



# GIRLFRIENDS

UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL WITH ARTIST PATRICIA CRONIN.

Patricia Cronin is animated as she discusses her latest watercolors - close-ups of herself and her girlfriend making love. What grabs your attention is not so much the beautifully evoked naked bodies, but the point of view- one that you could only have if you were a participant in the act. There is something both enticing and distancing about these images: Breasts, shoulders, stomachs, vulvas - painted in delicate flesh tones - draw your attention, but ultimately you realized that this is their pleasure, not yours.

Although her work has been in several politically oriented exhibitions curated by Dan Cameron, Ronny Cohen and Nancy Spero, what may be more telling is the panel she organized at the Drawing Center, "Representing Lesbian Subjectivity." Cronin, 31, has dared to step beyond the politicized, polemical rhetoric of much gay-oriented art of the past 30 years to pursue the expression of intimacy. The joy she conveys in her work and in conversation is symptomatic of a "lighter" trend in certain art of the 90's. Many younger artists, like Lily van der Stokker, John Wells, and



Tabboo!, are presenting positive, uplifting images - whatever their social or sexual orientation - as opposed to rubbing our noses in dreariness, pain and the unfairness of it all. "Whenever anybody does anything that's even remotely sexual," states Cronin, "and they put it out on the marketplace, it's like holding up a mirror to everyone's sexual anxiety and morals. And whatever they have, that's what you hear back, told to you as fact."

Cronin takes Polaroids of herself and her girlfriend in bed, which she later uses as the basis for her watercolors. She works on several

pieces at once, beginning with light yellow paint (no pencil) to form the outlines, then fills it in with a variety of hard edge and diaphanous textures. She usually completes most of the painting at one sitting, then lets it sit for a day or two, allowing it to settle in her mind. "Amateurs and weekend painters have used watercolors a lot," Cronin explains. "It's very feminine and kind of devalued. It makes a beautiful object out of something that maybe people wouldn't want to look at as long."

Cronin, who grew up in New England and got her MFA from Brooklyn College, has painted larger oil paintings, done performances, even exhibited the Polaroids, but in the past two years, watercolors have become her most effective medium. About 2 by 3 feet, these works are certainly not dainty, esoteric bits of erotic. Cronin also introduces abstraction in her depictions of those bodily areas too close to stay in focus. "Now I'm painting more [of] what we can see when we're embracing, so they're becoming even more abstract." In one work (all are untitled), a bright, white breast hangs in front of a forearm and hand that disappears into the

observer's (your?) vagina. In the background, a calf and foot extend into blackness, while up close the second breast goes totally out of focus. It is often difficult to tell which way is up, since both women are generally in some sort of reclining position. One watercolor, though, looks down at two hands stimulating two vaginas, all the parts interlocking with a symmetry that resembles an Islamic motif.

One image Cronin is fond of - she has done several versions of it - uses her lover's



upside down form, legs in the air, while Cronin's own hands reaching from out of frame to touch her body. "My work is just about how much I love my girlfriend," she simply states.

*Richard Anderson Fine Arts, 476 Broome St. April 11-May 20; and the "Way Cool" show at Exit Art, 548 Broadway, April 29-July 15.*

BY VINCENT KATZ