

Patricia Cronin at Wooster Gardens

In this, her first solo exhibition, Patricia Cronin moved beyond the work for which she had already received favorable attention—tight close-up watercolor views of sex between two women. Cronin jettisoned this subject, concentrated on a different medium and shifted her compositional focus in paintings of horses based on magazine photographs and on studies from life.

In the main gallery were 47 horse heads painted in oil on rectangular and oval canvases a foot or two tall. These works had a cumulative effect, almost as if they composed a single piece. All had the same restricted compass and all were painted in the same manner. However, a checklist went to great pains to diagram and number each painting, so that the viewer could attach the appropriate name to each horse. Looking at these works, one thought of the stereotypical passion of young girls for horses; but the works also evoked the mythological steeds of Apollo, or Hippolytos taking his fateful ride by the seashore. Horses represent power, speed and, with that, the first flights of youth beyond the comfortable, known environment—which could be taken as an analysis of Cronin's own efforts.



Patricia Cronin: *Dandy*, 1996,
watercolor on paper, 13 by 13 inches;
at Wooster Gardens

Although based on photographs, the work is not photo realist in its style. Usually the backgrounds are generalized. Sometimes a single, unmodulated color serves to signify a sky or stable. By retreating from the charged subject matter of her earlier work, Cronin foregrounds her craft and makes her new paintings colder, more distant and, in a way, more seasoned.

In *Cannon Ball*, Cronin dappled the horse's muzzle, pressing the paint in dabs of gray as well as laying down continuous, untroubled, strokes of brown and white. There is not much dimensionality to the image—it seems abstract, and consequently one becomes invested in the different types of strokes (which are plainly visible in all the works), *Cannon Ball* faces the viewer, her neck extending to the left. *Vamp* twists her head coyly to the right, delicate pink like a blush around her nostrils and eyes. Her dark brown mane streaks down, painted with panache. *Top Shelf* was one of the few paintings in the main gallery to give a sense of setting. Behind the horse's head and neck could be glimpsed foreground grass and an area of bare dirt before background trees and sky.

In the smaller of the gallery's two rooms were seven watercolors and one oil painting about 4 feet square, all of which depicted a horse in full, not just the head. The oil, *Cookie and Napoleon*, was a double portrait. These works seem liberated in comparison to the restrictions of format, focus, and size imposed on the works in the main room. One couldn't help remembering the interaction of body parts and the depiction of real but compressed space in Cronin's previous work. Both these fortes were sublimated in the horse cameos, while in the small gallery they remained refreshingly clear. One admired the boldness of Cronin's choices and her commitment to technique.

- Vincent Katz