



# **BROOKLYN RAIL**

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE **NOVEMBER** 2012

# Patricia Cronin

## WITH PHONG BUI

While preparing for her forthcoming solo show *Dante: The Way of All Flesh* at fordProject (November 8 – December 21, 2012) Patricia Cronin welcomed *Rail* publisher Phong Bui to her Gowanus studio one late Sunday morning to view the new body of work and to discuss her art and life.

**PHONG BUI (RAIL):** You are one of very few artists whose bibliography is vaster than your exhibition history. How do you account for this? *[Both laugh.]*

**PATRICIA CRONIN:** Yes, it's true. You make the work you believe in and occasionally when people want to show it, they show it. But whenever my work is shown, whether in solo or group shows, writers have always responded to it. The imbalance is interesting. Lee Bontecou, my professor when I was in graduate school at Brooklyn College, used to tell me: "Make the best decisions for the work." And that's what I've done. I haven't thought about the reception of the work, which can be very deceptive and unpredictable. Instead, it should only be about you, the work, and the history of art of the past as well as the present day. I've tried to focus on those conditions, and I've kept reminding myself that the artist's job is to look out, to see the world as incomplete, then try to complete it in my studio.

**RAIL:** Before going to Brooklyn College for graduate school you went to Rhode Island College.

**CRONIN:** Yes. It's a small state school on the other side of Providence from RISD. One of my professors, the painter Don Smith, who used to show with Allan Stone Gallery in New York in the '70s, nominated me for the Yale Norfolk Fellowship Program, and I was accepted in the summer of '85. It was an important experience because it was there that I met other young artists from all over the country and from abroad and realized New York is where it's all happening. I thought, okay, this is great. I came back from the program then immediately applied to graduate school and moved to New York.



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

**RAIL:** Why Brooklyn College? Just because it's in New York?

**CRONIN:** Because both Philip Pearlstein and Lee Bontecou were teaching there. One is an inventive figurative painter, and the other a formidable abstract sculptor, so between the two of them, they fed the different sides of my brain. Also, this is the mid '80s when there were very few art schools that had female full professors that were as highly accomplished as Lee. Most others only had adjuncts who taught sporadically. I felt lucky to have studied with her for two years. Apart from the formal and technical issues, which I learned from each of them, the essential thing was they were exhibiting their works, so we all would go to their shows then we would go to the after parties or dinners at their lofts. That's how I got to experience first hand how they talked about art and what they looked at and how they spent their time. I got to see what it was like to be a living artist. And I thought, okay, and I just followed what they did. It wasn't about money; it was really about the work. So there was a value system that was woven into my formative thinking, which still is very present in how I relate everything to the work.

**RAIL:** Bontecou's retrospective at MoMA in 2004 was an inspiring example for sure.

**CRONIN:** Yes. Her work changed so much throughout her life. And she followed every aesthetic and formal curiosity she had. She just didn't care about the marketplace; she forged ahead with works she knew people might have a difficult time comprehending. This is certainly true of the vacuum-formed plastic flowers and fish of the late '60s. When people didn't like certain work, it didn't deter her. She never made work to fulfill the viewers' expectations.

**RAIL:** In your essay "What a Girl Wants," published in the Winter 2001 *Art Journal*, you named both Joan Semmel and Carolee Scheemann as influences on your thinking about how to infuse art and personal politics in a way that can become self-fulfilling as well as universally appealing. Did you discover them during graduate school or after?

**CRONIN:** I got to know Joan and her work when she was one of the resident artists at Skowhegan when I was a student there in the summer of 1991. Just as both Pearlstein and Bontecou influenced different sides of my development as a young artist, at that time Semmel and Schneemann were equally important to my work. Then, right after Skowhegan, one of the fellow artists, Ellen Canter, and I co-curated this exhibition called *Coming to Power: 25 Years of Sexually Explicit Art by Women*, which showed at David Zwirner in 1993. We essentially started calling up every artist that



Patricia Cronin, "Memorial To A Marriage," 2002. Carrara marble, over lifesize. Cronin-Kass plot, Woodlawn Cemetery, Bronx, NY. Image courtesy of the artist.





Patricia Cronin, "Untitled," 2012. 60 x 40", watercolor on paper. Image courtesy of fordProject.



made work that would fit into this particular construct and visiting them at their studios. We were interested in sexually explicit art from different disciplines—painting, sculpture, photography, and performance made by women of different generations, ethnicities, and sexual orientations to highlight a fuller expression of what female sexuality really was. And you just weren't seeing that anywhere else if only men were in control of this imagery. That's how I met Carolee and then we became friends. She's magnificent all around. Amazing energy, great spirit, great intellect. A volume of her correspondence, edited by Kristine Stiles, which Duke University Press published two years ago, is phenomenal.

**RAIL:** I couldn't agree more. Although Semmel's paintings are particularly interesting in the context of your work because of the way she treats the figure like a sensuous yet erotic landscape.

**CRONIN:** Yes. Semmel's treatment of the figure—the gaze directed at either her own body or her lover's—was her challenge to the dominant patriarchal portrayal of the passive female nude. This was the perfect vehicle for me to then start addressing lesbian visibility within erotic spaces. So much lesbian pornography is made by straight men for straight men: they're both the creators and the consumers. My question was: what do you do if you're one of these women *and* you're the cultural producer? How does that change how things look? So I adapted Semmel's heterosexual view of things—feminist-heterosexual—into a female-homosexual-feminist view. It's my way of reversing the content while emulating the formal structure.

**RAIL:** Which began first with the erotic polaroids and watercolors. In this period you not only utilized cropping and extreme close-ups, but also assimilated a pre-Photoshop cut-and-paste into many of the images.

**CRONIN:** Yes, long before such programs were available on the computer. Those pieces were in every sense my homage to the first generation of women artists like Louise Bourgeois, Nancy Spero, Hannah Wilke, Carolee Schneemann, and a few others who paved the way in our constant struggle for visibility and power. I started the watercolors in the following year, with the same concept, though they were much more explicit in the sense that they focused solely on the love-making of two women. But I finished that series in '95 and went back to focusing on oil paintings.

**RAIL:** On portraits of horses' heads.

**CRONIN:** Exactly.

**RAIL:** In the "What a Girl Wants" essay you also spoke of the effect a Marlboro cigarette ad with a horse jumping off a cliff against a bright and glowing sunset had on you. This experience somehow compelled you to reconnect to your childhood obsession of drawing horses.

**CRONIN:** It was a huge ad of a single horse, no rider, jumping off a cliff into a blazing sunset without any text, painted on the side of an entire building I could see from my TriBeCa studio. At first, I thought, the horse is such a clichéd symbol. Then I remembered Susan Rothenberg used the image of the horse as formal device in her paintings. Deborah Butterfield had sculpted them. Every small town's museum in the United States owns one. I also remembered my favorite female painter of the 19th century Rosa Bonheur's landmark painting "The Horse Fair." After the Mapplethorpe scandal in 1989 everyone started posting exhibitions signs saying "not suitable for children or viewers under a certain age" if there were sexually explicit materials on view. I was soon labeled a lesbian sex artist. But I thought, we're all more than who we sleep with. I was trying to address a specific idea, that being the conceptual and personal and political ideas in those erotic watercolors, which evoke the sensual power of female autonomy, sexuality, body language, desire, and so on, seen through different parts of the body without the faces.

**RAIL:** Then you painted the reverse: only faces, no bodies.

**CRONIN:** Yes, and horse portraits! But addressing a lot of the same concepts. And they were installed as one coherent solo style installation, not standalone objects, at Brent Sikkema in 1997, when the gallery was on Broadway—where the H&M is now. The salon style hanging of the 50 paintings echoed a kind of teenage girl bedroom aesthetic teeming with desire and longing of a different kind, but was also about my class aspirations. Albeit, run amok. I mean, who gets their portrait painted? Wealthy people. And what kind of wealth would be required to have a living room filled with portraits of presumably the 50 horses you own?

**RAIL:** I like Helen Molesworth's description of your *Harriet Hosmer: Lost and Found Series* (2004 – 2009), an illustrated/appropriated catalogue raisonné of possibly the first professional female sculptor, originally shown at the Brooklyn Museum in 2009 before travelling to the Newcomb Art Gallery at Tulane University. She thought the work was "sweet" and "serious." Decidedly not "ironic." She thought of it as a performative project, beyond being an act of appropriation, in that you took on the roles of both a curator and an art historian, even though you are

neither, professionally. Were you aware from the outset that the project would entail such complexities?

**CRONIN:** Absolutely. Although I'm not an art historian I have always been a great student of art history. While I was doing research on my "Memorial to a Marriage" sculpture, I poured through every history of sculpture book I could get my hands on and came across these two marble sculptures "Beatrice Cenci" and "Tomb of Judith Falconnet," and thought, oh these are beautiful, I wonder who made them? I read the name Harriet Hosmer at the bottom of the page, then I said to myself, "why is it that I have never heard of her?" I knew right then and there that the world outside is incomplete. There was only one biography on her at one point, and nothing else. We've got the market place (sales) and we've got academia (scholarship), and these two intersect in a catalogue raisonné, the complete scholarly archive of an artist's production. So I immediately began doing the research for my catalogue raisonné. Since a legitimate publisher won't hire a Ph.D. art historian and pay them a salary for five to 10 years, which is what it usually takes to do a catalogue raisonné, I decided to do it for her. But as an artist. The first thing I did was paint a watercolor of the book cover, then a title page and began to work on the text; it required an unbelievable amount of detective work to hunt down every object Hosmer ever made. Besides the proper title, date, size, medium, and signatures on the works, it also included the provenance, the succession of ownership, exhibitions, bibliography/reviews, and then more scholarly text about the subject, where it fit in Hosmer's production, artistic and/or literary inspirations, and then my version of art criticism. And then for the image, I painted a monochromatic watercolor of every neoclassical marble and/or bronze sculpture she made. I wanted the institutional critique to be legible—I



Patricia Cronin, "The Sleeping Faun," 2006. 12 x 15". Watercolor on paper. Image courtesy of the artist.



Patricia Cronin, "Untitled Bleach Portraits," 2012. Bleach on colored paper, 14 x 10" each. Image courtesy of fordProject.

wanted it to be apparent that this was being made by an artist, not by the people that should have made this.

**RAIL:** That's terrific. The 19th century is so intense.

**CRONIN:** It's true. With "Memorial to a Marriage," I needed a nationalist form to talk about a federal failure of not allowing gay people to get married. You know, equal protection under the law? Nineteenth-century American neoclassical sculpture was a perfect form and vehicle for it, given the use of imperial iconography such as the Lincoln Memorial. Just a side note: Hosmer's proposal for the Lincoln memorial was much more interesting and ambitious than Daniel Chester French's. Death entered into it because that was all I was legally afforded: wills, healthcare, proxies, power of attorney documents, it's all about the end of life. It's not about living a life together. It's about if one of us gets incapacitated or dies. That's how I'm going to talk about gay marriage. It brought me to the 19th century nationalist form, the garden rural cemetery movement, it all came together.

**RAIL:** You've reversed the order of the form. In my last interview with Gary Stephan, he talked about how the paintings of David and Ingres as presentations of power; the viewers are necessarily subservient to what they see. So you are manipulating that order, in a way.

**CRONIN:** Yes. What I'm saying is, if all you'll give me is death, I'm going to turn death around and give it back to you in a way that's politically critical and beautiful. Hopefully it gets under your skin. We think we define ourselves when actually the law does.

**RAIL:** When did you meet your longtime partner and now wife Deborah Kass?

**CRONIN:** When I was co-curating *Coming to Power*. I had known her work from the early and mid-'80s, when I first started visiting New York from New England. I remembered seeing her work at Baskerville and Watson Gallery. At the time Deb was involved with the Women's Action Coalition, a feminist political activist group of which she was one of the co-founders. Their direct actions creatively addressed Republican politics, art world misogyny, abortion rights, etc. I started going regularly to the meetings and we struck up a friendship. Also, I interviewed Deb for an issue of *M/E/A/N/I/N/G* magazine around the same time.

**RAIL:** Was it a gradual or immediate attraction?

**CRONIN:** It was immediate, for me at least. [*Laughs.*]

**RAIL:** "Memorial to a Marriage," which is permanently installed at Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx, is, besides being a social and political critique, one of their most popular sites. Was it the first overtly queer funeral monument?

**CRONIN:** Well, there is the gravesite of Leonard Matlovich, the first gay service member to openly out himself, for which he was less-than-honorably discharged. This was in the '70s, when the military banned gays from serving their country. Matlovich is buried in the Congressional Cemetery with the most amazing tombstone inscription: "When I was in the military, they gave me a medal for killing two men and a discharge for loving one." Whenever I talk about my work I always show this, along with Felix Gonzalez-Torres's billboards of the pillows. Both the tombstone and the pillow are so cold. Think, for example, of when you just get out of bed and how the warm temperature of the pillow dissipates even though the impression is still there—the vacuum, the missing people. Besides reinvigorating traditional forms and injecting my specific contemporary political content, I think the main question all throughout my work—my career—has been: whose life has value? Whose body has value? And who decides? And what does that mean, and how does that feel? And this new work that's loosely inspired by Dante's *Inferno*, is saying: *this* is what it feels like. Previously I've addressed very political, social justice themes that some people don't want to hear about or know about, but I've tried to say them to the best of my formal skill set. Even though I didn't want to illustrate the *Inferno*, I read every translation I could get my hands on. I became preoccupied with 14th-century Italy, and how we're still plagued by so many of the same social ills: war, religious hypocrisy and strife, corrupt politicians, unstable economic markets, disease, natural disasters. I mean, it's just astounding that so little has changed, because human beings don't really change that much. While reading the text and various translations over and over and over again, I also looked at almost seven centuries of artists' interpretations, everything from early illuminated manuscripts, to the illustrations by William Blake and Gustave Dore and endless other artists, including Robert Rauschenberg. I've taken some of the poses from illuminated manuscripts, some from art history, some from just from my imagination, and some

directly from the text. Judas, Brutus, and Cassius hanging from Lucifer's mouth—this is exactly as Dante describes.

Maybe it's just our obsession with the 24-hour news cycle, but you cannot get the tiniest snippet of news without hearing some horrible story about some corrupt politician being caught and embarrassed with another sex or corruption scandal, not to mention the fundamentalist tendencies among different religions all over the world. So, since the church and the state were the two big entities whose wrongdoing most obsessed Dante, I just started looking at all of these portraits of different clergy and statesmen today, which were intended to show along with the oil paintings. There are faces of Jamie Dimon or Bishop Egan, for example. And I'm looking at their portraits, but I'm painting them with bleach on these orange and red pieces of paper, but the bleach is clear, so it's almost like painting with an invisible medium. So I can't see what I'm doing when I'm painting it.

By the time the bleach reaches the value it's going to be, depending on the concentration of it, it's too late, you can't change it. So all of their faces end up slightly distorted and deformed and contorted, which is exactly what Dante would have liked. He thought these people were so horrible in life they shouldn't be famous in death. Dante's literary concept called *contrapasso* is about the appropriate, equal and opposite punishment in the after life for the crime committed on earth. Poetic justice, and yes, perhaps revenge.

**RAIL:** You're doing the opposite of what Leon Golub did with the seemingly harmless faces of world leaders, where their monstrosity is concealed. You, instead, expose their grotesque qualities in both the material and technique you chose to work with as well as the resultant imagery. You actually make them look earthly.

**CRONIN:** Yes! What do they deserve on their faces? Bleach and acid. [*Laughs.*] I mean, look at how smug and demented Tom Delay looks. Ninth circle "shades," as Dante referred to the sinners, committed the worst crimes in his time and ours, betraying and abusing their faithful, their customers and their citizenry.

**RAIL:** Yes, definitely.

**CRONIN:** And the thing is, when I say Dante's *Inferno*, the ninth circle is the only one I'm really interested in. The first few—the sins of incontinence, appetite over reason: lust, gluttony, anger—exist intensely in all human beings. Heresy—it's complicated today especially if you're in a country with a state religion. That's a totally different thing. But the ninth circle: complex fraud, treachery, betrayal on the grandest scale—my bleach portraits are faces of people who have committed those crimes.

Ultimately, for me the artist's job is to look out at the world, and reflect. It's my particular job to tell the world what its like to be me right now. ☺