



Patricia Cronin, *Vallant*, 1996, oil on canvas, 20 x 24".

PATRICIA CRONIN

WOOSTER GARDENS

Beyond an artist's intention, so much goes into any artwork that's part of the time's texture of attitudes, understanding, and knowledge, whether specialized or everyday, that it's amazing posterity has any way in at all. *They're pointing at the baby Christ's penis because*—Who'd be an art historian? And should art history still exist as a discipline in a few hundred years, what will it make of Patricia Cronin's horses?

Paintings quite like Cronin's portraits of ponies named Peppermint, Parfait Prince, Palatial Summer, and so forth, could well be made by a young apprentice using a paint-by-numbers kit, or might be worked up by the score for sale in sidewalk art shows. Yet being alive in New York today (and having stumbled on one of the artist's gallery lectures), I would doubt that these pictures could exist without the last two or three decades' worth of feminist politics and theories of the gaze. Still, how would I know this from the works themselves? They're certainly a lot more skillful than the novice's, but it's the kind of skill that doesn't call attention to itself—skill in the service of an idea; and how will art scholars of the future know that idea was there, or what it was?

They might begin by thinking about the history of horse art, from the ancient Middle East through the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century West. Kingship, war, and aristocracy play implicit or explicit roles in much of that art, since for several thousand years ending almost within present-day human memory, the horse was the most powerful and the fastest object of technology and mobility that anyone could own on land. Cronin's oils aren't like that; they're sweet. This comes partly from her

attentiveness to this series of long faces, so full of personality (there's also a small group of *plein air* full-body watercolors), and partly from their style: pleasantly démodé, they evoke an affectionate backward look to a simpler time or to art you might make if you were a gifted young teenager.

In fact the sources of many of Cronin's pictures are magazines like *Horse Illustrated* and *Young Rider*, which, she says, have readerships almost entirely female and mostly young. A lot of pre- and early-teenage girls have a thing about horses, and will learn to ride if they can, or read horse magazines whether they can ride or not; and here power reenters Cronin's imagery, for if the horses are powerful, so are those who control them. And it's not just power that comes in: the feelings in play here are clearly sensual. Cronin calls young love of horses "fan worship before girls know about rock stars or supermodels." So, finally, these paintings, with their secret curls of pink inside ears and nostrils, come to be about constructing an erotic space or circuit that has nothing to do with male vision or expectation.

Whoda thunk it? The art historian of the future might if he or she had uncovered Cronin's preceding body of work, an explicitly erotic, explicitly lesbian, series of watercolors of the female (human) body. But if you came on one of Cronin's horses by itself, out of context, would this be readable? You'd certainly get the work's sweetheart quality, its warmth, but would you dismiss it anyway as not different enough from its vernacular-art cousins? All things being equine, I say neigh.

—David Frankel