

Lesbians are Miracles

March 11, 2021

DAYDREAMS & FANTASIES

This March, in arm's reach of that first, hopeful glimmer at the end of what has been a long and dark tunnel, we celebrate going inward—to reconnect with our imagination, our inspiration, our joy, our creativity, our power.

The work in this issue represents the divine, the fantastical, the surreal, the sublime. It is a reflection of the daydreams and fantasies that sustain us through our struggles, upsets, and setbacks. As winter gives way to spring and we begin once again to venture outside of our homes and ourselves, may we keep the playful, uninhibited, inquisitive, adventurous spirit of our inner child never too far from reach.

Your friend in shadows and in light,
Lia Ottaviano
Lesbians are Miracles

In Conversation with Patricia Cronin

Patricia Cronin is an internationally recognized lesbian artist whose work explores same sex marriage, female desire, gender equality, social justice, and the experiences of girls and women around the world. She lives and works in Brooklyn, NY and is a Professor of Art at Brooklyn College of the City University of New York. We had the opportunity to speak with her about representation, poetic protest, lesbian authored artwork, and creating for an LGBTQ+ audience. Discover more of her work at www.patriciacronin.net and find her on Instagram @patriciacronin.

What was your impetus for creating *Memorial To A Marriage*?

In 2002 I created *Memorial To A Marriage*, the first and only Marriage Equality monument in the world, in response to the lack of real, specific women represented in public monuments in New York City and the United States government's prohibition of same-sex marriage. Basically, national and local governments denying my existence. It was an untenable legal and civic reality, and it needed a poetic political protest work in proportion appropriate to the scale of the problems.

Can you talk to us about your process for bringing this piece into being?

I sculpted this three-ton Carrara marble, mortuary sculpture of myself and my (now) wife to simulate a few of the 1,200-rights heterosexual marriage affords. In 2000 when I began this project, same-sex couples could only acquire (read: hire a lawyer to draw up) legal documents about the end of their lives, such as wills, health care proxies, and powers of attorney documents. These are the most depressing documents you can sign; they are only useful if one of you is ill, incapacitated, or dead. So, I employed the American Neo-classical sculpture form to address a federal failure of prohibiting same sex

couples to wed. The challenge of this work was to strike a balance between a high level of sophisticated, formal execution and pointed political protest. I purchased our burial plot in Woodlawn Cemetery, Bronx, NY, an American National Historic Landmark, and designed as America's Père Lachaise Cemetery, and permanently installed the sculpture on our future final resting place. By buying my own land, my real burial plot (!), I also addressed the scarcity of real women (as opposed to allegorical female forms) honored in public monuments in New York City.

The world does not seem very tolerant right now, systemic racism has been on full display, and the reckoning has finally come: Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, #TimesUp, and Black Trans Lives Matter rallies. Although the Supreme Court overturned the Defense of Marriage Act in 2013, making the United States the 29th country in the world, out of 195 countries, to legally recognize same sex marriage, we mustn't

forget that homosexuality is illegal and punishable up to death in 27 countries. That leaves another 139 countries... doing I don't know what. This is still a major international human rights issue.

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Memorial To A Marriage, Carrara marble, overlie size, 2002, © Patricia Cronin, courtesy of Artists Rights Society

In what ways does Memorial To A Marriage bridge more traditional/classic art forms with contemporary and progressive expression and representation?

I thought about two types of audiences: 1) one that wasn't interested in or even against homosexuality, homoeroticism, and lesbian subjects and 2) the other that was interested in a lesbian authored artwork that addressed marriage equality with lesbian subjects and bodies front and center.

Recently, after years of observing visitors view Memorial To A Marriage in Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, curator Laura Bauld wrote in *Art UK*,

“The reason that viewers stop in their tracks is, more often than not, because their unconscious, heteronormative bias has been momentarily disrupted. In a sculpture of such inherent classical form, they expect to see a man and woman lying together. Instead, they are confronted with something quite different from their expectations.

I have seen this reaction again and again while taking visitors around the halls of Kelvingrove or even just people-watching. For this sculpture was made to provoke a reaction. It was created to challenge and confront heteronormativity, bias, and LGBTQ+ discrimination. Every double take proves the power of this sculpture.”

My aesthetic strategy is to insert my contemporary content into time honored historical images and forms and breathe new life into them. When you lure the audience into a false sense of security with something familiar, they are more relaxed, more ready to receive new information, the political content slowly reveals itself when the viewer's consciousness lets it in. I also think it's my best shot at changing hearts and minds!

What has been the most surprising or unexpected part of the feedback you've received from the piece?

Memorial To A Marriage is the third most visited plot in the Cemetery. First is Duke Ellington, second is Miles Davis and then us. We're obviously not famous jazz musicians and we're still alive! Woodlawn Cemetery does all different kinds of Historic Walking and Trolley Tours: the Art + Architecture Tour, the Beautiful Women of Woodlawns tour, the Jazz Tour, the Victorian Tour, the Veterans Tour, and we're on every single one.

What do you hope viewers, specifically viewers in the LGBTQ+ community, take away from the piece?

We all want to see our reflection writ large in the culture. What happens when a) your reflection is so distorted you don't recognize it or b) it's missing? We're so used to seeing heteronormativity everywhere. It is very powerful when you finally see something that reflects some of your reality, your humanity,

and not your exclusion. I hope viewers in the LGBTQ+ community, my intended audience, feel pride, acknowledgement, feel seen, see a part of themselves, dignity, their reflection.

How does your identity as a queer woman inform or influence your art?

I don't really identify as queer; I identify as lesbian. I think the word queer is nice big umbrella or tent we can all be in. But as an identity, the word "queer" ignores and erases the material differences between men and women. White men still make a minimum of 25% more money than white women, so a white lesbian couple is going to make 50% less than a white gay male household. It's even worse for our black and brown sisters. A woman's sexuality is so ridiculed in American culture and then lesbians are so marginalized in the LGBTQ+ community, so that's just another reason why I had to create a dignified protest statue in response.

From where do you draw your inspiration?

Art History inspires me every day and injustice propels me to speak up as loudly and fiercely as I can using all my conceptual art making and eye hand coordination artistic skills.

How does Memorial To A Marriage fit into your larger body of work?

For over three decades I've forged a feminist queer (yeah, I know I said I don't identify as queer—but this is for the larger umbrella audience!) artistic practice that aimed to put female representation in the public sphere as the central focus. Whether it was my personal wild erotic beginnings (Early Erotic Polaroids and Watercolors) or sublimated female desire (Pony Tales and Tack Room) to my desire for civic and legal inclusion (Memorial To A Marriage) to resurrecting the forgotten first woman sculptor (Harriet Hosmer, Lost & Found, A Catalogue Raisonné) to the international rights of women and girls (Shrine For Girls) to a public female authority (Aphrodite Reimagined). My life-long commitment to female presence, authority, and healing is steadfast. They are my core social justice and human rights issues, and I manifest them in my work.

Where can our readers view Memorial To A Marriage?

Online: <https://patriciacronin.net/memorial.html>

In Person:

1. The Woodlawn Cemetery, Bronx, NY, Cronin/Kass burial plot
2. Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, Glasgow, Scotland, Balcony Gallery ♦

Find this article at: <https://www.lesbiansaremiracles.com/patricia-cronin>