

CRITIC'S DIARY

A Year in the Life: Tropic of Painting

A wide-ranging look at the 1993-94 season reveals that despite rumors of its death, painting is alive and well in New York, where stylistic variations continue to flourish.

BY JERRY SALTZ

Category IV. Our Bodies, Our Selves, You Asshole



Patricia Cronin: Untitled #37, watercolor, 12 by 17 inches, Courtesy Trial Balloon.

While these practiced professionals were pushing their art further, a number of younger artists - mostly women in their 30s - were proving that performance art, photography and sculpture aren't the only mediums capable of making art "about the body" or dealing with corporeal politics. Sexuality, gender, eroticism and developmental psychology have become subjects, as well, for painters who have zeroed in on the body, dissecting it in extreme close-up, deforming it, stylizing it or making it the literal site of confrontation. Many of these artists have an unapologetic in-your-face anger or audacity: a sense of "here we are, deal with it or die." Much of this work is accusatory.

Patricia Cronin's (Trial Balloon) pornographic photographs had been popping up in group shows for a season or so and I always thought them uninteresting as anything other than sexy pictures. Last year, however, Cronin unveiled a group of exquisitely rendered, small watercolor close-ups of two women making love. The bodies were lovingly depicted in gynecological detail, seen with strap-on dildos while hands fondle breasts and tongues lick labia. The point of view of each image was that of one of the participants. In other words, Cronin painted things you could only see if you were doing them. This lesbian viewpoint may seem obvious, but so are most really good ideas.