



Cooling, Janet (b. 1951)

by Susan Richards

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An audaciously pioneering artist, Janet Cooling has become recognized as a significant contemporary American painter. The recognition of her work has helped bring lesbian imagery into mainstream art.

Cooling was born on October 14, 1951 in Chester, Pennsylvania. She was educated at Pratt Institute (B. F. A., 1973) and the Art School of the Art Institute of Chicago (M. F. A., 1975).

Cooling began her career in the late 1970s and early 1980s exhibiting lesbian erotic paintings: portraits of lovers, self-portraits with her lover, and double portraits of gay and lesbian couples. This work is lyrical, evocative, intimate, and explicit. Cooling abandoned her erotic work in 1986 because of difficulties in exhibiting the paintings.

The sheer joy of sensuality continues to infuse her work, however, which is distinguished by the vibrant and visceral use of color and a complex interplay of abstraction and realism. In this work, urban landscapes, floating figures, empty dress forms reminiscent of shop windows with elegant evening gowns, androgynous suited figures, jazz musicians, and shoes are painted in surreal juxtapositions as if on a stage, framed by curtains that contain the action. It is as if the energy of the imagery and color would explode without the containment of the curtains.

Cooling's personal iconography includes animals that range from whimsical and playful to totemic, powerful and seductive. Art historical references abound in her paintings, which allude to female forms in earlier compositions but reinterpret them.

For example, Cooling's empty dress forms populate landscapes that echo Renaissance compositions, which assume the female form is viewed by a male painter, but which are given a new spin when seen through lesbian eyes.

In the mid-1990s, as a tenured professor in the Fine Art Department at San Diego State University, Cooling returned to her roots and again began painting works with overtly lesbian erotic content. The lesbian content in these new paintings is presented in an even stronger and more powerfully sophisticated way than was the case in the earlier work.

On the basis of her powerful series, the "Paintings from Hell's Kitchen," Cooling was awarded the highly coveted Marie Walsh Foundation Space Grant for 1998.

Able to paint uninterruptedly in New York City, Cooling has expanded and deepened her exploration of the female form by using female body builders as models. Always inspired by art history, Cooling in her new work plays with Renaissance techniques of figure painting and explores underpainting and glazes, which add a new depth, texture, and glow to her already vibrant color. The sensual interplay between figuration, abstraction, and surrealism is heightened.

In both large scale and smaller paintings, panel series, and prolific figure studies, an evocative poetic narrative emerges to which the viewer contributes his or her own meaning. In the new work, the image of Bunny Man, a trickster character, suggests Cooling's personal myth.

Cooling's mature work continues to bring her recognition as a major contemporary painter and bridges lesbian art further with the mainstream. Never one to shy away from radical territory, she has chosen to be a pioneering trailblazer, a lesbian artist inventing new imagery.

She and her partner of many years, Jackie Corlin, have formed a foundation to collect under-recognized and under-collected women painters, particularly lesbians and women of color, thus creating a legacy on many levels. Her work can be seen at <http://www.daltonprives.com>.

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About the Author

Susan Richards is founder and Coordinator of the Queer Artist Project of the Lesbian and Gay Historical Society of San Diego. As an artist, she works in mixed media, assemblage, printmaking, digital imaging, and video. She is also a psychotherapist in private practice with specialties in creativity and the unconscious, dream work, and the resolution of creative blocks.