



The Attic (a name which commemorates our first physical location) is, first and foremost, a site for the research students of the School of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester: a virtual community which aims to include all students, be they campus-based and full-time, or distance-learning and overseas. But we welcome contributions from students of museum studies - and allied subject areas - from outside the School and from around the world. Here you will find a lot of serious stuff, like exhibition and research seminar reviews, conference alerts and calls for papers, but there's also some 'fluff'; the things that inspire, distract and keep us going. After all, while we may be dead serious academic types, we're human too.

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 20, 2012

Review for the 17 October Brown Bag Seminar with Patricia Cronin.



" . . . The artist sees the world as incomplete and attempts to complete it in their studio; that is what I attempt to do."

~Patricia Cronin, Brown Bag Session 2012.

On Wednesday, 17 October, New York conceptual artist and Professor of Art, Brooklyn College, Patricia Cronin, visited the University of Leicester School of Museum Studies Brown Bag Seminar Series, to discuss her journey as an artist and her most recent project, 'Dante: The Way Of All Flesh'. Cronin's current work is a meditation on the human condition, using Dante Alighieri's 'Inferno' as aesthetic inspiration. Using the mediums of oil painting, watercolour and bleach drawing, Cronin explores the socio-political dimensions of justice and revenge as enacted by intra and inter-personal narrative experience. Before discussing the 'Dante' series however, Cronin shared reflections upon the past ten years of her life as an artist and how some of her previous projects have contributed to this new series of works-in-process. Cronin began the seminar session with a brief discussion of 'Memorial to a Marriage' (featured as the image upper-left).

Fine art at its best, has a profound ability to promote empathy in the viewer/audience, evokes in the viewer a sense of mutual recognition and creates a point of reference that links the life experience of the viewer to the perceived meaning of the artwork. In this way, Patricia Cronin's work seeks to support a better understanding of the human condition while manifesting personal resonance. Her graceful treatment of socially



policised, feminist subjects potentially makes topics and challenges that are of particular concern to LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) communities, personally relevant to non-LGBT communities.

'Memorial to a Marriage' depicts Cronin and her wife tenderly lying together in bed. The Neoclassicism of the sculptural technique depicting a what is initially to many viewers, an androgynously beautiful shared intimacy, calls to mind the narrative sculptural pieces of Renaissance of Italy, causing Cronin's aesthetic to be at once familiar and unfamiliar to audiences acquainted with classical and Neoclassical traditions. It generally takes a moment for the audience to realize that the sculpture depicts two women in bed together, rather than a man and a woman. This observation, teamed with the title: 'Memorial to a Marriage' rather than 'Sisters' or 'Shelter from the Storm' affords no doubt in the viewer's mind that this work is dedicated to a same-gender marriage.

'Memorial to a Marriage' is a sculptural experience that potentially creates an empathetic bridge. In that moment of immediately accepting the work as a lovely, 'traditional' Neoclassical sculpture, followed by the viewer's dawning realisation of the 'non-traditional' subject matter of the sculpture, an audience that may not understand or accept the concept of same-gender marriage, may momentarily undergo a shift in consciousness. In 'Memorial to a Marriage', viewers are gently invited to acknowledge and reflect upon whatever biases they may have on the subject of same-gender marriage and lifestyle choices. It is a stunningly intelligent challenge to the justification of unexamined social prohibitions.

Of course, none of the potentially profound socio-political impact of Cronin's work was the original creative catalyst her work. Her technique and aesthetic sensibility are informed by her own daily life, her sense of identity and expression of personhood. 'Memorial to a Marriage' was created in response to Cronin's frustration at not being able to have the love that she shares with her wife recognized legally. 'Memorial to a Marriage' will be the tombstone for Cronin and her wife's gravesite; it is Cronin's very public expression of her marriage, written/carved in stone, for all to witness.

In addition to 'Memorial to a Marriage', Cronin also briefly discussed her research into the life of Harriet Hosmer and the influence that Hosmer had on Cronin's own aesthetic praxis. Cronin's research into the life of Hosmer resulted in both an exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum and in the publication of 'Patricia Cronin: Harriet Hosmer, Lost and Found' in 2009. The academic research of the Hosmer project was again, motivated by a burgeoning sense of identification that Cronin had in response to the history of Hosmer's life and Hosmer's aesthetic agenda.

The life of Hosmer, 'Memorial to a Marriage', all of the varied, intense projects of Cronin's life hereto and her current 'Dante' series are expressive of the guiding principle of her

# THE Artistic

working method as an artist. Cronin “--sees the world as incomplete and attempts to lend completion”. She is interested in the people, events and places that are ‘hidden in plain sight’. Cronin hopes to lend ‘presence to absence’ and in some cases, absence to presence.

What an honour for our seminar to be given the opportunity to share ideas about ‘work in progress’ with such an acclaimed artist and scholar. The second half of the Brown Bag session was a creative exploration of the ‘Dante’ series, suffuse with questions:

“How will the placement of the paintings of the ‘Dante Series’ within the chosen gallery space create a narrative dialogue between the paintings?” “What type of gallery space will be used?” “What can museums and galleries do to help engage with work?” “What is the relationship between the techniques used and the subject of the work of art?” “Is the Neoclassical aesthetic of Cronin’s work a form of ‘safe subversion’?” “What is the dynamic relationship between conceptualization, social interactions, the medium used, technique and the ownership of the ‘real estate’ or physical context where any given work of art is installed?”

Depicting her ideas in oil, watercolours and bleach, all of Cronin’s current work has a sense of timelessness about it, rather than any sort of postmodern specificity. Cronin is interested in the most intrinsic of questions about what it means to live passionately in accordance with one’s own beliefs--to courageously live one’s personal ‘truth’. There are two main bodies of work-in-progress that Cronin shared with the Brown Bag Seminar: her ‘Dante Series’ and her associated work in the portraiture of corruption.

Cronin’s re-interpretation the ‘Inferno’ from Dante’s ‘Divine Comedy’—in which the dead reside in a hell of their own design—considers the physical nature of the painting process itself, in relation to an exploration of the essential experience of humanity, desire and betrayal. To the right of this text, please observe one of the images of the ‘Dante Series’.





Working with intense, dazzlingly robust primary reds, blacks, blues, and stark whites, upon huge canvases, featuring twisted, sometimes headless, always faceless figures, some male, some female, that appear to be struggling against the binding edges of their visual frame, their torment exceeding the limitations of their context, Cronin strokes the canvas in fluid lines and florid shapes slashed on raw linen--soft linen, emphasises Cronin, that texturally is "--as natural as skin". For some of her subjects Cronin paints as little as possible so that the application of the painting technique resonates with the psychological life of the subject.

In contrast to the large 'Dante Series' works, Cronin's bleach paintings of notoriously corrupt political figures are much smaller, roughly 14x10 inches. Again, Cronin has chosen her technique to suit her subject; she feels that the process of the medium itself treats the subject of the painting as they should be treated. For example, bleach drawings of corrupt political figures that are warped and will disintegrate over time due to exposure to light. In this way, the display context becomes a vital component to the ongoing progression of Cronin's technique.

In the case of the bleach drawings, the materials that the artwork is made out of may disintegrate over time with exposure to light. This process becomes allegorical to the subject—the disintegration of the soul from corruption. As was remarked by one of our seminar members, the only way for bleach drawings—or corrupt political practices—to survive, is if the corruption remains in the dark. Bringing these images of corruption into the light of day will destroy them. Cronin has posited that in the gallery presentation of the bleach paintings, she may simply pin them to the wall (again, the display technique allegorical to how Cronin feels the subject deserves to be treated).

Though Cronin had originally assumed that the 'Dante Series' would attract the interest of a factory-like or dungeon-like exhibition space, the gallery that has expressed interest in showing Cronin's interpretation of the 'Inferno', is an open, airy, beautiful and bright environment, with a magnificent staircase leading between the levels of the exhibition space. Cronin laughed that it is almost as if the Ninth Circle of Hell is about to be hosted within Paradise! And yet, this seemingly inappropriate setting may be in better keeping with the idea of 'Hell' and 'Heaven' as a frame of mind, that one person's 'Hell' is another's 'Heaven', than a more decorously 'hellish' gallery setting (would be). Perhaps a lovely, light-filled environment will prove the perfect juxtaposition for the intensity of Cronin's vision of the 'Inferno'.

To paraphrase and summarise Cronin's gracious response to all of the seminar's insistent questions, her work, though fiercely politicised, is very personal. Her work is always an expression of her life and perception of the world. Cronin tries to 'lull' her audience into a sense of security—to provide them with a 'familiar' contextual orientation for non-traditional subject matter, in order to encourage an alteration of social consciousness



and awareness. Certainly, this is a very challenging aesthetic to successfully create and the display context—that is, the physical characteristics of the exhibition—has a remarkable impact upon the ability of the painting or sculpture to communicate the artist’s intentions. Cronin feels that the gallery/museum space is partnered to the unfolding process of her art (to the development of the ‘life’ of any given work of art).

The essence of Cronin’s process is transformation. Intimating that everything that the artist experiences in life, is a part of the creative development of art, Cronin observed that resultant to the interactions of our Brown Bag session she was already a different person than she had been upon arrival. Indeed, everyone in the room seemed impressed with the new perspectives garnered from the discussion and was enlivened by a delightful if all too swift passage of an hour’s conversation. Safe journey and best wishes to Patricia Cronin for her continued tour of the United Kingdom, due to include a lecture at the Victoria and Albert Museum, hopefully to be followed by a visit to Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, in Glasgow, where one of the smaller versions of ‘Memorial to a Marriage’ is now on permanent display.

Many thanks to Janet, Jocelyn and Richard for bringing Patricia Cronin to the Brown Bag Seminar Series and thank you as well, to Linda, for audio recording Prof. Cronin’s visit (currently accessible as an mp3 file for the benefit of our Museum Studies distance learning community at the departmental, in-house Blackboard site).

For those not able to access the University of Leicester Museum Studies in-house departmental website and/or for those that simply want to know more about Prof. Cronin’s work, the following website links are offered for perusal:

<http://www.patriciacronin.net/newpattie/news.html> This page is a part of Prof. Cronin’s website. It features news updates and information about her most recent work.

[http://www.brooklyn.cuny.edu/web/academics/faculty/faculty\\_profile.jsp?faculty=29](http://www.brooklyn.cuny.edu/web/academics/faculty/faculty_profile.jsp?faculty=29) This is Prof. Cronin’s academic/staff information page at Brooklyn College.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patricia\\_Cronin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patricia_Cronin) This is Prof. Cronin’s Wikipedia page.

[http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/patricia\\_cronin/](http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/patricia_cronin/) This is the Brooklyn Museum page for the 2009-2010 Exhibitions: Patricia Cronin: “Harriet Hosmer, Lost and Found”.

[http://www.patriciacronin.net/html/Cronin\\_First%20Proof.pdf](http://www.patriciacronin.net/html/Cronin_First%20Proof.pdf) This is the pdf file for a review/reflection piece by Prof. Cronin regards: “Harriet Hosmer, Lost and Found”.



<http://www.gireview.com/article.php?articleid=180> 'The Second Life of Harriet Hosmer' is the transcription of a short interview that Prof. Cronin did with Cassandra Langer for 'Gay and Lesbian Review' in 2010. In it, Cronin discusses not only the life of Harriet Hosmer but her own work, notably remarking: "[Harriet Hosmer's] Neoclassical forms were very inspiring to me when I made 'Memorial to a Marriage'. I made this three-ton marble mortuary statue of my partner and myself in what I considered to be an American nationalist form, to address what I considered a federal failure, which is that same-sex couples can't legally wed throughout the United States."

<http://www.amazon.com/Patricia-Cronin-Harriet-Hosmer-Found/dp/8881587327> This is a link to the Amazon page for "Patricia Cronin: Harriet Hosmer, Lost and Found".

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