



Artist Patricia Cronin on "Memorial To A Marriage"

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Memorial To A Marriage / Patricia Cronin / modeled 2002, cast 2013 / National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; gift of Chuck Close / © 2002 Patricia Cronin

Grace Yopez, Duke Ellington School of the Arts senior and current National Portrait Gallery intern, had a few questions for artist Patricia Cronin, who is in town to give a talk on her sculpture *Memorial To A Marriage* on Friday, March 9 at noon.

What inspired you to create *Memorial To A Marriage*?

I wanted to make an art work that addressed several issues near and dear to my heart; a) to make something dignified that officially commemorated my relationship with my then girlfriend at a time when same sex marriage was illegal in the United States, b) to address the dearth of specific, as opposed to allegorical, real women in public sculpture and c) to address the almost total absence of public art by women in American cities.

So I used a “nationalist” form – American Neo-Classical sculpture - to address what I saw as a federal failure, and I made a double portrait funerary sculpture because the only legal protections gay people could have were wills, health care proxies and power of attorney documents and those didn’t celebrate our life together but the end of it. I placed the sculpture on our burial plot in Woodlawn Cemetery that was established in 1863 and designed as America’s Père Lachaise where it is on view 365 days a year through eternity. Or as I tell my women artists friends – if you want permanent public art – you’ve got to buy the land!

What were the emotions you felt while creating *Memorial To A Marriage*?

Rage and sadness that my country treats the LGBTQ community and women with such little regard and unequal under the law. I couldn’t be silent. That would be condoning prejudice. Also, I did most of the modelling of the figures during the aftermath of 9/11 when funeral after funeral was televised daily on local TV and I think all that sorrow got into the forms for my tomb monument.

What inspired you to use bronze as your medium?

French artist Edgar Degas called bronze – the medium for eternity. And while I was researching and making *Memorial To A Marriage*, I studied funerary sculpture in three Paris cemeteries: Montparnasse; Père Lachaise; and Montmartre. The damage the elements caused the marble tomb sculptures was visible. And it was interesting how well the bronze sculpture held up, including seeing there was a tradition of visitors rubbing different body parts for good luck, and how the bronze got burnished to a golden yellow. When I switched my marble version for a bronze in Woodlawn, I thought it would extend the performative nature of the piece and wondered what parts of my sculpture would be people’s favorites too.

What was the modeling process like?

Long! I didn’t really know what I was doing, so I had to make many different size clay maquettes, i.e., 9”, 18”, 34” and 53” to get the composition, poses, anatomy, drapery folds, portraits and textures just right. I had nude models that resembled Deborah and myself pose for me in my studio I had every copy of the history of sculpture books I could find and large color copies of my favorite sculptures up on the studio walls.

How did you feel when you completed creating the sculpture *Memorial To A Marriage*?

Really proud. It took a lot of courage to make a work about marriage equality with lesbians being the subject. I needed this work to exist but I couldn't have imagined that it would mean so much to others as well and that has been incredibly gratifying.

But mostly, I think about being both an activist and an artist at the same time. Like the great author Toni Morrison said, "The best art is political and you ought to be able to make it unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time." Or as I like to say - it's when a love song and a protest song are all rolled into the same song. That's always my goal.

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