

WIDEWALLS

The Importance of Patricia Cronin's Memorial to a Marriage

Artwork(s) In Focus

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The matter of **representation** has been explored by numerous artists, especially the ones belonging to social groups that were or still are exposed to oppression such as **the queer community**. Despite the fact things have changed since the 1969 Stonewalls Riots, the American society did not recognize LGBTQ+ people legally in terms of their right to practice marriage until 2015.

The struggle to **earn rights any person should be eligible to** has been decades-long and caused different artists to articulate the situation through their work. The most illustrious example that marks an array of emotions related to systematic oppression and critical of the heteronormative gaze is the sculpture titled **Memorial to a Marriage** by the acclaimed American multimedia artist **Patricia Cronin**.

The radiating and almost haunting work featuring **two naked female figures embracing in draped bedsheet**, currently on display at the **Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum in Glasgow**, acts as a **timeless reminder of the rigidness and genuine homophobia** inscribed in the canon of traditional sculpture making. Aside from portraying a same-sex relationship (of Cronin and her partner **Deborah Kass**, also an accomplished visual artist), it seems that the work still evokes the same controversy for the viewer as it did at the time of its creation.

Patricia Cronin - Subverting The Canon

Namely, **Patricia Cronin came to prominence in the early-1990s** for the way she approached themes such as female sensuality and eroticism explored through photography. Her career started developing while working for the Anne Frank Stichting (Foundation) in Amsterdam, where the artist became aware of the female absence, something that was to become a leading thread in her work. Over the years, Cronin's conceptual practice spanned to other media as she addressed gender, class, and sexuality **with an emphasis on feminist art history, lesbian visibility, marriage equality, and international rights of women**.

By appropriating traditional patterns of art-making and recontextualizing them in regards to the mentioned subjects, Cronin subverts the representational canons that stood at the core of Western art history.

The Context Of The Work

Memorial to a Marriage was made in 2002, at a time same-sex marriage was still illegal in the United States of America. The only way Cronin and Kass could be recognized legally as partners was via wills or health care provisions that would only be valid in the case of one's death.

To articulate the fact their relationship is recognized only postmortem, in 2002 Cronin initially made this sculpture in marble and installed it as a personal burial landmark in Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx, New York. This particular gesture expressed the genuine feeling of sorrow that numerous LGBTQI+ people feel in their everyday lives, as they remain institutionally segregated and therefore **unable to achieve equal rights as all the other citizens**. Cronin once underlined the symbolic meaning of her sculpture:

” *The statue addresses issues of lesbian invisibility, gay marriage, love and loss, power, and status. In this sculpture, I chose a nationalist form – nineteenth-century American Neoclassical sculpture – to address what I consider a federal failure. In death, I make official my "marriage" which is still not legal while we are alive.*

The Significance of Memorial to a Marriage

In July 2011, same-sex marriage became legal in the state of New York, and the two artists married the same day. That year in September, the original sculpture was replaced by a bronze version to protect the marble from air pollution. It still stands at

the Woodlawn Cemetery as the first and only Marriage Equality Monument in the world.

The version held at Glasgow Museums was **cast by the artist from the original marble sculpture** (though it is a smaller two-third scale). In 2009, Memorial to a Marriage was part of the exhibition sh[OUT] that explored lesbian, gay, bisexual, and intersex human rights, and right after it was **installed at Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum in Glasgow**.

Since then, Cronin remains active with the display and interpretation of her sculpture and gave full support to Glasgow Museums' initiative **to interpret and unravel LGBTQ+ histories within their collection**. More recently, Memorial to a Marriage was included in a new online school topic 'LGBTQ+ Histories and Experiences' organized by Glasgow Museums.

Memorial to a Marriage excels the way **Cronin uses art to mediate socially relevant subjects regarding sexuality and gender**. Furthermore, she doesn't just appoint the message, but rather undertakes a subversive method by "queering" the conventional representational modes typical for Western art. This emotional, tender, and finely crafted sculpture **stands proudly in the high ranks of artworks** that perfectly emphasized the issues of LGBTQ+ visibility, activism, and human rights to broader audiences.

Featured image: Patricia Cronin - Memorial To A Marriage, 2002. Carrara marble, overlie size. © Patricia Cronin, courtesy of Artists Rights Society (ARS).

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