

## Mirror mirrored on the wall

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Saturday, September 6, 2003 - Page R9

It is typical of painter **Chris Cran** that rather than call his new exhibition of paintings at Toronto's **Sable-Castelli Gallery** something sensible like New Paintings, the waggish and prodigiously inventive Calgary-based artist has titled his show Big Opening!!! Big Opening!!! is made up of the variations Cran has perpetrated upon what are essentially just two paintings: a work called, with charming portentousness, *The Metaphysics of Admiration*, and a second work, which fuels the rest of the paintings, called, with equal bathos, the *Sublime Sales Series*.

The original *Metaphysics of Admiration* painting consists of two elements: Filling the left half of the painting is a disembodied black and white head of a remarkably characterless man (glasses, pompadour, ineffectually suspicious expression) silkscreened (in large half-tone dots) onto the canvas -- which is itself coloured bright yellow. Opposite this nerdy, milquetoasty guy is a mirror, cunningly painted onto the canvas at an angle to the viewer, in which our small anti-hero can regard his unimpressive visage.

In the larger painting derived from it, *The Physics of Admiration*, this self-regard attains alarming, narcissistic heights: Here, in a more expansively horizontal version of the first painting, the same little silkscreened everyman inhabits the left side of the painting (which is yellow again), but this time he is busy painting his self-portrait. There is another painted mirror over at the right side of the picture, painted this time so that, depending where you stand, you see in it either a positive or a negative image or reflection of the strange little nebbish now painting himself into a lunatic sort of immortality at the other end of the canvas. What a deadpan farrago Cran has made here of imagelessness and its over-compensations! Cran's *Sublime Sales Series*, on the other hand, features the continuing silkscreened presence at the left of all seven paintings in the suite (again in enlarged halftone dots) of a bluff, hearty salesman-type (his image, which varies in colour from painting to painting, is always placed against a yellow ground). While the salesman presents a constant, repeated, iconic appearance (rather Warhol-like in effect), he is juxtaposed, from painting to painting, with entirely surprising and more or

less inappropriate or ingeniously irrelevant, carefully painted (or silkscreened) works of art, posters, and plaques (a badly halftoned reproduction of Gainsborough's *Blue Boy*, for example, or an optically dizzying abstract painting, or a carefully painted wooden plaque that reads "It starts when you sink in his arms and it ends with your arms in the sink").

Just what is this expressionless salesman trying to sell us anyhow? And, for that matter, what's Cran himself trying to push? Well, I don't know about the stolid salesman, but I'd venture that Cran is pretty thoroughly immersed in certain issues touching on the processes of cultural devaluation, the leveling effects of omni-media, the glutinous arts of persuasion, the ironies of desire, and the mechanisms of the presentation of the self. But then I could be wrong.

Cran wants it known, by the way, that these paintings can be ordered in any colour combination whatsoever and that you can also order, if you really want to, any particular part of any of these paintings -- at any size you please. Chris Cran is nothing if not accommodating.