years ago. Also, because I am a painter. I think people like the idea of having a visual artist on the board.

CACH: Do you think that being an artist helps you recognize some of the needs of artists and people in the arts who may not be artists?

MA: If I have any strengths, I think that is it. I think that being an artist helps me communicate with other artists, and having a connection with the visual and performing arts groups helps too. On the board we are responsible for distributing funds, for trying to help the emerging groups and the major organizations. We have to know about them. I think I have seen almost every performing group in Houston.

CACH: Are there any special activities or projects that you hope will start or continue during your tenure as president?

MA: My dream is for an alternative art center. I would love to see this happen in the inner city. I think it is so necessary, and it is possible. So many other cities have done this, some through arts councils and some through other channels. Some have used existing buildings, old churches, schools, theaters, and some have gotten money to build new things ...

CACH: Would this space be for both performing and visual arts groups?

MA: That would be ideal, to have both. However, if we could only do one, then I think the visual arts should be emphasized. With the new Wortham Theater Center, there will be two new theaters for the performing arts as well as the Wortham Theater at the University of Houston and the other theaters in town. I think Houston at least needs a place where visual artists can work and show and come together.

CACH: You mentioned that in other cities the catalyst for such projects is often the arts council or a city department. Do you see that as a viable role for the arts council here?

MA: I think so; I don't know why not. A marvelous indicator is 3221 Milam. They took a small existing space behind Farrell Dyde's dance studio and started having exhibitions of experimental artwork by local artists, work that was not being shown in other exhibition spaces. The space is not terribly accessible but there has been an enormous interest in it. People go. To me that indicates that an art center would work here. And the thing that would be good about the Arts Council being involved is that the staff of the Arts Council has some planning knowledge and could help interested groups develop a center. The problem with a lot of artistic people is that

we sometimes don't know how to do things. We have great ideas, but we don't always know how to do it. If the Arts Council were involved, I think we could do it.

CACH: You have lived in a lot of other cities, some that might be considered more attractive than Houston. How does Houston rank to you? Do you think there are still people who come here with the notion that there is no culture in this city?

MA: Oh yes. In fact, I did. It was eight years ago, and we came from New York, London and Chicago. In my ignorance I really thought I was coming to a cultural wasteland. I say in my ignorance because that was what it was. I simply did not know. I very quickly found out that there was a lot happening in Houston. Eight years ago there was a lot, and it's just mind-boggling what's happened in the time that we have been here. The organizations have grown in both size and sophistication. When we travel in Europe, people mention Houston with real excitement. They know about us. But when I visit New York, I still meet people who say "Houston ... do you really like it there?" expecting me to say I don't. A lot of people still don't know. They think of Houston as a town with a lot of money and not so much culture, but they are wrong. We do have the culture and the interest and that is one of Houston's strong points. With the new increased need for private sector support, we can get it here. In other cities there may not be as much money, or people may not be as generous with their money.

CACH: What do you think about the fact that there are arts groups that fold, and those that seem to fade in and out instead of growing steadily?

MA: It is sad to see a group try so hard, one that is very good, but then die for one reason or another. I think often it may be because they don't have as much knowledge as they should have. This is where the Arts Council can come in to give these groups information about how to structure their organizations, how to fundraise, how to establish a board — all the things that are necessary but that sometimes a group with a great idea and a great product might be lacking ... And I think that another strength of the Arts Council is that we not only give money and technical assistance, but by funding groups we give a stamp of approval which enables these groups to go to corporations or foundations and say "The Arts Council has given us a grant. They approve of us; we must be good. Will you support us too?"