

Deborah Kass studio, Brooklyn

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## A VISIT WITH DEB AND PATTIE by Charlie Finch

The January thaw brought us out to Brooklyn's Gowanus Canal and the adjoining studios of Deborah Kass and Patricia Cronin.

Having a writer's prejudice against the use of text in painting, we were initially taken aback by Kass' new body of work. But this foremost interpreter of Warhol through a womanly lens can be very persuasive.

"I love Broadway musicals and all styles of post-war American art," Deb told us, as we stared slack-jawed at the most complete *mélange* of Ab-Ex and Pop styles we'd ever seen in one atelier, each textually throating a different song or phrase.

Particularly poignant was a repeating march of the word "cojones" done in the grays and block-print style of Jasper Johns.

A dark panel painted a la On Kawara conjoined with a wispy bit of psychedelic smoke. The phrase: "Being Alive." Deborah pulled out a drawer of meticulous studies, preparations for her show at Germany's Ludwig Museum this summer.

We checked out a Barnett Newman *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue?* imprinted with the phrase "Oh God, I need this show," a mantra repeated in a radically different pop painting on the wall.

The sheer flat boldness of the new work spoke of puritan wistfulness and lost opportunities. The disparate styles surrounded us: Here a Guston, there a Robert Indiana.

Apropos of something, Kass told us, "I'm a cousin of Sandy Koufax," and we thought, "You are sure throwing us a curveball." So we parsed her radical but stylistically conservative change.

Well, Kass is telling us, "You can't run away from the history of art. It plays in our heads, Charlie, like a song on the radio, ever variegating, but there." "I'm a product of it, and if it oozes out into these strange new paintings, so be it." There's a whiff of the tombstone in all art praxis and our satisfaction in what we see is often stillborn.

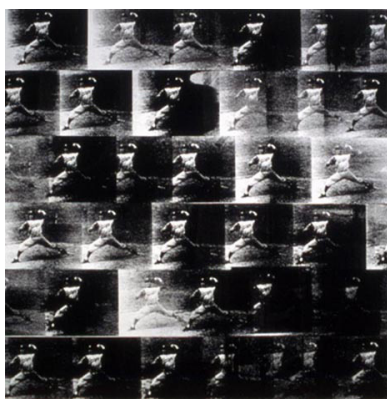
This challenging body of work should be shown in a gallery of infinite light and space until it plays like a sonata of American memory. Uncomfortable as some of these paintings made us feel, Deborah Kass has ripped off the Andy mask and shown us her soul.



Deborah Kass  
Painting with Balls  
2003



A flatfile of Deborah Kass studies



Deborah Kass  
Sandy Koufax #3  
1997



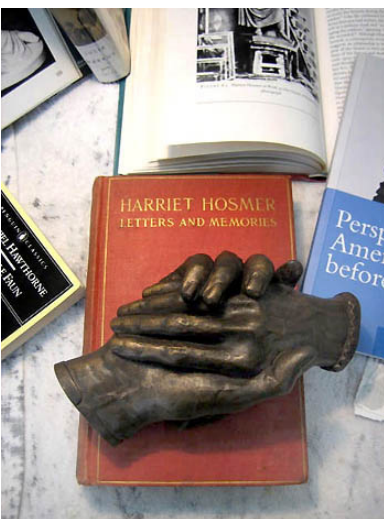
Patricia Cronin studio, Brooklyn



Patricia Cronin's map, marked with sites of sculptures by Harriet Hosmer



Patricia Cronin's Sleeping Faun watercolor, in progress



A model of Harriet Hosmer's Clasped Hands of the Brownings (1853) in Patricia Cronin's studio

Patricia Cronin, on the other hand, has accomplished nothing short of a small resurrection with her rediscovery of the 19th-century American sculptor Harriet Hosmer.

"She sold work for \$150,000, commissioned all over the world. She was a friend of Hawthorne and Henry James, and now she's completely forgotten."

Not any more. Pattie's studio is covered with her meticulous drawings of Hosmer's soft Neo-Classical pieces. Pushpins alight on maps of the world, each signifying the location of a Hosmer sculpture, which Cronin has visited, or plans to visit.

Pattie showed us a reproduction of two conjoining hands. "They actually sell this in the Metropolitan Museum for \$150. It's the hands of Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning."

Curiously, a picture of Hattie Hosmer strongly resembles the ebullient Ms. Cronin, an observation that delighted her.

"She did marble fauns and Perseus and Pucks. I'm planning rows of 30 Pucks in my installation, a la Vanessa Beecroft.

"There's one sculpture of Hattie's which has completely disappeared, a lifesized rendering of Maria Sofia, Queen of Naples, with whom Hattie had an affair."

Patricia unveiled a stunning clay figurine of an angelic woman draped in a toga.

"I've recreated it from descriptions in Harriet's letters, Charlie. But in my show, it's going to be a hologram!" Evanescent, like the spirit of a forgotten master.

"All my drawings on the wall, accompanied by the provenances of Hosmer's sculptures, will make up a catalogue raisonné from Hattie's perspective."

Deb Kass walked in. "When you come to our studios, Charlie, we throw you back into the '60s. With Pattie it's the 1860s, with me it's the 1960s." And as the three of us approach our own 60s, there's no doubting the will to experiment on new vistas on the part of these two mature, most beautiful stars.

CHARLIE FINCH is co-author of *Most Art Sucks: Five Years of Coagula* (Smart Art Press).

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