

Design Matters



Patricia Cronin

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DISCIPLINE
ARTIST / EDUCATOR

TAGS
art / painting / religion / deborah kass / memorial to a marriage / shrine for girls / aphrodite reimagined / teaching / protest / rhode island college / brooklyn college / philip pearlstein / lee bontecou / italy / woodlawn cemetery / toni morrison / madonna

YEAR

“For me, the artist’s job is to look out at the world and reflect. It’s my particular job to tell the world what it’s like to be me right now.”

To some art critics—notably, those who believe creator and creative outcome should be kept church and state—those might be words of heresy. But Patricia Cronin is no heretic. After all: As a kid, she figured she’d become a nun when she grew up.

And reflecting on her life now, she has said she wasn’t all that far off.

“I spend my days quietly, methodically working by myself on something I think is important, and I’m in a community of women. The things I liked about [life in the convent], I actually got.”

Cronin was born in Beverly, Mass., in 1963, to a school teacher and a wastewater treatment agency worker, and her upbringing was one anchored in religion. She attended Catholic school and strummed guitar in church, and was exposed at an early age to the pervasive religious trappings of classic art. Meanwhile, she was a prodigious lover of drawing, but rather than Madonnas and prodigal sons, her output was more focused on the equine.

Cronin studied art and art history at Rhode Island College, and got accepted into the prestigious Yale University Norfolk Summer School of Art program in 1985—which brought her into a community of creatives from all around the country, and led her to the realization that to best ply her craft, she needed to be in New York City. Soon enough, she was earning a Master’s Degree at Brooklyn College.

Cronin has said she maintains an obsession with the body given her Irish Catholic childhood, and her first project to break out in a major way focused on exactly that: She created a series of erotic Polaroids from the perspective of the artist as participant, and they were featured in a landmark show she co-curated, *Coming to Power: 25 Years of Sexually X-plicit Art by Women*. Yet despite the acclaim her work received in the *The New York Times* and other outlets, it cost Cronin her teaching job at Pratt, where she has noted she was surrounded by older men in an environment where those who couldn’t do, taught.

As she was curating the show Cronin met the artist Deborah Kass—and was instantly drawn to her. Kass had co-created the Women’s Action Coalition, and Cronin began attending regularly as the two forged a friendship, and then a bond and tight relationship that would stand the test of time.

But despite years of testament to that fact, they couldn’t get married. And most of the legal benefits they could get via the law dealt only with death. So Cronin, meditating on this (and also on how nearly all the public sculpture throughout New York City depicted and celebrated men), began crafting what would become her masterpiece in 2002: *Memorial to a Marriage*, a three-ton marble funerary sculpture that depicts Cronin and Kass embracing naked in bed. After purchasing a plot for herself and Kass in New York’s famous Woodlawn Cemetery, eternal home to Duke Ellington, Herman Melville and other notables, Cronin had the statue installed on the gravesite. It later toured the world.

As Cronin has said, “What if a protest song and a love song ... are rolled up into the same song? I use art historical forms to lull my audience into a false sense of security. They have invested their time, they have moved their body through or around my work, and as that’s happening the content is slowly revealing itself. That’s how, I think, you change hearts and minds.”

(In 2011 Cronin and Kass would wait hours in the sweltering heat to get married on the first day it became legal in New York, finally receiving government recognition of a bond that had already endured for nearly 20 years and was set, quite literally, in stone. Today they create in studios next to each other.)

Cronin next brought her philosophy to Venice, Italy, with the exhibition *Shrine for Girls*, which utilized the three altars in a deconsecrated Catholic church to focus on a trio of international atrocities: the Chibok schoolgirls kidnapping by Boko Haram in Nigeria; the gang rape and murder of cousins in the Katra Sahadatganj village of India; and the secretive church-run Magdalene Laundries in Ireland, revealed to be forced-labor institutions for “fallen women.” The installation is haunting: A pile of clothes atop each altar—one consisting of hijabs, one consisting of saris, and another consisting of uniforms from the asylums—represents what is left of the victims, and calls chillingly to what is missing. On the whole, *Shrine* is a cry of urgency for the perpetual crises faced by girls and women around the globe.

With Aphrodite Reimagined, which recently debuted at the Tampa Museum of Art, Cronin's output seems to have in some ways come full circle. Cronin was commissioned by the museum to respond to one of the pieces within its collection—and Cronin, perhaps unexpectedly, selected a simple broken marble torso of Aphrodite, all that remained of the goddess of love after the limbs were lost to time and an art dealer removed the head so he could profit off the sale of both remaining parts of the sculpture. Cronin restored the goddess to startling life by recreating her missing portions using a clear, green resin modeled after the sea glass she comes across at her cottage in Long Island. The result is a woman torn apart by the past, reinterpreted, reclaimed and reborn.

The museum was looking for a way to bridge their classic artifacts with their contemporary collection, and the piece does exactly that—and Cronin was a brilliant choice, and perhaps the only true choice, to forge the connection. In her work, history burns with searing life into the present—as does the artist's own past.

All told, Cronin creates with two missions in mind. As she has said, "I've kept reminding myself that the artist's job is to look out, to see the world as incomplete, then try to complete it in my studio."

And then there's the part that often causes those aforementioned critics to bristle: "I just think it's the artist's job to tell you what's it like to be 'me' right now."

Sure, Cronin's art could be viewed totally divorced from its creator. And Cronin herself could be viewed totally divorced from her art. But what if one is the key to the other?

Together, like her Aphrodite, they are whole.

—Zachary Petit, Design Matters Media Editor-in-Chief

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