

THREADS AND LAYERS:

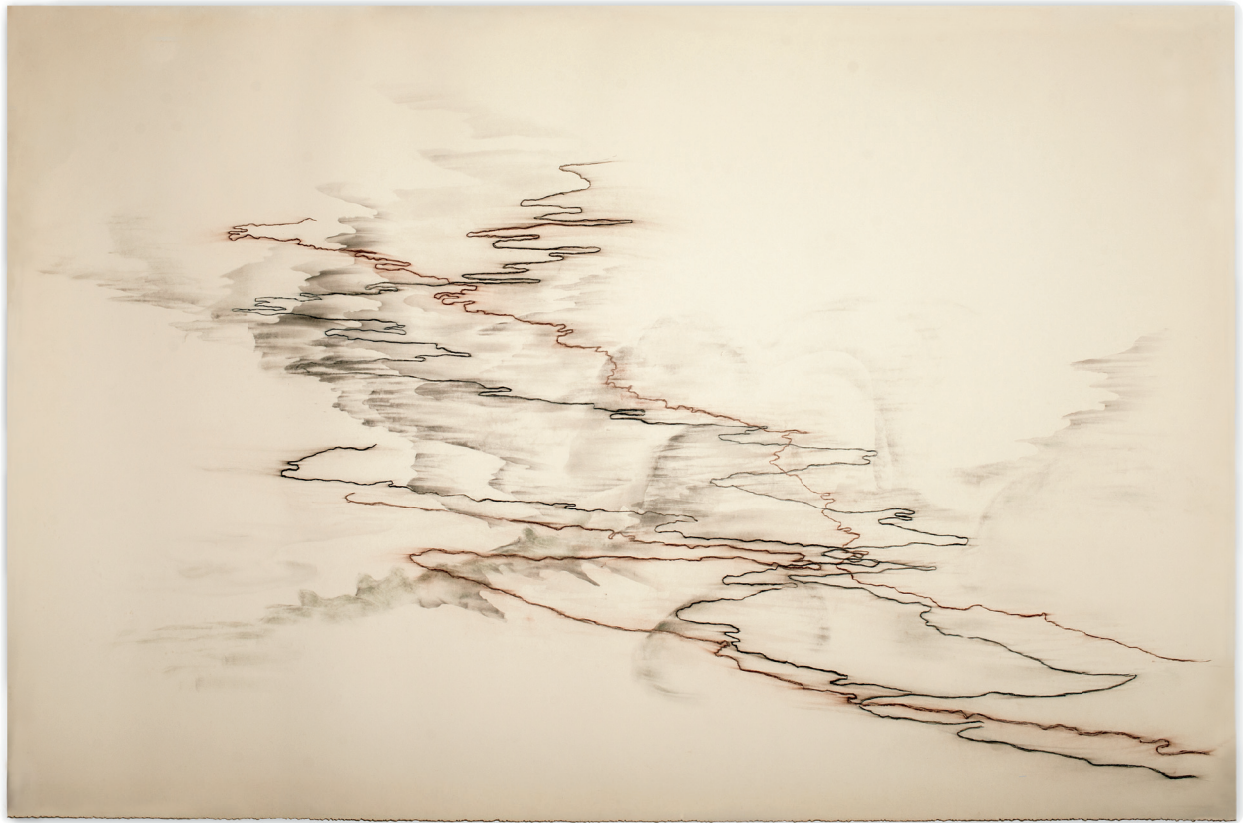
*Sara Garden Armstrong at the
Gadsden Museum of Art*

Breath has a rhythm, a sound, and although invisible to us, we can see and feel it happening, this simple, essential proof of life.

This origin cycle, often used as a metaphor for change and renewal, connects us to the natural world, to our habitat, to the motion of the tides, of the ocean, which creates fifty percent of the oxygen we inhale. In conversations with Sara Garden Armstrong in her Birmingham studio this past June, breath emerged repeatedly as the powerful anchor grounding her four decades of multifaceted, poetic work.

The infinite crossing points between vital cycles of life—breath, water, time, and change—galvanize *Threads and Layers*, Armstrong's exhibition at the Gadsden Museum of Art. She activates the spaces between the inner and outer realms of bodily sensation, moving between the expansiveness of imagination, of the consciousness of our ability to experience without limits, and the limitations of the body, the fundamental constraints of time and mortality.

Motion between these dualities is palpable. Throughout the exhibition, we see Armstrong change as she is changed. Sometimes immersed in beauty, she walks along the edge of a Brittany beach, tracing the successive patterns of the tides in *Littoral Drawings* (1998–2000). Capturing her experience at the shoreline in this series of wall-sized drawings, she documents the imprint of each wave in the sand with delicate graphite and pastel lines. The overlays of each instance accumulate and begin to resemble a sketch of veined marble—but in the drawings the tenuous veins are formations from the compression of time and the crystallization of memory. As in a traditional Chinese ink painting, the ephemerality of nature and time are in balance, both empty and full.



Littoral 9, 2000
Graphite, pastel, acrylic
on paper
80" × 120"

AIRPLAYERS & Beyond

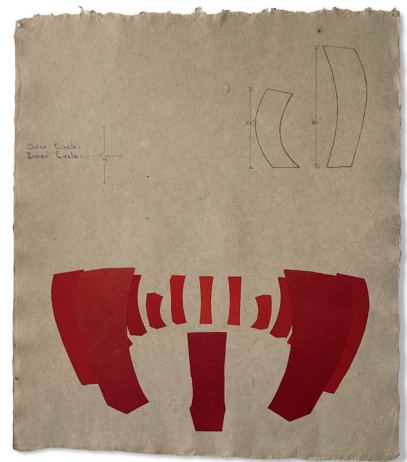
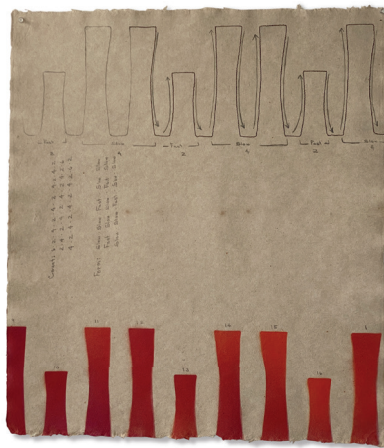
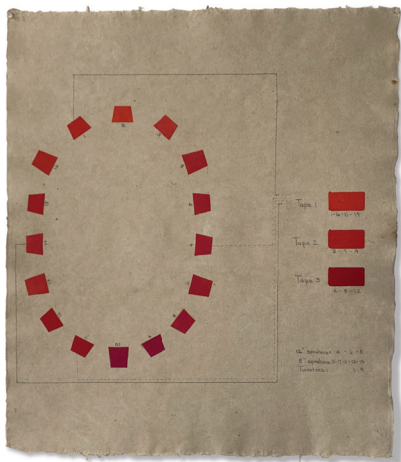
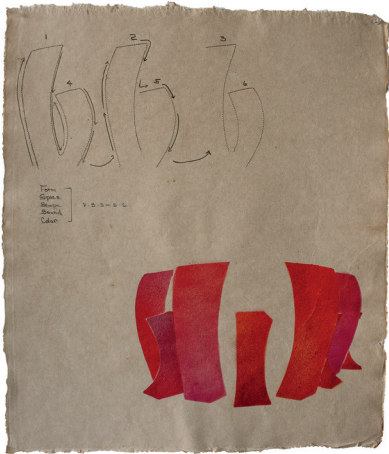
At other times, Armstrong's work becomes a remonstrance to anguish. *Skin Rack* (1991) is Armstrong's response to witnessing the ravages of illness on her mother in the last stages of life. Back-to-back sheets of cast abaca paper are hung from an industrial rack and lit with optical lenses and grow lights. The imprint of tubing and the texture of the cast paper eerily approximate dried, flayed, hanging skin, or perhaps the exoskeleton of a future crustacean. Surreal and confrontational, it is equally evocative of the sensual meat carcasses painted by Soutine and the uncanny, futuristic laboratories of HBO's *Westworld*. Armstrong delves into the pathos of ancient taboos surrounding the exposure and dissection of the body, but with the factual coldness of our industrial age.

The interrelatedness of life and death is a complex and thematically large concept for Armstrong, and through the decades she has engaged time-based media and multiple senses in this pursuit. Large-scale, experimental projects have defined her career and have required a demanding practice with ever-increasing levels of resourcefulness and invention. To realize each piece, she takes on extensive research, which usually involves a daunting learning curve as her installations incorporate evolving techniques of fabrication and electronics, including components of sound and lighting. She learned early the value of collaboration and community, and from the late 1970s onward has relied on—and benefited from—this aspect in her work. It adds another layer of relevance to her contemporary practice, as current generations of artists explore the possibilities and politics of working cooperatively to survive an inhospitable economy for studio work. Armstrong gets it.



Skin Rack, 1991

Metal rack, paper fiber,
optical lenses,
fluorescent grow lights,
incandescent lights
60" x 42" x 24"



Sound: Montevallo, 1978

Acrylic, graphite, sewn machine lines, handmade paper
3 parts, 29" x 78"

S.S.S.- C.S., 1978

Acrylic, graphite, sewn machine lines, handmade paper
3 parts, 29" x 78"

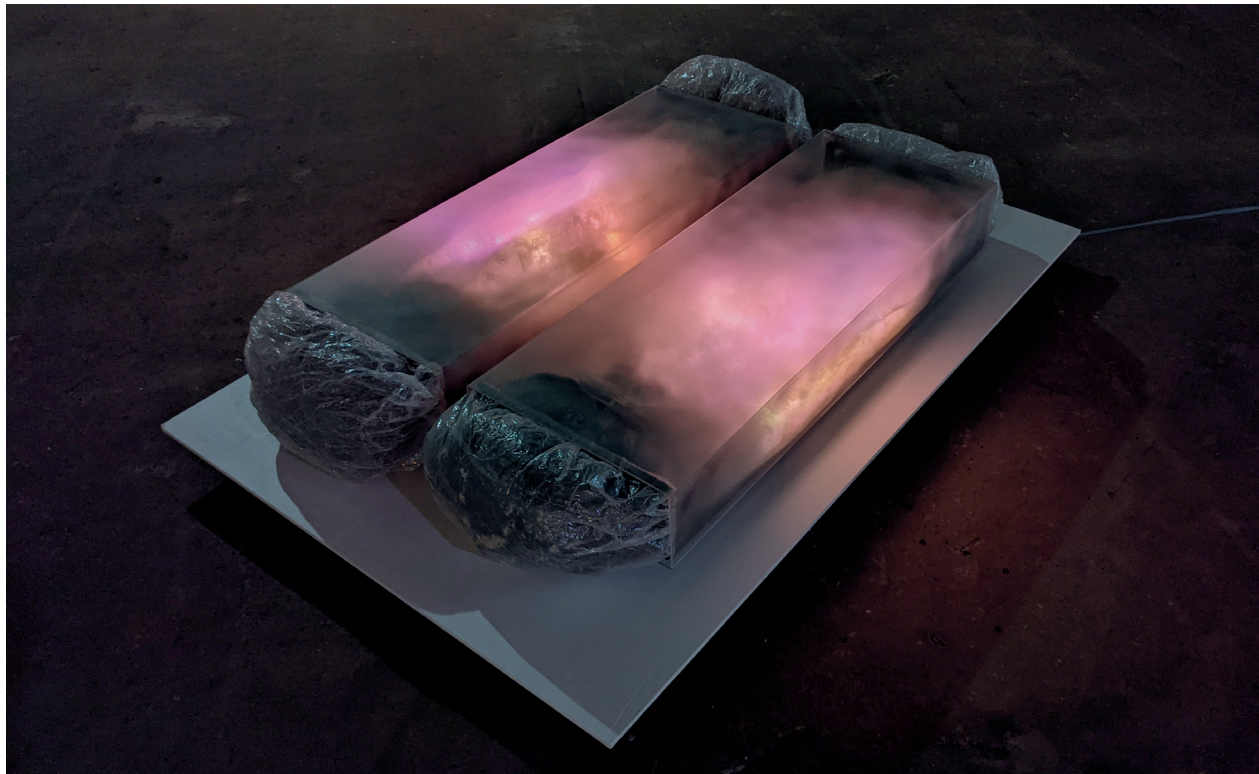
These qualities were all forged in a groundbreaking early piece, *Environment: Structure/Sound III* (1979/2021), which exemplifies Armstrong's bold transition from painting into sculptural installation and her relationship to minimalism. This new genre, emerging during the late '60s, prioritized the invigorating power of actual space and three-dimensional reductive geometric form. In *Environment: Structure/Sound III*, sixteen vertical, arched rectangular canvas forms are placed in a circle. The monolithic structures are handmade, covered in canvas sewn by the artist, and flawlessly airbrushed in gradations of the red spectrum, from oranges to red-violets.

Although each form is unique, the forms function serially as an assembled, single entity. To conceptualize the piece, Armstrong imagined a primal social group of parents and children to ascribe the varying sizes, curves, gradations, and composition. Minimalism was a portal for Armstrong, but in *Environment: Structure/Sound III* she goes beyond the formal aesthetic principles of what Donald Judd famously called "specific objects." Inspired by the new music of John Cage and Steve Reich, she moved further into her own territory, animating the installation with the incorporation of sound. An abstract, soft rumbling score surrounds, and is emitted from, the group, evoking a communicative, somber atmosphere or ritual, enhanced by dramatic lighting. The score sounds vaguely familiar and comforting, one thinks of whales calling to each other underwater, or, perhaps, magnified sounds from the interior of the body, possibly in utero. The addition of sound was pivotal, and, notably, Armstrong contributed to the emerging genre of sound art over subsequent decades.

The attendant *Sound Drawings* (1979) allow the viewer to follow her creative process. A geometric structure flows through visual notations of the sound score and the many iterations of compositional arrangements for *Environment: Structure/Sound III*. A sense of liveliness and animation emanates from these drawings. A circular magnetic field seems to hold the group together, bending and recoiling, caught in the force of their attraction. Like Matisse's *Dance*, from 1910, the red group is easy to anthropomorphize.

Armstrong's anthropomorphism of reductive serial form greatly moved forward the radical work of minimalist artists Eva Hesse and Sol LeWitt. The influence of LeWitt is notable in the use of an industrial box or container as a signifier for interior space, both as a psychological metaphor and as a statement of the infringement of the commercial and industrial into contemporary life. From Hesse, she adopted the assertive use of body references. Armstrong found these ideas liberating and never looked back, forging her own aesthetic with personal references, movement, and a pioneering material inventiveness, grafting jerry-rigged Home Depot stuff onto the latest new technology. *Closed Systems X and Y* (1997/2021) and *Breeder Box* (1999/2017) are metaphorical containers, but also representative bodies, a rectangular, manufactured, and screen-like translucent exodermis, with lights within revealing shadowy organic forms moving around. Then, we hear them breathing. Ventilators, incubators, iron lungs, virtually all the machinery of life support and medical imaging are evoked, both beautiful and grotesque, holding the viewer in suspension between awe and empathetic vulnerability. Armstrong courts these complex emotions and dualities, common components of deeply personal experiences, the confounding effects of love and loss. Armstrong admits that a sense of Southern Gothic permeates some of her work, and in *Closed Systems X and Y*, science fiction, Edgar Allan Poe, and the sexual yearning of Felix Gonzalez Torres's two synchronized clocks in *Perfect Lovers* come together.

In *Backs* (1991/2022), *Growth Dialogue 5* (1997), and *Reciprocating Support* (1997/2017), the container is eliminated. The organic forms sprayed from abaca paper fiber and lit from within could be either relics of our present bodies or petri dishes being farmed for survival in an uninhabitable future scenario. In *Reciprocating Support* a single supine horizontal form inflates and deflates rhythmically and helplessly on the floor. Armstrong exposes the simple mechanics this time: blowers, hoses, and



Closed Systems X and Y,
1997/2021

Plastic, electric blowers, lights,
relay switching, rubber,
paper fiber
10" × 66" × 18" each

lights. A beached whale, a cinematic extraterrestrial prostrate before us, a last goodbye at a hospital bedside . . . these are all associations that fleetingly attempt to ground one's experience of the piece. But it's the *Reciprocating* in the title that stays with me, as once again a cycle is insinuated, all too-human instances of mutual dependence and thwarted desires repeatedly connecting.

Armstrong has a great affinity for shadows. She mines them with theatrical skill and poetic license, artfully managing them through projections and augmenting them with painted semblances on the walls and floors. In *Airplayer XVII* (2022), she scrambles the visual logic while enriching the ambiance. A landscape of multiple, seemingly weightless vertical forms is lit from within and also illuminated with projections and overlapping shadow forms that are painted on the walls—with patterns the colors of embers and blue playing across the surfaces. Seriality has evolved into a natural, interdependent configuration in which the movement of exploration is inviting, as is the sound of the ocean emanating from the piece. The associations are otherworldly, delightful dualities of microcosms and macrocosms, like a dream landscape of magnified plant life in the throes of photosynthesis.





Above
Reciprocating Support, 1997/2017
Paper fiber, plastic, electric
blowers, relay switching, lights
Dimensions variable

Left
Detail, **Reciprocating Support**



Layered-scape 11, 2022

Acrylic and pigmented fiber
on canvas

60" × 48" × 2"

Her minimalist roots have grown baroque, the fecundity of *Airplayer XVII* shares with Pipilotti Rist and Judy Phaff a celebratory sense of wonder and abundance. The list of materials for *Airplayer XII* is a topic in itself, and speaks volumes about Armstrong's ingenuity: "made from sprayed abaca and cotton forms, embedded with plastic hoses, connected to blower boxes which contain squirrel cage blowers, and operated by a microcontroller with video projections and ocean sounds."

Her paintings are stripped down, direct manifestations of Armstrong's visual lexicon. From John Cage, elements of chance infuse the compositions; from postwar abstraction and minimalism, dance and movement inform the process. The paintings are made in dialogue with chaos and control. As in the drawings of Trisha Brown, the experimentation of Sigmar Polke, and the fluidity of Helen Frankenthaler, the process is the image. The pieces are made "wet into wet," by placing the paper or canvas into large trays, then pouring water, acrylic pigments, and/or additives directly onto the surface, reacting with and manipulating the emerging images. Like the sculptural and installation pieces, they glow with the color of embers and fire: backlit yellows, amber, and oranges burn from the center, held in their orbit with charred earth tones of umber and charcoal. Armstrong's palette completes her connection to the primal elements.

The studio for Armstrong is a laboratory, a social space, and a haven. From Birmingham to New York City and back to Birmingham, she has worked, as painter Joan Mitchell, writing of her own art, observes, "from remembered landscapes that I carry with me—and remembered feelings of them, which of course become transformed." Armstrong's work is decidedly abstract, the invisible made visible, rife with the rich terrain of the interior of the body, time, and change, the transformation that happens with every breath.