

Sculpture

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New York
Patricia Cronin
White Columns
Patricia Cronin's Tack Room, installed in the garage space of White Column's new space in the meat packing district of Chelsea, is filled from ceiling to floor with all the equipment necessary for maintaining and riding a horse. There are saddles, blankets, bridles, helmets, brushes, ribbons, boots, and other gear, even straw on the floor scattered among stacks of horse magazines, horse calendars, ads for clothing, photos and paintings of horses, and even postcards depicting horses painted by Delacroix, Degas, and Rothenberg transform this small square room into a familiar yet somewhat private space. On a shelf near the entrance are books on technique, anatomy, and upkeep. Magazines dedicated to the breeding and training of horses are stacked alongside



novels and videos that narrate stories about the relationship between humans and horses. All that appears to be missing is the horse. Cronin's focus here is not on the animal, but rather on the personal and public discourses of gender, class, race, and sexuality that are encoded in the detritus of this specialized sport and leisure activity.

Cronin's milieu is decidedly female, an exclusive environment of adolescent girls and women. The artists includes herself in this social subset and she is seen mounted on standing by her horse in several leather framed photographs. The women on display around the room are all white and middle- or upper-class and they all exude a palpable sense of pride and ardor for their sport. In most of the images the women are casually posed and smiling, their bodies in framed intimacy with the bodies of their horses.

Traditionally the perforative act of riding has been aligned with the authority and leadership of men as visually represented in innumerable monuments of soldiers and statesmen, to mount a horse, to make its body and energy conform to the command of the hand and voice or the nudge of the heel, was the means whereby

nations and tribes were conquered and the order of patriarchy affirmed. When women rode, they sat sidesaddle for arranged pageants of display where they, like the horses they rode, became examples of property and propriety. In Cronin's installation, however, the women hold the reins. It is they who rule, they who are in control, their informal poses and casual postures an acknowledgment of power assumed and easily held.

This rupture of authorial code is enclosed however within elaborate rules of decorum and social ritual which are aimed at disguising the disconcerting implications of a woman or girl straddling a horse. Cronin's installation notes the ways in which access is admitted only to those who follow the established procedures for riding or jumping, to those who have or can afford the right equipment, to those whose horses fulfill acceptable guidelines of beauty, speed, and posture. The comparative analogy between women and horses, a script taken from popular culture and alluded to in countless movies and songs, becomes one more coded mechanism of social control that Cronin violates. Her women smile back at the viewer in beguiling ways as they parade by or sell riding breeches, the exchange of affection between themselves and their horses naturalized by enclosure within the tack room.

Indeed, in this space, pleasure and desire co-mingle with the hard work of horse grooming and gazes among women circulate freely. As they do, the arrangements of leather harnesses take on more sexualized possibilities and magazines with titles like *Stud*, *Spur*, and *Young Rider* or advertisements that read "Our Bottoms are Still Tops" serve up slyly humorous double entendres. Enveloping the audience in erotic play and alternative readings of what had seemed at first glance but an innocent evocation of equestrian life, Cronin reveals the disruptive potential of a place where power and fulfillment is derived, not from men, but from the enjoyment and leisure of women. -Susan Canning.