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THE BROOKLYN RAIL

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Carol Saft: The Cynnie Paintings



Carol Saft, *Sleepers*, 2022. Acrylic on canvas, 14 × 18 inches. Courtesy the artist and Canada Gallery.

Canada is currently showing ten small-scale paintings by artist Carol Saft. Her lifelong practice has included video, sculpture, and installation, and though she trained as a painter in her early years, she chose to freshly turn to this medium during the pandemic when we were asked to cloister ourselves indoors in a global effort to stop the spread of the Covid-19 virus. Her painting asks us to slow down, to self-reflect, and cherish the ones we hold dear. For Saft, that meant turning her gaze to her partner, Cynnie, who takes center stage in these paintings, and thus gives us an intimate view into the domestic life of a mature lesbian couple, a subject that has not often been addressed in this tender and quotidian way in art history.

Sleepers (2022), on the east wall draws you in immediately, as it shows the heads of two women, the partners, sleeping side by side comfortably and peacefully. Cynn timer, the protagonist in this series, turns away and to her side, while Saft, in a self-portrait partially outside of the frame, faces us. The sleepers both have their eyes closed as we enter this intimate space of grays and blues that separate the two lovers in their state of rest. This title may allude to Gustave Courbet's masterpiece of the highly eroticized *The Sleepers* (1866): two nude women in bed, a feast for the eyes, painted through a male gaze. European male masters Toulouse-Lautrec, Rodin, Klimt, Schad, and Schiele, among others, also depicted explicitly erotic lesbians in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but who is to say that Saft's painting doesn't also conjure up erotic thoughts of two women together? The angle points to the shared love of the marital bed rather than an un-lived or amplified one-sided fantasy, and Saft's paintings evoke familiar domestic moments such as sleeping, bathing (*Shower for Two*), beautifying (*Putting on a Zoom Face*), and working (*WFH*) (all 2021), within the interior of a home built and lived together, suddenly rendered more intimate as a result of the 2020 pandemic.

The nude back adorned with floral tattoos in *Cynn timer Loves Her Tattoos* (2021) shows Cynn timer sleeping on her side, topless and vulnerable in her sweet slumber, inviting her partner's touch. We are then swept away by a torrent of brush marks modeling the covers, the cream bed sheets taking over the lower half of the painting and contrasting with more sober and mysterious burgundy and black shadows behind the figure set against a forest green and olive green flat wall. Likewise, the brushwork in the square painting *Under the covers with her iPhone* (2021) also transforms the bed into a tumultuous gray-green sea, set against a rectangular background of the headboard and wall, Cynn timer seeking comfort under the duvet. Her forehead and short haircut are barely visible in the yellow glimmer reflecting from the smartphone screen, a lens into the outside world. Saft's aptitude for sharp composition and her use of subtle blocks of colors to build these interior worlds play an essential part in appreciating the work her paintings do. *Sunday Morning* (2021) includes their dog Iggy staring back at us inquisitively, lovingly; his appearance is perhaps symbolic of loyalty in marriage, which has often been included in paintings such as Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* (1434), or later by Diego Velázquez or Édouard Manet. Saft's eye naturally becomes one of empathy and care, looking at others. In her past work with videography we also saw portraits and conversations with artists, as well as the modeling of small figures in the bronze sculpture series "Fallen Men" (2006–2019).

Composition is at play in *WFH*, creating inventive movements from the arrangement of rectangles in the different colors of the wall, the angles of the sofa, the laptop, and notebooks on a rectangular table. While the more sinuous white line of the computer cable divides the scene into two parts, three silvery furniture legs create movements for the eye. As Cynn timer gazes into her screen, casually slouching into her couch, we see ourselves in the intimacy of our homes, adopting similar postures away from a more judgmental outside world. The artist has her eye on her partner, seeing her as she is and not a mystery or a myth. We also feel both the absence of the physical presence of Cynn timer's partner, Saft, but we feel her supportive gaze is there with Cynn timer in these affectionate moments of household life. We don't get the sense that Cynn timer in the paintings is aware of the gaze focused on her because it is one of real familiarity. In *Shadow* (2022), she has her nude back to the viewer, standing in between the black and white geometric diamond pattern of a shower curtain and the grayish tiles on the wall, which reverberates with David Hockney's *Man in Shower in Beverly Hills* (1964). A stream of light blue water divides the painting diagonally, adding movement and attention towards the mysterious dwarfed shadow waving an arm back at Cynn timer like a small child. In the bathtub of *Long Soak* (2021), a full-frontal nude figure from an aerial perspective is seen relaxing in a tub,

her mature body, breasts, and pubic hair visible—the body of a real woman as opposed to an idealized one, a change mostly seen after the 1960s with the feminist social movement.

In these moments of ordinary life we feel the extraordinary love felt by one woman towards another as well as the painter for her subject. We're eager to see more, as Saft explores this new development in her work and lets us be a witness into her world.