

Art in America

INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

October 2004



View of Patricia Cronin's exhibition "The Domain of Perfect Affection," 2004, at the University at Buffalo Art Gallery.

BUFFALO

Patricia Cronin at the University at Buffalo Art Gallery

"The Domain of Perfect Affection," the title of an exhibition of Patricia Cronin's work in various mediums from 1993-2003, was the nickname Rosa Bonheur, one of the great horse painters of the 19th century (and a lesbian), gave to her country home in Fontainebleau. Many of Cronin's own horse paintings from the mid- to late 1990s were on view here, pale watercolors on paper, and 13 oils on small square or tondo-shaped canvases framed and installed along two walls decked out in a homey floral paper. There was also a reinstallation of the artist's freestanding *Tack Room* (1997-98), stocked with an array of her personal riding gear, awards, posters and clippings, as well as old equestrian magazines, porno of sorts to teenage girls with this particular obsession. Cronin once numbered among them, a kind of modest means consumed not only with the animals- as testified by the loving particular-

ity of her horses, each a named portrait (Peppermint, Harry, Roscoe, Top Shelf, ect.) some known to the artist and others borrowed from the magazines)- but also with the trappings of wealth and privilege that horse culture brings.

Cronin's class fantasies bloomed in a series, painted in 2000, of seven small, virtuoso landscapes of tony estates. These aerial views of absurdly perfect domains are titled with the prices they were selling for in the fancy realtors' catalogues from which Cronin lifted them. There is \$20,000,000 (*Bedford*), for example, a villa on a manicured property on which horses might well flourish, or \$15,000,000 (*Southampton*), a rambling waterfront home framed by stretches of blue ocean.

A group of untitled gouaches from the mid-'90s, showing Cronin and her lover, the artist Deborah Kass, having sex, brought to fruition the sub-rosa eroticism percolating in the adolescent tack room. The point of view is Cronin's, but neither woman's face is shown, with the viewer placed unnervingly cup close, in the midst of the action (alluding to the aggressive intimacy of Courbet's 1866 *Origin of the World*). The artist Joan Sernmel set the precedent in her similar, larger 1970s paintings of male-and-female couples and

self-portraits. Cronin revisited the theme during the heyday of identity art, and her gouaches became well known in the area of queer esthetics. Glimpsed on a wall just beyond another bearing the muscular flank or neck of a horse, the naked stretches of human flesh fringed by pubic hair or punctuated by a sex toy are weirdly similar to the equine bodies, making a special sort of sense.

More recently, Cronin has garner attention for *Monument to a Marriage* (2002), an over-lifesize marble funerary monument of herself and Kass placed on a plot designated for their remains in Woodlawn Cemetery, in the Bronx. The sculpture shows the naked, embracing pair in bed, lightly draped by a coverlet, in Victorian style. In the exhibition, the piece was perhaps over represented by smaller bronze versions, a plaster maquette, a giant photo mural on cloth and a handsome new series of six inkjet prints. Given current events, the legalization of a "domain of perfect affection" is tantalizingly within reach of those who, like Cronin, might enjoy it while they are still among the living.

- Faye Hirsch