

art journal



Patricia Cronin. *Pony Tales*, 2000. Oil on canvas, walnut frames, and "Summer Country Archive" wallpaper. Installation view, Nexus Contemporary Art Center, Atlanta. 132 x 588 in. (3.3 x 14.9 m). Courtesy of the artist. Photo Mike Jenson.

Having been trained as a figurative painter, I thought I would spend my life exploring the “objective” tradition of clothed men painting naked women, while injecting it with my own brand of feminism. Most of the artists I like—especially nineteenth-century French painters—have been men who often painted naked women in a way that was hard for me to identify with. For instance, Gustave Courbet’s *The Sleep* (1867) depicts two naked women in bed. To paint it the artist must have stood across the room from them. I asked myself how I would approach the sitters if I were making this painting. What does that erotic space look like from the inside? The art historian Linda Nochlin raised the same issue in a statement that came as a revelation to me:

“As far as one knows, there simply exists no art, and certainly no high art, in the nineteenth century based upon women’s erotic needs, wishes, or fantasies. . . . Man is not only the subject of all erotic predicates, but the customer for all erotic products as well, and the customer is always right. Controlling both sex and art, he and his fantasies conditioned the world of erotic imagination as well. Thus there seems to be no conceivable outlet for the expression of women’s viewpoint in nineteenth-century art, even in the realm of pure fantasy.”¹

Joan Semmel’s work was a major influence on my thinking about this. It allowed me to see myself as part of an intended audience. In a series of large oil paintings from the 1970s, she employed a point of view of looking-down-her-own body. Exploring a related idea, the critic Amelia Jones has written that Carolee Schneemann’s art “actively challenged/threatened, the masculinist gaze by her oscillating exchange between object/subject and artist/model. Her chosen point of aesthetic departure—feminine pleasure.”²

This also can be said of Semmel’s work, which possesses “the possibility of a work of art that is both sensual and conceptual, both corporeal and theoretical, both eroticized and politically critical.”³ Purging the typical sense of male domination and virility from her sexual images of women

and men, she employed this particular feminist visual strategy to open up a space in the culture in which I could make work about female desire, passion, and power within a resistant culture.

In a series of paintings based on Polaroids of the woman with whom I was having a relationship, I adopted Semmel’s point of view of looking down my own body as a particularly appropriate approach for lesbian sexual imagery. Using the traditionally delicate, femininized, and often devalued medium of watercolor, I transformed the genre of the erotic nude by representing myself and what I saw when my girlfriend and I made love. Never having observed our lovemaking from across the room, I painted what we saw within our erotic space. This perspective forces the viewer to assume a lesbian position and is my response to the patrilineage of Courbet and the matrilineage that includes Semmel and Schneemann. *Untitled No. 119* (1995) is my answer to Courbet’s *Origin of the World* (1866). I wanted to place love and politics in the same object.

When the crisis in federal funding for the National Endowment for the Arts erupted, and long-brewing censorship debates came to a head, it became increasingly difficult to exhibit sexually explicit work without posting labels warning audiences that the exhibitions were “not suitable for children.” Yet I

What a Girl Wants

Patricia Cronin

1. Linda Nochlin, *Eroticism and Female Imagery in Nineteenth-Century Art: Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 138–39.

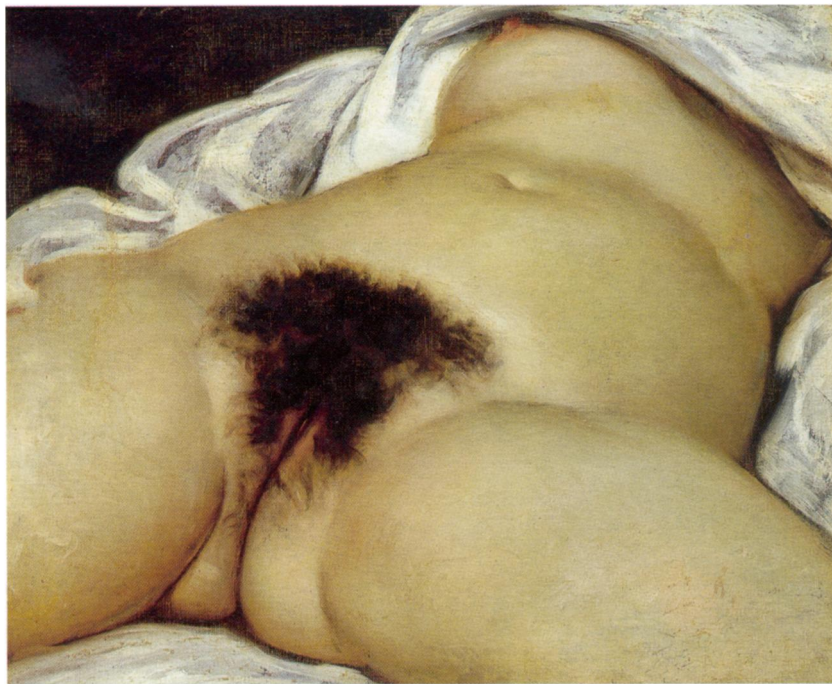
2. Amelia Jones, “Postfeminism, Feminist Pleasures, and Embodied Theories of Art,” in Joanna Frueh, Cassandra L. Langer, and Arlene Raven, eds., *New Feminist Criticism: Art, Identity, Action* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 27.

3. *Ibid.*, 31.

Gustave Courbet. *The Sleep*, 1867. Oil on canvas, 56¼ x 88½ in. (135 x 200 cm). Musée du Petit Palais, Paris, France. Copyright Erich Lessing/Art Resource, New York.



Gustave Courbet. *The Origin of the World*, 1866. Oil on canvas, 19½ x 23 in. (46 x 55 cm). Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Copyright Erich Lessing/Art Resource, New York.





Patricia Cronin. *Untitled #119*, 1995, Watercolor on paper, 20 x 24 in. (51 x 61 cm). Courtesy of the artist.

wanted young girls, who have little access to good role models in the visual arts, to be an audience for my work. From the windows of a great studio I rented in New York City, I found another, less sexually explicit theme, through which I could address the same concerns. I had a view of a big building that bore a large Marlboro cigarette ad of a horse jumping off a cliff, set against a bright, glowing orange sunset in the background. Horses seemed a potent image to pursue, but I knew no more about them than I had when I drew them obsessively as a child. I needed to get close to some, in order to paint them, but I had never even ridden one. So I started taking riding lessons at Kensington Stables in Prospect Park, in the heart of urban Brooklyn. This stable is truly a New York experience, with its horse owners and riders—Joel the Jewish cowboy, the Black Urban Cowboys, the Hasidic girls who sneak rides after school. These real live horses were my resource. I also collected magazines and books published primarily for a female audience: *Horse Illustrated*, *Young Rider*, *Spur*, some of whose titles are heavy with



Patricia Cronin. *Tack Room*, 1997–98. Mixed-media installation. Real Art Ways, Hartford, Connecticut. 9½ x 10½ x 8 ft. (2.9 x 3.1 x 2.4 m). Courtesy of the artist. Photo John Groo.

sexual overtones. Each issue of *Horse Illustrated*, for example, has a centerfold with the Breed of the Month and a last page called “The Gallery,” featuring pictures of horses sent in by their owners—mostly women. I liked the idea that these women had already posed and photographed their horses for a readership of women. My response was *Pony Tales* (1997), an installation of fifty oil portraits of horses, hung salon-style to evoke the teenage-girl bedroom aesthetic of overall obsession. The oval shape of the canvases reinforced the sentimentality of the works. The installation didn’t seem to me like a big change from the erotic watercolors. Whether my subjects were women or horses, they had this in common: I wanted them.

Because I was taking riding lessons, I had started to accumulate saddles, boots, crops, outfits, and other horsey accoutrements. Seeing and smelling the leather of a real saddle became more compelling than representing it. I felt that my audience should see these objects that meant so much to me. I wanted them

to walk through a tack room and smell the hay, leather, and wood, and be exposed to the erotic reality of horse culture and barn life. So I built a space, called *Tack Room* (1997–98), to house my collection. It was a ten-foot-by-ten-foot-by-eight-foot knotty-pine room with two entrances. It housed saddles, bridles, whips, chaps, nutrition supplements, sheath cleaner, first-aid kits, magazines, books, training videotapes, photographs of me on various horses, and postcards and books of the work of other artists who used the horse as a metaphor. It was important that the contents be objects that I had personally used. Playing with issues of sexuality and class, I juxtaposed these with images that had inspired many of the paintings: a full-page Ralph Lauren advertisement for a horse-woman's clothes and lifestyle from the *New York Times*, a postcard of one of Edgar Degas's racetrack paintings, real horse blankets, and an advertisement for riding breeches that declared, "Our Bottoms Are Still Tops." Formally, this was a whole new realm for me. I had been motivated by a desire to use equine imagery as a metaphoric means to address concerns of female autonomy, desire, power, and class. *Tack Room* looked like a woman's private tack room in the country, but it was really my private fantasy room, in which I imagined the adolescence I had not had and fantasized about my future. All I needed was the horse.

Patricia Cronin. *Tack Room*
(detail), 1997–1998. Courtesy of
the artist. Photo Steven Bates.





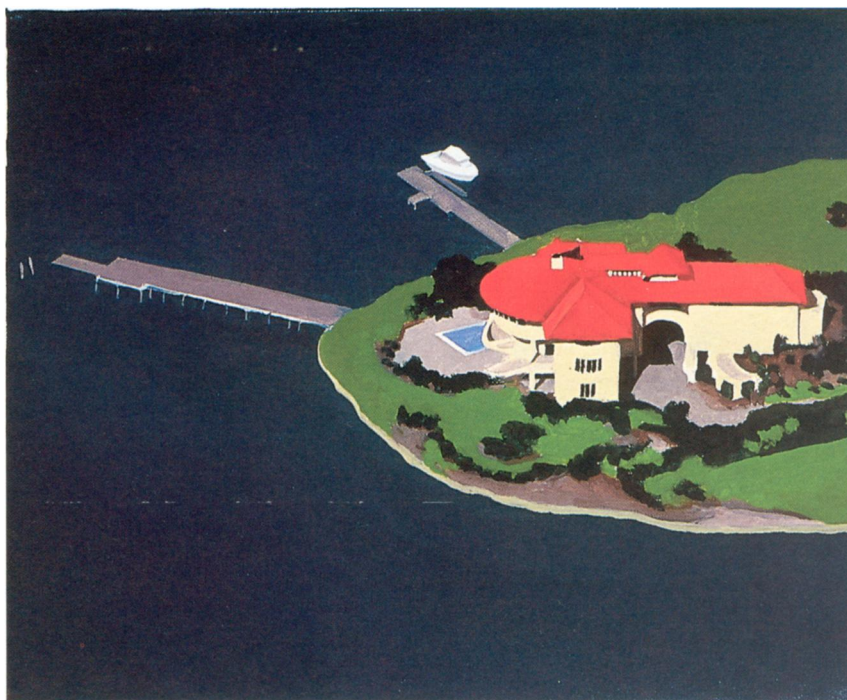
Patricia Cronin. *Gelding*, 1999.
Bronze. 9 x 12 x 3 in. (23 x 30 x 8
cm). From *The Domain of Perfect*
***Affection*. Courtesy of the artist.**
Photo Sardi Klein.

A few years earlier, someone had given me a plastic model of a horse, the sort known to millions of girls as a Breyer horse. The *Wall Street Journal* reports that “the plastic toy horse model industry, of which Breyer is the main manufacturer, had sales of more than \$50 million last year.” Ninety-five percent of the collectors of these figurines are girls, and the horses are sculpted almost exclusively by women. “Apparently, only women know what women want when it comes to modeled horses.”⁴ Both girls who ride real horses and the millions who can’t afford to, collect these plastic toys. I wanted to make valuable art about these girls and their passion. To elevate this hollow, mass-produced plastic toy, the young girl’s object of desire, to the status of art history, I cast it in solid bronze—which Degas had called “the medium for eternity.” Looking at public sculptures of male military heroes I found that their horses are frequently stallions, which reinforces the association with male virility, power, stature, status, and victory. My Breyer horses are small-scale solid-bronze editions made in four different versions of equine sexual status: *Stallion*, *Gelding*, *Mare*, and *Foal* (1999). In all my horse work, I investigate adolescent female desire and the love that dare not speak its name—“horse love.”

In *Tack Room*, I was spending time in the barn. I got to sneak into the “big house” with the *Pony Tales* installation. I wanted to zoom back in space and look at the entire property, so I developed a new series of luxury real-estate paintings,

4. Karin Winegar, “A Model Horse Stampede,” *The Wall Street Journal*, September 24, 1999, W19-C.

Patricia Cronin. \$3,500,000
 (Figure Eight Island), 2000. Oil on
 linen, 9 x 11 in. (22.9 x 28 cm).
 Courtesy of the artist.



inspired by Sotheby's Realty advertisements. Each one is very small, no larger than nine by eleven inches, because I wanted to emphasize their intimate, rare quality. The title of each painting is the price and location of the property. When I think about them historically, they conjure up images of Dutch seventeenth-century landowners and their houses. It was very important to me that the vantage point of the source photos be aerial. Rather than the real-estate agent driving up and snapping a photo, the aerial view requires hiring a plane, a pilot, and a specialized aerial photographer. This was the most expensive resource material I've ever worked with. My feet are on the ground; these properties are otherworldly and beyond reach.

In all my work I construct a critical vision of a life and lifestyle that are beyond the means of most Americans, but desired by many. The underlying content of this work is sexuality, class, longing, and aspiration. When class is addressed in the art world, it is often in the context of exoticized poverty. I'm from a very modest working-class Irish background, born and raised in the New England Rust Belt. People who see this work ask me, "Aren't you just endorsing Ralph Laurenism and the capitalist way?" I respond, "You know, Ralph Lauren's real name is Ralph Lipschitz. He grew up poor in the Bronx. If it's good enough for him and it's good enough for Oprah Winfrey, I don't see why it can't be good enough for me."

Patricia Cronin is an artist based in New York, where she teaches at Columbia University and the School of Visual Arts. Her most recent work, *Memorial to a Marriage* (2000–2002) will be exhibited at Grand Arts, Kansas City, April 5–May 25, 2002, and will travel to the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, Connecticut, in summer 2002.