PATRICIA CRONIN'S XX PORTFOLIO
By: Sandra Firmin

Patricia Cronin, The Domain of Perfect Affection, 1993 –2003
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Untitled, Polaroid, 1993

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Sandra Firmin

Brooklyn-based artist Patricia Cronin began to work with the Polaroid camera in 1993, producing a large "shoebox archive" that documents a multiplicity of sexual lifestyles dominant in New York at the time. In contrast to her contemporary, photographer Catherine Opie, who received critical acclaim for her dignified studio portraiture of queer leather communities in California, Cronin's snapshots are taken in the frenzy of participation. Emerging concurrently in the early 1990s, both Cronin and Opie offer a lesbian counterpart to Robert Mapplethorpe's controversial X Portfolio from the late 1970s and early '80s, which filtered multiracial sex acts and sadomasochism through a highly disciplined language of formal photography, merging homoerotic pornography and high art in the process.

Queer history in the twentieth-century partially can be traced through personal photographs passed privately among friends, which established contact between previously isolated groups and individuals. The formation of these communities was often associated with specific self-identifying characteristics: alternative sexual practices; legible outward markers such as clothing, hairstyles, tattoos, and makeup; and relationships, one example being the butch/femme dynamic.

Within this queer narrative, photographs like Cronin's, which catalogue a jumbled insider's view of sex and sex-related activities performed both in New York's exclusive subterranean nightclubs and in domestic settings (one informative Polaroid humorously depicts the safe-sex practice of boiling dildos) would have been originally intended for circulation solely among participants. Cronin, however, willfully removes these frank images from private viewing and composes them in a grid format to endow them with a rationality that comes with such arrangements [not in exhibition]. The grid is the ultimate formal device used to organize space, but like William Penn's institution of the easy-to-navigate city plan, this imposed order often cloaks less than ordered lives.

A pivotal moment for the visual arts in the United States occurred in 1990 during the trial of Dennis Barrie, the Director of Cincinnati's Contemporary Arts Center, for his refusal to censor a survey of the artist's work, "Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment." Organized in 1988 by the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia with partial funding from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the exhibition included Mapplethorpe's homoerotic imagery alongside his more palatable photographs of celebrities, classically inspired nudes, still-lives, and children. This controversy raised questions about institutionalized homophobia, censorship, and the role of the United States government within the arts. The subsequent debates took place not only in court, but also in the media, extending its reaches into the popular imagination, and ushering in a decade where a battle ensued between art professionals and the government regarding obscenity laws.

Ultimately the jury acquitted Barrie, but deep cuts to the NEA's budget indicated that the

government was adopting a more active and dictatorial role in imposing standards of cultural production.[1] Clearly, Cronin's early Polaroids were made within the context of the Culture Wars, which were inextricably tied to gay and lesbian artists' struggle for self-representation and increased visibility of the queer body in a society transformed by the AIDS epidemic.

The Polaroid camera's internal processing is a tantalizing feature that has equipped untold numbers of people with the means to create their own "at home" erotica. Cronin exploits this unique property to create her untitled erotic watercolors (1993-95), which are based off photographs she took of her and her lovers in the act (pg.13). These works, in particular, are influenced by 1970s feminist, body-based practice, specifically, Joan Semmel's self-portraiture and larger-than-life-sized oil paintings of heterosexual couples. Like Semmel, Cronin playfully uses the camera during sex to frame tightly cropped compositions that magnify moments of bodily contact until the background is completely overwhelmed. Both artists avoid letting their subjects' heads totally enter into the picture plane, a formal device that deflects attention away from the work as portraiture and encourages viewers to focus on the dynamic interactions.

In Cronin's gravity-defying watercolors, a medley of vulvas, breastplates, nipples, thighs, elbows, bra straps, stomachs, underwear, shoulder blades, and toes cohere into palpable legibility before softening into indecipherable stratums of pliant flesh animated by light and shadow. She dislodges sex from the confines of an actual bedroom and places them topsy-turvy into an insistent present circumscribed, but not harnessed, by the picture frame.

Cronin's translation of her perspective onto paper is confrontational, denying viewers an easily assimilated stance as outside observers. But, by divulging what she sees during these undeniably intimate encounters, she also reproduces a pleasurable experience that is participatory. Cronin's Untitled #16 (1994) (pg. 20), for instance, draws viewers into the represented space by inverting Gustave Courbet's Origin of the World (1866) and the ravaged torso in Marcel Duchamp's Étant donnés (c. 1946-66).[2] Rather than being faced with a recumbent woman whose legs are splayed in perpetuity, the perspective is reversed and we are able to assume Cronin's aroused position. We look down into compressed space, following a foreshortened stomach down towards a seductively haloed patch of pubic hair, watching in mounting anticipation as our would-be lover advances.

To pick up once again the comparison with Semmel, Cronin works at an accelerated pace and on a smaller scale, quickly transforming her photographs into watercolors. The speed and spontaneity with which Cronin paints finds a direct correlation in erotic temporality. Furthermore, her use of watercolor promotes the unique properties of a medium long deemed secondary to oil and historically identified with women and Sunday painters. She triggers a material conversion, associating the paper's grainy texture with skin, the absorption of color and water into the support building up diaphanous layers of sweat and flushed flesh tones. The most marked difference, however, between Semmel and Cronin's paintings is the latter's politically-motivated appropriation of Semmel's self-representational strategies to establish a matrilineage of artistic influence and convert, in

Cronin's words, "the subjectivity from heterosexual to Homo."[3]

A major feminist critique involves challenging a universal model of sex, which is presumed applicable to men and women equally, as well as all types of couples across the board. This understanding gives credence to sex defined solely by male penetration and climax, a definition, which is unable to accommodate the reality of female pleasure and orgasm. This narrow characterization is especially perplexing because a masculine paradigm does not pertain to lesbian experiences of intercourse.[4]

A possible corrective to this ambiguity, Cronin's watercolors engender an elastic view of intercourse that has significant ramifications for lesbians seeking a shared sexual vocabulary. Heavy petting, in Cronin's perfected erotica, is not anterior or posterior to intercourse, but is rendered obsolete, as all points of contact are folded into a transcendent experience of sex. These paintings insist on a wide range of activities that disrupt the trajectory of sex as climactic, arguing for a nonlinear alternative based on an inexhaustible exploration of one's self and partners.

Deliberately moving away from graphically explicit imagery to an investigation of the erotic subtext of horse culture, Cronin painted portraits of horses obsessively throughout the year 1996. A passionate collector of equine paraphernalia throughout her life, Cronin delved into this new subject matter with the enthusiasm of a fanatic to make real what she had previously only dreamed. She began taking riding lessons and subscribed to multiple equestrian magazines such as Young Rider and Spur. Cronin's source materials were the real-life horses housed at stables in Brooklyn and Long Island and images taken from calendars, postcards, and magazines. She was particularly fascinated by the sexy pinup logic of Horse Illustrated's "Gallery" page, which featured a different horse each month selected from mountains of photographs sent in by its readership of young girls.

Pet owners' attempts to align animal temperament with their own personality traits is evident in the offbeat names of the horses in Cronin's head shots, including superior appellations: Consul, First Edition, Apollo; seductive: Vamp, Lorenzo; celestial: Firestar, Stardust; fated: Victory, Destiny; human: Harry, Katie; and prosaic: Bear, Sparky. The presentation of these works in traditional three-quarter view or profile produces an odd sensation that the horses might have actually commissioned the portraits themselves. This humorous effect draws our attention to anthropomorphic projections that transform these animals into cherished friends.

Pony Tales (1996) (pg. 28 – 29) originally comprised fifty of these portraits installed salon-style against a fine backdrop of F. Schumacher and Co. wallpaper, redolent of country estates, Ralph Lauren, and the leisure activities of the affluent [34 are included in this exhibition]. The highly individualized oils, hung in a mock living room environment, provide a quirky commentary on the high status accorded to horses in American culture while underscoring their transformation from utilitarian to recreational.

These horses, with aristocratic airs, stare doe-eyed out of their walnut frames: a pure white Queenie (pg. 26), with a dappled pink nose, coyly tilts her head to the side in a

delicious nod to hyper-femininity while Commissioner (pg. 6), with his rugged demeanor and wind-strewn mane, embodies the romance of the wild frontier. This family album is a proclamation of social standing. It is also a gentle parody of a privileged domestic space placed in the public view of an art gallery, exposing most people's lack of access to these cultural symbols of want and might. Still, this playful critique does not negate girls' fascination with horses, but rather passionately upholds the value of their homespun imagination.

A Crayola palette and a paint-by-number coloring-book aesthetic align Cronin's horses with girlhood longing, and by extension, incipient sexual identity. A delightful example of latent eroticism implicit in childhood naiveté is Velvet, Liz Taylor's horse-struck character in the film National Velvet (1944). The equestrian sport's accoutrements and terminology are a treasure trove of sexual innuendo in which the twelve-year old smolders as she dreams, swoons, and ecstatically rides.

Cronin's Tack Room (1997-98) (pg. 30 & 31) is a more overt immersion into the sensuality of horse culture. From the exterior, viewers encounter an unassuming 10 x 10 x 8 foot cube with two entrances that lightly references early minimalist sculpture. Contained within its walls is an accessible fantasy realm with lesbian undertones. Audiences are invited to wander freely through the life-size replica, stocked with posh riding equipment, clothing, and heavy blankets. Cronin's meticulous attention to detail – a slight scent of fresh hay, leather, and grooming products; a phone number for a veterinarian haphazardly scrawled into the wooden panels; an empty Diet Coke can – causes reality and fantasy to co-mingle promiscuously.

Obviously, horse lust is not a strictly female preoccupation. Traditional equestrian bronze statuary, for instance, habitually depicts a military hero astride a stallion, imprinting the man plus horse equals virility equation into collective consciousness. Casting off all masculine associations, however, Tack Room is exclusively about femininity and female pleasure: cluttered with posters and magazine clippings of horses and women, framed photographs of Cronin mounted or standing by her horse, postcard reproductions of Edgar Degas' racetrack paintings.

A traditional feminist analysis of this installation would likely focus on the strict rituals of elite socialization for girls and the constructed roles that women assume throughout their life-time, as well as the race and class inequities that equestrian sports maintain. It could be argued that by pinning up advertisements – such as one for riding breaches that depict two models with upper class poise declaring "Our Bottoms Are Still Tops" – Cronin glosses over the privileges of wealth and implications of product marketing that link women with sex and consumerism. The lesbian politics of Cronin's installation, on the other hand, aim to generate codes that give visibility and free reign to women's desire for women. This agenda necessarily supersedes strictly feminist critiques. Aside from pornographic depictions of lesbians, typically created by men for male consumption, there are few detectable traces of lesbian interests in either European or American visual culture. While Tack Room appeals to a broad demographic, it also functions as a repository of insider jokes and suggestive imagery that brings Cronin's experience of

lesbian identity into representation.

The Domain of Perfect Affection (1999) (pg. 32) is comprised of eight solid bronze horses originally cast in wax from plastic toy models – each representing one of the four levels of equine sexual status: mare, stallion, gelding, and foal – and arranged on a pine table in pastoral bliss. The comforts of a lived-with piece of furniture establish the mood for this whimsical tableau that depicts, in miniature, a make-believe world where the conventions of domestic hierarchies, often reinforced in children's play, are subverted by a utopian promise of non-gendered familial duties. Cronin was inspired to fabricate these horses after reading an article in the Wall Street Journal that reported "the plastic toy horse model industry, of which Breyer is the main manufacturer, had sales of more than $50 million last year." The artisans sculpting the horses are predominantly women and 95 percent of the collectors are young girls. Despite the article's apparently flippant summation: "Apparently, only women know what women want when it comes to modeled horses," Cronin recognized the value of a female-driven economy and happily integrated its product into her practice, which, by the late 1990s, was undeniably horse-obsessed.[5] Casting her figurines in solid bronze, she endows girlhood passion and play with the weight of art history.

Over the course of the last ten years, Cronin has taken us on tour of a virtual home-made manifest in her work to explore hidden meanings concealed within. She has unveiled the private seduction of the bedroom where women make love and young girls daydream; exploited the living room's essential character as an exhibition site to display possessions, lineage, and status; and lastly conceived of the stable as realm separated from the house to entertain unbridled fantasy.

*The Luxury Real Estate paintings (*2000) continue Cronin's preoccupation with the interplay of domestic space and spaces of privilege. She zooms out of the home's interior to present aerial views of crème de la crème estates in majestic isolation. The mansions are embedded in idyllic landscapes painted in a style reminiscent of Bob Ross' democratic "joy of painting" technique. Cronin's small-scale paintings – partly ironical, partly about longing – are named for the price and location of each estate: $3,500,000 (Figure Eight Island) or $15,000,000 (Southampton) (pg. 35). These informative titles simultaneously dispel the mystique of each property with hard numbers and reinforce their aura by locating them in specific geographical areas that evoke luxuriant lifestyles befitting the Great Gatsby.

Gated estates are immune to daily nuisances with which most homeowners have to contend, allowing the wealthy to transcend many social realities. Rosa Bonheur's estate in the French countryside was such an Eden-like environment where the artist lived with her life-long companion Nathalie Micas and their animals until Micas' death in 1889. The American artist Anna Klumpke (1856-1942) moved into the chateau nicknamed "the Domain of Perfect Affection" a year before Bonheur passed away in 1899. These household arrangements subverted the French social system as the women forged their own matrimonial conditions, living financially interdependent lives in chosen retreat. Gretchen van Slyke, translator of Bonheur's biography, explains:

Because the state would not give legal sanction to marriage between women, Rosa Bonheur exploited the next best thing—her last will and testament—in order to force some official recognition of their private vows. Despite her family's fierce opposition, she declared first Nathalie Micas, and then Anna Klumpke, her sole legatee and staunchly affirmed her right, rather her solemn duty, to dispose of herself and her estate as she pleased. In this way she used the letter of the law against its spirit and established another transformed sense of matrimony: the transmission of property from woman to woman, bypassing the traditional father-son circuit.[6]

In a lasting tribute to the love that Bonheur shared with Micas and Klumpke, the three women are now buried together in the Micas' family vault at Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris.

Over a century later, Cronin's most ambitious project to date, Memorial to a Marriage (2000-02) (pg. 38), calls to mind Bonheur's radical entombment. The sculpture is an enlarged double portrait of Cronin and her partner lying snugly in bed. Carved out of Carrara marble and permanently installed at Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx, the monument is the apotheosis of Cronin's exploration into cultural expressions of lesbian relationships, love, and wealth.

One of the most telling laws enacted in the 1990s was Bill Clinton's 1994 "don't ask, don't tell" military policy. This deliberate closeting of gay public identity implicitly tolerated homosexual acts as long as they remained private, ensuring that to avoid punishment gays and lesbians had to refrain from or conceal same-sex relations by adopting a pseudo heterosexual identity. Because homosexuality is often narrowly categorized according to private sexual acts rather than physical markers, gays and lesbians are often subsumed under the rubric of heterosexuality; a reduction that does not take into account outwardly visible civic rituals of heterosexual life: flirtations, dates, marriage, childbirth, and wills, and all of their attendant expressions, including hand holding, dancing, weddings, and financial planning.

Memorial to a Marriage is seamlessly integrated into its outdoor surroundings rather than assimilated into the rarefied realm of an art museum as an autonomous sculpture. The piece carves out a space where the lesbian body can be publicly integrated into the everyday vernacular of birth, life, death, and renewal. In a fittingly ironic gesture, the marble borrows its outward appearance from American mid-nineteenth century neo-classicism, a style that combined Puritan beliefs with renewed interest in Greek statuary. Cronin's nudes cradle each other, eyes closed, suspended between sleep and wakefulness. The all-pervading calm imposed by their blissful facial expressions and relaxed body postures is pleasantly disturbed by dynamic folds of a sheet fluidly wrapping the lower-half of their bodies, leaving feet uncovered. Their naked toes are pressed together in an erotic register of the other's presence.

Cronin explains the motivations to cast her lesbian partnership in these funerary terms: "we have wills, health-care proxies, powers-of-attorney, and all the legal forms one can

have, but they all pertain to what happens if one of us should become incapacitated or die. It's not about our life together; it's about the end of it."[7] Death provides a poignant means to institute an eternal domain of perfect affection that transcends changing legal and social structures while addressing the systemic exclusion of the queer body from the public sphere. A site of mourning and contemplation, the gravesite honors in death what U.S. law, for the time being, does not –a lifelong, matrimonial commitment between same-sex partners.

FOOTNOTES

1. Former New York Times critic and art historian Michael Brenson states: "In 1995, funding for the endowment was cut forty percent from $162.3 million to $99.5 million, but the agency survived. Despite the advocacy of NEA chair Jane Alexander (1993-97) and others, fellowships to individuals, except writers, were eliminated." Michael Brenson, Visionaries and Outcasts: The NEA, Congress, and the Place of the Visual Artist in America (New York: The New York Press, 2001), 89-91.

2. Origin of the World depicts an up-close view of a woman's vagina. Her body is cropped mid-thigh by the bottom and side edges of the canvas and her head and arms fall outside the picture frame. While her stomach and right breast are left uncovered, a sheet obscures the upper half of an extremely foreshortened torso. Duchamp's installation Étant donnés (permanently on view at the Philadelphia Museum of Art) presents a peephole bored into a wooden door through which lies a simulacrum of a naked woman's lower body and hairless sex organs among bramble. Nineteenth-century art historian Linda Nochlin writes about the analogy between the two works: "In both cases, the crucial relation between looking and desire is established by means of a realist strategy that foregrounds the role of voyeurism in artistic experience." See Sarah Faunce and Linda Nochlin, Courbet Reconsidered (New York: The Brooklyn Museum. New York, 1988), 178.

3. Patricia Cronin and Deborah Kass, "Conversation: Patricia Cronin and Deborah Kass," in Patricia Cronin & Deborah Kass (New York: Art Resources Transfer, Inc, 1998), 1.

4. Lesbian theorist and philosopher, Marilyn Frye discusses in depth the inability to articulate what constitutes lesbian sex and the necessity to develop such a language. See Marilyn Frye "Lesbian 'Sex'" in Lesbian Philosophies and Cultures (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1990), 305-315.

5. Patricia Cronin, "What a Girl Wants," Art Journal (Winter 2001): 96.

6. Anna Klumpke, Rosa Bonheur: the Artist's (auto) biography, trans. Gretchen van Slyke (Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1997), xxix.

7. Jan Garden Castro, "Making the Personal Monumental: A Conversation with Patricia Cronin," Sculpture Magazine (Jan/Feb 2003): 42.