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Offering a little of everything in art

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Patricia Cronin

The Latin maxim “ars longa, vita brevis” — art is long, life is short — doesn’t seem to apply in this age of temporary installations and flickering video images. One provocative exception is Patricia Cronin’s “Memorial to a Marriage,” a nearly life-size bronze tomb sculpture that depicts Cronin and her life partner (and fellow artist) Deborah Kass in perpetual embrace. Cronin calls the work’s style “19th-century American neoclassical sculpture”; it was inspired by such famed precursors as Augustus Saint-Gaudens’s memorial for Marian Hooper Adams, erected in 1891 in Washington’s Rock Creek Cemetery.

When the first, smaller version of the sculpture was finished in 2002, it was in part a protest against Cronin and Kass’s inability to wed. That’s still a raw issue nationally, but a decade later same-sex marriage is legal in both New York, where they live, and Washington. Like life, political battles can be shorter than expected. (Cronin and Kass are now married.)

Politics aside, “Memorial to a Marriage” challenges Victorian aesthetics with its lack of solemnity. It depicts the two women nude, although partially shrouded by sheets, and animatedly intertwined. The name of this four-piece Conner Contemporary exhibition is “Bodies and Soul,” and Cronin depicts soul mates as being body mates as well. The show includes two watercolors (secluded in the gallery’s office) that are unabashedly erotic. Rendered in bronze, the women’s physical intimacy feels a little less immediate yet still palpable. Cronin’s sculpture is a rare example of a memorial that’s more about life than its loss.

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