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ZACHARY ARMSTRONG PAYS HOMAGE TO FATHER FIGURES AT TILTON GALLERY

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Zachary Armstrong grew up surrounded by art. His father, George Armstrong, a sculpture and ceramics teacher in Dayton, Ohio, would bring home supplies from school and encourage both Armstrong and his brother to put pen to paper every night. “Drawing was very much a part of living at home,” the artist, now 33, says. “I wanted nothing more than to make a life of it, but that is like saying at nine that you want to be an astronaut. It felt both incredibly close and completely out of my reach.”

Armstrong’s dream took years to fully materialize, but this month, the artist, who still lives in his hometown, pays homage to his father’s influence with his new exhibition, “George,” at Tilton Gallery. The show isn’t the first time Armstrong has mined his own personal mythology as a starting point. His practice in a sense can be viewed as an ongoing narrative driven by material curiosity and anchored by a constellation of people and moments

from his life. “My mother’s family kept everything so I’ve been able to incorporate her childhood drawings into my own work, but I never had anything of my Dad’s,” Armstrong explains. “I always loved his ceramics but I didn’t want to paint them or throw them the way he did, so the past few years I’ve been making these wooden armatures that follow the silhouettes of his sculptures.”



The resulting work, a series of plaster, wire and fiber glass coated structures play with the aesthetics of traditional ceramics while occupying a defiantly new territory for Armstrong. Developed over months of experimenting, these new sculptures exemplify the artist's desire to immerse himself in and push new mediums especially those he finds within art history. "I've always enjoyed learning new techniques," he says. "When I work with wood or encaustic, I feel connected to this larger story."

Visitors weaving between Armstrong's plaster vessels and a new suite of encaustic paintings might miss a part of the big picture if they don't look up. A school of wooden cut-out fish will adorn the doorway of each gallery as a nod to Jack Tilton, the gallery's late namesake who passed away last spring. "The fish were kind of an accident," Armstrong says of the surreal addition. "They came out of a series of faces I was making. I gave one to Jack during what became our last visit and I'll never forget the beautiful story he gave me in return."

Apparently, Tilton had received a similar gift years earlier from art dealer Betty Parsons, who told him that a fish over your door would protect a home against fire. Adopting the late dealers' poetic superstition, Armstrong has installed one above his solo exhibitions ever since.

"I always will be really proud of my relationship with Jack," Armstrong says who met the gallerist following his opening at Night Gallery in 2015. "He gave me a dream of having my first show in New York City. In a way, this show is also about our relationship and his mentorship."



When asked about this first meeting, Connie Tilton, the gallery's director, remembers the sense of excitement discovering Armstrong's work inspired. "There was an energy about the work," she says. "My husband and I have been working in art all our lives, so it takes a lot to impress us. I remember what we saw in that exhibition betrayed a deep appreciation for painting and a genuine core."

Michael Goodson, senior curator of exhibitions at the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus Ohio, had a similar first impression. "Here is the thing about Zachary, he is preternatural talent," Wexner says, who encounter Armstrong's work when he moved from James Cohan in New York back to his home state. "From the way he handles paint, imagery, and the picture plane, it is clear that it is what Zachary is here to do."

This spring, Goodson curated Armstrong into "Inherent Structure," a group show that speaks to abstraction not as a strictly formal discussion but a starting point for unpacking the psychological and sociopolitical. Armstrong's contribution, a series of paintings expanding upon on a childhood portrait by his brother Noah, exemplifies Goodson's thesis. "Here is an example of someone working with abstraction as a structure for exploring the personal," Goodson says. "He took an image and repeated it until it became an entire vocabulary."



While the personal underpinnings of Armstrong’s work are almost imperceptible to the casual viewer, it is this ever-evolving material lexicon that makes the artist’s work so commanding. Each new piece is a labor of love, one whose physicality communicates its importance to its maker. “I made work for so long before anyone was watching,” Armstrong says. “So, for me, the attention has been humbling but ultimately it hasn’t changed anything about my practice. As long as I have the opportunity to make the things that I want surrounded by the people I love, my son and my family, I consider myself incredibly lucky.”

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