

INTERVIEW : Patricia Cronin



In February this year, the New Museum opened the much discussed and **ambiguously criticized** exhibit, “NYC 1993: Experimental, Jet Set, Trash and No Star,” a show featuring dozens of artists from the era of Gen-X and the culture wars, blue nail polish and grunge. Twenty years ago, one of those artists, **Patricia Cronin**, was just beginning her career with a Polaroid photograph series controversial for the portrayal of frank eroticism from a woman’s perspective, and alternative sexuality including same-sex twosomes and moresomes back in the day of the AIDS crisis and don’t-ask-don’t-tell.

On a rainy afternoon this March, Cronin toured me through her studio to talk about the work she made in that moment of America that was pre-iPhone, pre-9/11, and pre-Google, but post-Roe vs. Wade, post-Reagan, post-Cold War. She discussed, as well, her current work as a scholar resurrecting the legacy of the sculptor Harriet Hosmer, who was renowned in her day, though she’s now lost to the selective memory of history.

Cronin took a self-made career path that today seems almost impossible for most of the current 20-something creative set. Her studio with huge vertical windows and high ceilings on that rare quiet Brooklyn street emits an atmosphere of sanctuary. The space is occupied by bodies that are both sexy and – as Cronin will say herself, specifically of the Dante series, – heartbreaking. There are life-size macabre male figures writhing off their canvasses, a small pair of paper angel wings thrashing and fluttering in a current of air from the heater, and there are tables of Polaroids featuring the most intriguingly carnal acts. The fleshiness of Cronin’s paintings and photographs results in work that is less *depiction* and more *impression*, that is, the viewer does not passively view, but becomes implicated. It’s work that’s as uncomfortable as seductive, as witty as visceral, and while Cronin’s work decidedly reflects a lively engagement with the world that bore it, there are also deep strokes that touch upon the more intense themes –and anxieties and absences— of art and history.

Interview by Rachel Cole Dalamangas

So, tell me about the Polaroid pieces “Boys” and “Girls”, which are in the “NYC 1993: Experimental, Jet Set, Trash and No Star” exhibit at the New Museum now, right?

Well, in 1992 (and it’s still the same today), you could not see the full expression of female sexuality reflected in the culture. So my friend, artist Ellen Canter and I thought we would do something about it and started going to artist studios and putting this show together. It was called, “Coming to Power: 25 Years of Sexually X-plicit Art By Women” and we chose the artists, picked the pieces and pitched it to a lot of venues. David Zwirner presented it in 1993 and it included Louise Bourgeois, Yoko Ono, Marilyn Minter, Alice Neel, Carolee Schneemann, and Cindy Sherman, among others.

And this was your first big exhibition, the one that really put you into the game?

Yes. Actually, I was always kind of surprised no other gallerists ever picked up on these. It’s great that younger curators are interested in them. There’s politics, sexuality, my three girlfriends at the time and Madonna! [*points to Polaroid in “Girls”, in which a cardboard cutout of Madonna is visible*]. The Madonna image was a life-size marketing display cardboard cutout promoting her infamous Sex book and the film *Body of Evidence*. A friend of mine worked at a video store and I asked her if I could have it as soon as the store was done with it. I took it home on the subway and put her in my bed and that was it.

Yes!

Which was really fun.

You can’t turn down a life-size cutout of Madonna. Tell me a little bit about the process of the Polaroids. They look very candid. How orchestrated were they?

They’re not orchestrated at all. It’s not set-up photography. The curator, Sandra Firmin, has written about them and contextualized them as being made during the Culture Wars and in relationship to Robert Mapplethorpe and Catherine Opie, but without the distance or the safety of a studio shot. These are taken within the frenzy of participation. There’s something really at stake in these photographs. I’m a really good student of art history, art theory, and performance art of the 80s and 90s. It’s when I came up in the art world. I saw art moving away from these ideas and I wanted to test them. I was really interested in power and representation, feminism, and the gaze, but as a *lived* experience. Not just about how art history problematized the gaze in terms of allegory, but how /

am a woman, I was there, I took those photos, and now you are me as the viewer. It's the seeing eye being imbricated. It is an index of a feminist narrative. Not THE feminist narrative, just A feminist narrative that just happens to be MINE.

One thing about these works is that they interrogate that boundary between another industry that is short on female gaze, which is pornography, and what is the difference between porn and art. Was that a question for you?

Oh yes, most sexually explicitly imagery, whether it's pornography or art or that blurry space in between is basically produced by men for men. Back in '93 everything was so politicized. There was a recession, scapegoats were needed, and many people in non-hegemonically normative bodies were demonized to consolidate the conservative electoral base. AIDS was an epidemic, research barely existed and politicians wouldn't say the word. Abortion rights were at the front line, how to control women, very little has changed. That we're still living in the culture wars is frightening. Along with other feminist activists, I was arrested for closing down the Holland Tunnel when the Supreme Court Casey decision came out. There were very few boundaries between the bedroom and the streets. Between ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), WHAM (Women's Health Action and Mobilization), and WAC (Women's Action Coalition) and other political activist groups that everyone I knew was participating in, and what you were doing in your bedroom or with your friends, there was no barrier, no walls. It was all the same thing, and that's what I think you can really see in this work.

That's what I found interesting about them – there's this confrontational sexuality, but there are elements of aesthetics that are at work and there is an eye that is tracing beauty, but it's also all so unapologetically political and there's this way that there's almost no boundaries.

But they're not abject. I know *50 Shades of Grey* is a very popular book this year, and I just want to say – this is no *50 Shades of Grey*. I don't understand women choosing abjection. I just don't get it. Well, I understand there's a lot of money in it, whichever way you do it, in your professional life or in your personal life. That's how the culture encourages and rewards women. My work is all about female agency. Which doesn't exclude a sense of humor, by the way. In the "Boys" piece, which is much more about S&M than the other, there are a couple of fun moments. I've got 'safe sex practices' that are hysterically funny like boiling your dildos so that they're sanitized.

Was that a thing in the 90s?

Yes, everything had to be very clean and if you participated in any S&M activities. Everything had to be washed in hydrogen peroxide. So cleansing is actually part of it. But also, the images with the TV set – it's Bush Headquarters, which is obviously a double-entendre, but it's also actually George Herbert Walker Bush (with Barbara next to him) conceding to William Jefferson Clinton on election night in November 1992. Dan Quayle is in another image.

Ohhhhh.

A Clinton Administration was what a lot of us were hoping for, because the political climate had been so oppressive under Bush and Reagan. And in the midst of a recession, no artist was risking a financially lucrative art career if they actually had the courage to speak the truth. I think that's what my images do. Now, many people are less inclined. But there was something about back then that was incredibly liberating you could actually just tell your truth. And then someone would have the equal courage to put it up on their walls. Hopefully, people will become more interested in that kind of direct communication again.

One thing I was thinking about is that there is a sense of beauty as defined by the female gaze here. I don't want to canonize the female gaze, but I am curious from your perspective, what are characteristics of the female gaze?

I can't get into a debate about Lacan, Mulvey and Foucault; all I can tell you about is my female gaze. And within these S&M performances in the "Boys" piece, they were the exact opposite of everything else I've ever experienced in my entire life. In this relationship, women are in total control and it is a vantage point that most people don't see in male/female relationships. I took these images from that very rare subject position and I found it incredibly powerful.

I mean, there's an awareness of power. That's what I notice about these, there's very much an awareness of where power is and it's not exploitive, it's not abject as you say, but these [images] are very much aware of power.

The same is true with the "Girls" piece; I'm forcing the viewer to assume my visual subject position, to assume a lesbian body. That's a very specific female gaze!

So how present do you think the female gaze is now, compared to when these were made?

I don't think it's very present at all. But I like movies from the 40s when women were smart, fast-talking, and [*snaps fingers three times*] . . . savvy and sassy, you know what I mean. Oh, but I just saw Kathy Bigelow's *Zero Dark Thirty* and I thought it was very much from a feminist perspective and a great film. It has stayed with me. The solemnity of the narrative is told with arresting visuals. She should have won the Oscar for Best Director. Can you believe she's the only woman to ever win it? This is 2013. And I thought the art world was bad. And, I really identified with the lead character.

Where does your interest in the body come from?

Being raised Irish Catholic in New England, I'm hardwired this way, and I'm simply obsessed. There's the natural world of the body, flesh and bone, blood and tears, and there's the unnatural world beyond, and you're trained to believe in both of them. I also think it's where my passion for social justice comes from.

One thing that I think about as a female writer is have times changed. I mean, things are different, but it's all still there, so have we just remixed it in a way that's appropriate to us?

There's so much resistance to female agency and authority. This might officially be a "timeless" theme. I wouldn't say it's demoralizing, but it is unbelievably depressing.

One thing I think about as a woman and a writer and as someone who follows art, is when I see or read work by women, I feel like part of the problem in engaging in political subject matter is that you risk being reactionary and not a voice that's at the table. And I see your work as politically in-your-face, though I don't see it as reactionary. It's carving a place for itself.

Let's start with everything is political. Then, of course my work is politically motivated, too. But I think the reason it doesn't feel reactionary is because I'm always looking for a trifeckta; the right image or form for a very specific content and matching that up with just the perfect material. So it's really conceptual, *and* engaging and satisfying to look at. If you take away any one third of this equation, the

work should fail completely. Sometimes the work takes the form of a three-ton Neo-classical marble statue and sometimes it's writing a catalogue raisonné and other times it's figurative, expressive paintings, all to address my specific political content. I mean, I'm obsessed with the body and what it's like to inhabit one. How we succeed and how we fail as human beings. Whose body has value, who gets to decide, what that feels like when other people decide the value of your body and what the cultural repercussions are of constantly being ascribed a certain political status. I'm really glad you see these works as not being reactionary. I just think it's the artist's job to tell you what's it like to be "me" right now.

And one way to do that is to look back at history, like I did with my interest, a trilogy really, in Harriet Hosmer, the first professional female sculptor. First there were the watercolors of her Neo-classical marble statues, then *Harriet Hosmer: Lost and Found, A Catalogue Raisonné* that I wrote and now the last part – *The Zenobia Scandal: A Meditation on Male Jealousy*, published by the forthcoming issue of zing.

One thing that stuck out to me about the Zenobia project was a quote from Joy Kasson, which was, "Hoping for popular approval, Hosmer did not defy her audience's expectations about woman's nature, but she did try to propose a different perspective on the captivity theme." Do you think compromise is something that is necessary in some way?

It's so interesting. Kasson is talking about "Zenobia in Chains," an over life-size marble statue of Queen Zenobia, the Ruler of Palmyra (modern day Syria). I don't think she compromised with "Zenobia" at all actually, because when Hosmer picked Zenobia as a subject, all of her male counterparts, including writers, sculptors and painters, chose Cleopatra. And we all know what happens to Cleopatra. She commits suicide instead of being captured by the Roman Army. Zenobia, after her husband was assassinated, rules for seven years in proxy for her son, conquers Egypt and most of Asia Minor. It was astounding what she was able to do in the 3rd century. She was educated in philosophy and mathematics, and was a brilliant military strategist. Eventually she was defeated by Emperor Aurelian, but doesn't commit suicide, and they march her through the streets of Rome in gold chains as a war trophy. But the dignity and the solemnity with which Hosmer portrays Zenobia somberly moving forward is amazing, instead of Cleopatra on her deathbed. I mean, Zenobia talks the Emperor out of killing her and ends up getting remarried, has five more children and lives out her days in Tripoli outside of Rome as a diplomat – it's unbelievable. Hosmer chose Zenobia as a subject when all the men are choosing Cleopatra – that's how they saw women. Hosmer chose to depict a strong woman ruler at a moment of potential humiliation but through her own agency persists, perseveres and prospers. This subject choice is intentional. So no, I don't think that was compromising.

It's an ambiguous piece. I've looked at [photographs of "Zenobia in Chains"] over and over this week, and I can read it so many different ways. There's ways to read it as an objectification, a subjugation of women, and there's even that very cynical idea that she has more value as a queen.

Yes, you can certainly read it as 'we won, the enemy Queen is our war trophy.'

Right, it's not just any woman in chains, it's a woman with more 'value' in chains. And there's the reading of the woman with dignity even in humiliation, and I think humiliation is such a huge cultural force with women. We even see it with pop icons. We love to see a beautiful woman fall apart in media. I'm thinking like, Britney Spears going down.

I think the culture at large loves heaping huge rewards on women who can't handle it. It feels almost premeditated in a sadistic way.

Right, and then it's sort of a public spectacle.

Oh yeah, because it's demoralizing to other women or at least a warning to others, don't try to compete in the big leagues.

One thing that really interested me about the project is that Harriet Hosmer's story is sort of this female revenge narrative in a way. You discuss in the introduction the issue of "eradication from history," so I love this idea of resurrecting someone or something.

I diplomatically call my Hosmer Catalogue Raisonné an "institutional critique." It's not *Django Unchained*. It's more about justice than revenge. There's a dearth of scholarship on important female artists and when I realized how famous Hosmer was in her time, how critically acclaimed, winning all the major commissions and exhibiting in all the international expositions (like our biennales) and that she didn't have a catalogue raisonné? I decided to make one for her. In my research for the catalogue raisonné, I discovered this whole scandal instigated by jealous male sculptors. My discovery of this scandal happened at the exact same time as something very similar was happening to me: an ugly vendetta by jealous people I had considered close friends. Not unlike Hosmer, it was also a bitter unsuccessful old white man. While I was trying to figure out how and why Harriet Hosmer got erased from history, I learned from what was happening to me exactly how people try to wipe you out: destroy your reputation, damage you financially so you just disappear. Thankfully, the next year, I won the Rome Prize and was living at the American Academy in Rome. I was already working on Hosmer's catalogue raisonné, and the more I read about her Zenobia scandal, I thought, wow, this is a really good story. It's not right for the catalogue raisonné but I should do something with this because this still happens to women and so many women I know. Since all the characters involved, whether it was Henry James or Nathaniel Hawthorne or Elizabeth Barrett Browning, were major figures in the arts, I realized, I didn't need to write this narrative. I just let them speak in their own words, friends and foes alike. So I sequenced their quotes to chronicle this event and Hosmer's clever response that also really resonated with me. It was a great creative vehicle to exorcise everything I'd been going through. Isn't that what artists do?

For those of us who are educated in our areas of expertise, but don't have lots of money, what seems implied in your project of Hosmer as well as Zenobia, and an idea that I really like, is that maybe we can rewrite the canon.

I would love that. Nothing would make me happier.

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