

By IAN HILL

OUT ON Belfast's Great Victoria Street, by the Bruce Street intersection, high up on an advertising hoarding there's an 8ft deliberately erotic photograph of a woman boxer.

She's wearing the shortest of silk shorts, her skin is burnished, her muscles ripple, her sports bra brims, her hair's blonde and her cheekbones bear the bruises left by other fists maled in the boxing gloves she brandishes.

'My Girlfriend Can't Wrestle' runs the caption above her head. Beneath her feet the legend is completed with in the provocatively suggestive punning line 'But You Should See Her Box'.

But Crissie Virtue, putative comic-book porn star isn't advertising anything. Rather she's the creation of diminutive Winnipeg artist Christina Kirouac, a distant relation of the as yet more famous Jack, of On The Road - and of a slight change of spelling - fame.

What's more, the photograph is of Christina herself, her self-image digitally rescheduled, butt, as she says, tucked in, bust enhanced. And the bruises aren't for real, though she herself has spent several years in training in professional boxing gymnasiums in Canada, France, Holland and Bristol England.

"I've been hurt more in a street fight," she adds enigmatically.

Christina has an Honours BA in Fine Arts from the University of Manitoba and she's plugged into the Plug In Gallery in Winnipeg from where, on a government travelling scholarship, she's brought her work to Belfast through Bryson House, the last of whose Billboard Artistes she seems likely to be.

Previously, as well as presenting a number of one-woman exhibitions across Canada, she's worked as a nude model and as a psychiatric arts therapist.

"I started dealing with the transformation of my own body because, quite honestly, I have an obsession with it," she says, challenging you to smile. "As much as I'm an intelligent, educated woman, I still find myself wanting to be a pin-up, with muscle."

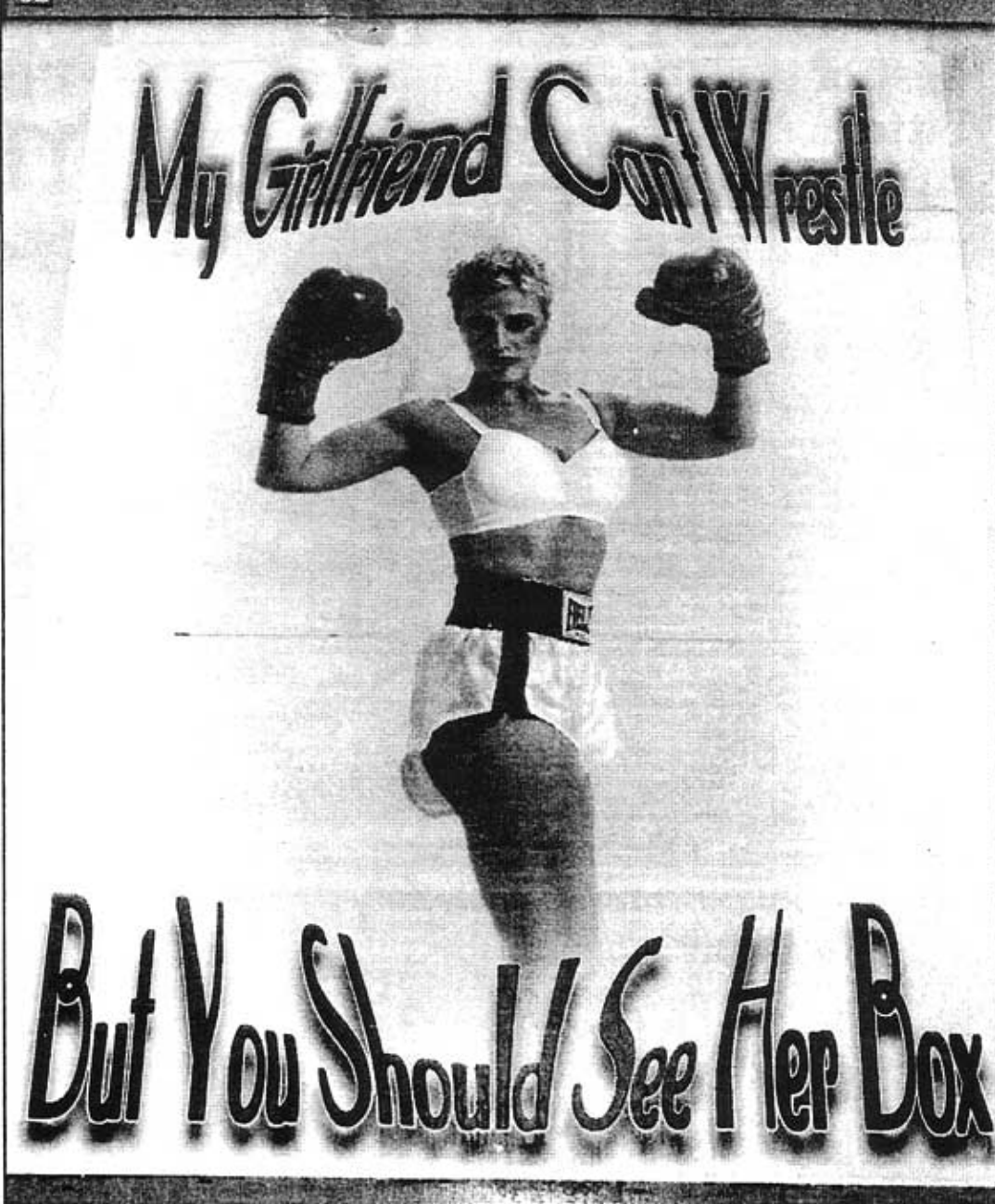
Her portfolio is packed with superb, playfully erotic images of women boxers, and of Crissie as a wrestler engaged in - near enough - oral sex. Her new project, under discussion with producers of pornographic films in America, may involve further women boxers fitted into comic action book robotic prosthetic suits.

Crissie Virtue, foxy boring Queen, is based on poses in Amazonian Action, a female contact sports magazine.

"What I've done for the billboard is just use the normal procedures which images of women go through before they appear in magazines. In another sequence she sports white lingerie, complete with garter-belt, matching stockings and red boxing gloves."

Part of Christina's thesis is that in many of her pieces, the woman's body looks very like that of an attractive man, so that there may also be a homoerotic element, she admits. She also agrees that in the wrestling drawings, there's little doubt about the nature of

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## Portrait of the artist as pin-up - by herself

the physical act depicted.

"It's fun. It's play. If you look at late-night cable TV sports channels, where you're looking at women wrestling, maybe women boxing, you'll see it's play. You don't play at boxing in reality. Besides, look at their bodies, they haven't been picked for their athleticism. It's a joke. Believe me, I've seen real women's boxing in Paris, Mexico, Rotterdam. That's not it."

What Christina is comment-

ing on here, skilfully, bravely is the notion of women as a trophy. On the transformations women have to go through to present themselves to certain audiences, mainly male.

"I'm not working on projects designed for some lonely male, married or unmarried, late at night alone with his fantasies."

As to the poster on Great Victoria Street?

"I'm hoping people see the

humour at first, then think about the social constraints which control women's images in soft pornography, about where the boundaries should be, what's acceptable and what's not. There are a lot of women in everyday advertisements in shopping malls wearing a lot less than Crissie, aren't there?"

"As to the boxing, well it's about a lot more than women doing what men can do. It's a coupling of the debate about

sex and violence, the semi-pornographic sub-culture of pornography in women's wrestling, topless or otherwise."

So go see for yourselves this contemporary warrior Princess Xena, an extraordinary artistic event which contributes provocatively, and with an attractive sense of humour often absent from such exercises, to the continuing debate about empowering women to have control over their own bodies.