

Shrine for Girls: Patricia Cronin + Bradley Rubenstein

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Patricia Cronin's work has been exhibited in solo shows at the Venice Biennale; Musei Capitolini, Centrale Montemartini Museo; Newcomb Art Gallery, Tulane University; Brooklyn Museum; and the American Academy in Rome Art Gallery. Her work has been included in group shows NYC 1993: Experimental, Jet Set, Trash and No Star, New Museum; Watch Your Step, FLAG Art Foundation; and Sh(out): Contemporary Art and Human Rights, Gallery of Modern Art, Glasgow, Scotland. Cronin is the recipient of the Rome Prize from the American Academy in Rome and two Pollock Krasner Foundation Grants. She has also received support from the New York Foundation for the Arts, the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation, and Anonymous Was A Woman. Cronin's works are in numerous collections including National Gallery of Art, Washington; Perez Art Museum Miami; and the Gallery of Modern Art and Kelvingrove Art Galleries and Museum in Glasgow. She is the author of Harriet Hosmer: Lost and Found, A Catalogue Raisonné and The Zenobia Scandal: A Meditation on Male Jealousy.

Bradley Rubenstein: We were supposed to have had this conversation years ago. I was looking at some notes from around 1999 or early 2000 from a studio visit with you

when you had just starting making little models for your large-scale Memorial To A Marriage (2002). I suppose a lot has happened in the meantime, personally, culturally, and whatnot, so let's frame our talk around that piece, the work I saw last year at Ford Projects, the Dante paintings, and your most recent Shrine For Girls, Venice.

Patricia Cronin: I have a long history of making work that addresses contemporary social justice issues focused on gender, from lesbian visibility to feminist art history to marriage equality. So, yes, I'm always interested in making an impact both aesthetically and politically. My aesthetic strategy is to breathe new life into traditional art images and forms in time-honored materials, and to inject specific contemporary political content that compels me.

I usually subvert Polaroids, watercolor, oil paint, bronze, or marble, and sometimes I write books, but my creative process also includes ready-mades like the girls' clothing I gathered here in Venice. In May 2014 when Italian curator Ludovico Pratesi first invited me to do a show in Venice, I was working on a project about the crisis in masculinity. The constant barrage of horrific news stories about violence against women and the systemic oppression of girls around the world overwhelmed me -- from the gang rapes in India to Boko Haram kidnapping the Chibok, Nigeria schoolgirls to the Magdalene Asylums in Stephen Frears's film *Philomena*. I was grappling with comprehending the magnitude of these devastating crises and felt helpless. I decided to do what artists do best -- keenly observe the world around them and comment on it, much like Goya's *Disasters of War* (1810–20), Käthe Kollwitz's anti-war works (1902–35), or Picasso's *Guernica* (1937). After I visited the Church of San Gallo a month later in Venice, the subject started to shift to addressing the women and girls. I wanted to translate the horrific statistics into something concrete and emotional. By creating an installation with the remnants of what the missing bodies would have inhabited, the physicality and the materiality of the fabric reminds us of who is missing and publicly acknowledges their suffering.

BR: Looking back at the sculpture, which you and Deb are actually using as a cenotaph, I was really struck by the pathos of it -- now remember this was pre-9/11 New York -- in the face of an overwhelming trend toward, for lack of a better word, the pathos of pretty much everything else that was being made at that time.

PC: Actually I lived five blocks from the World Trade Center in Tribeca, so that day had a profound effect on me. Then my father died suddenly six months later. I remember working on the 53" clay maquette of Memorial To A Marriage in my Williamsburg studio, watching the daily firefighters' funerals with tears streaming down my cheeks. I think all the sorrow I was feeling is in that piece.

I only make art that I need to have exist in the world. Half of the stuff I make, I look around first hoping someone else will tackle it, and when no one does, it's like, okay, I'll do it. I addressed lesbian sexuality before it was chic with my *Erotic Watercolors* (1992–96), gay marriage before it was legal in *Memorial To A Marriage* (2000–02), feminist art history when it was presumed passé with *Harriet Hosmer: Lost and Found, A Catalogue Raisonné* (2009), and now the global plight of exploited girls in *Shrine For Girls* (2015). So that's why my work is usually not at the center of what is trendy. My subjects are urgent—feminist, social justice, and human rights issues. Because, unfortunately, the art world is still such a deeply conservative place, these topics aren't a priority in what has

become solely an art market. I'm interested in art history, not market history.

BR: I like that. Looking at the Erotic Watercolors...after seeing your studies for the Memorial, I saw them not as ironic, as I had originally seen them, but as sincere. I know that now that seems like it isn't a huge revelation, but considering the context then...

PC: I was trying to reclaim my subjectivity from a male heterosexual gaze. These watercolors were objective, factually rendered from the Polaroids, and ultimately they continue to read as cool-fully sincere. Irony was never my game. In fact, I think irony is the new kitsch. I can respect it, but it's not where my heart is.



BR: More and more I've noticed, and often commented on, the banality of "cultural criticism," "art criticism," whatever... They have been reduced to a very middlebrow "non-judgementalizing." The term "de-skilled" has replaced "referencing" as the most fucked-out word in criticism. Sincerity in painting and talking about serious paintings seems like the last truly avant-garde reaction at the moment. How do you feel about that? Can you talk a little about the reactions to your work over the last ten years -- about some of your different investigations through paint into subjects that captured your interest?

PC: Well, I think the whole de-skilling movement is kind of a disaster. Richard Serra said that all sculpture now is collage and bricolage. This is as sad as it is true. I don't think de-skilling works in medicine, law, literature, music, nor art. There's been a huge shift in graduate MFA programs. Students are taught by a succession of adjunct/visiting critics. There are fewer real classes and less skill refining and perfecting. Students are graduating with enormous

debt and no skills. But on a deeper level I think it's all about fear of criticism, a kind of performance anxiety, a kind of "I can't compete, so I'll satirize" as a form of Oedipal urge. "You can't criticize my broken sheet rock leaning against the wall. Obviously I wasn't really trying" is a common refrain from students.

BR: You say that your work addresses social issues, yet you still talk about it as art with a capital "A." There are a lot of artists I can think of, like Kara Walker, who I like a lot,

but who don't ever mention "art" when they talk about their work.

PC: Well, first, I love her work -- did from the first moment we both showed at Brent Sikkema Gallery. But, I don't want to choose between being an activist or an artist. Obviously I'm both. 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." It's like a protest song and a love song being the same song. Think Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On." This has always been my goal. Joseph Beuys was the first one to coin the phrase "social sculpture." I strongly agree with the idea that art has the potential to transform society. The artist who is currently working in this mode who interests me is Theaster Gates. He uses real objects, like a fire hose, to talk about racial identity and economic inequality. Is it really a fire hose? Of course. And a work of art? Yes. With Shrine For Girls, are they really just piles of girls' clothes? Yes. Is it really a real shrine? Yes. Is it also simultaneously an art installation? Yes. The openness of the project is its strength. Can you go there and pray? Sure. Reflect, remember? Absolutely. And is it also a work of art, secular and cultural? Yes. Is it for sale? Yes. And does 10% of my profits go to three non-profit organizations connected to the three tragic events? Yes. It's completely real and social on every level. Visitors to the show have tried to give money directly to the exhibition attendant at the church. They wanted to do something immediately. And the most poetic moment for me and how I judge success is this: We had to rope off the church one day for a couple of hours to do a video shoot/interview. A group of Indian women tourists passed by and read my signage outside which has Shrine For Girls written in the 14 most frequently spoken languages. They read Shrine For Girls in Hindi, saw the saris on the central altar from outside, went to their hotel room, went through their luggage and brought a black sari for mourning they were traveling with to give to me to add to the shrine. There was no press release in Hindi. My art communicated across national, geographical, and linguistic boundaries. THAT is how I define a successful artwork! Not how much it sells for at auction.

BR: So can you talk a little about the Shrine for Girls? It's a pretty complex piece, but I think you've brought together a lot of things, ideas, and influences that make it a kind of summation of your work up to this point.

PC: I LOVE that you see it that way! Shrines are part of every major world religion. Since I was creating a site-specific installation inside a de-consecrated church, and since these women and girls are missing or dead, I decided to honor them within the construct of spirituality. The history of art is the history of remembrance and memorialization, but that architecture, those memorials and monuments, are reserved for only the most powerful people -- men and sometimes their wives and mothers of his heirs. I wanted to treat these non-royal women and girls' deaths with the dignity they were denied in life. I have gathered hundreds of girls' clothes from around the world and arranged them on three stone altars to act as relics of these young martyrs. Commemorating their spirit, this dramatic site-specific installation is a meditation on the incalculable loss of unrealized potential and hopelessness in the face of unfathomable human cruelty, juxtaposed against the obligation and mission we have as citizens of the world to combat this prejudice.

BR: I see a little bit of Bill Viola and Sophie Calle in it. They have also made work for churches.

PC: Artists have made art for churches for centuries, up to and including Matisse's Chapel of the Rosary in Venice, France, and the Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas. Both are actually places of worship and major works of art. Recently, Sophie Calle's and Bill Viola's installations in churches have been very interesting to me. Sophie Calle's *Rachel, Monique* (2014) in the Chapel at The Episcopal Church of Heavenly Rest, New York, which was a reflection on the death of her mother, had a light interventionist touch that was really impactful. The installation allowed for the church to maintain its purpose while inserting very clever and moving conceptual video and sculptures. Neither detracted from the other, and I think it is very important to create a tight rigorous conceptual installation in a space with pre-existing specific meaning and function. Don Gianmatteo Caputo, the priest in charge of Chiesa di San Gallo and the other 199 churches in Venice, said, "The church has to bring something to the work, and the work has to bring something to the church." It's a dialogue between an historic religious architectural space and contemporary art.



Creating site-specific art for a church, a place of sacrifice and love, defeat and hope, is a daunting task and must be approached with a different kind of consideration than a show for a white box gallery. In Robert Storr's 2007 Venice Biennale, Bill Viola presented *Oceans Without a Shore*, also in Chiesa di San Gallo. It was a dramatic installation where single figures emerged toward the viewers on video screens on each altar inside the darkened church interior. Similarly, but different, in *Shrine For Girls*, natural light creates a contemplative atmosphere, drawing the viewer close to commune with each sculpture. Other examples... I really liked Christian Boltanski's *No Man's Land* (2010), with piles of rumpled clothing about memory. I also like Ann Hamilton's *Indigo Blue* (1991/2007), with a massive pile of folded denim workers' shirts. In *Shrine For Girls*, I wanted the specificity of the three subjects and their horrific circumstances to be legible. I didn't want viewers to poke their heads in the church, see a pile of dirty

laundry, think they got the message, and walk away. But I also didn't want to hit people over the head with the content; I wanted it to slowly reveal itself. By luring my audience into the church, by elegantly arranging the chromatically rich saris on the central altar, viewers move closer out of curiosity and then notice a small framed photograph to the side -- then all becomes clear. With such disturbing content, I thought it was important not to beat them up with it, but let to their own specific emotional, psychological narrative arch take place.

BR: And you have brought back the element of portraiture...

PC: In addition to the sculptures, there are also two-dimensional works in the Shrine For Girls series.

If I were to show work from this series in a vast white cube gallery space, I would want to have the paintings and watercolors of the people involved on the walls to bring together both the individual and the vast numbers of individuals who have had to withstand this unbearable human cruelty.

During the time that curator Ludovico Pratesi invited me to do this show, that the Venice Biennale selected us as a Venice Biennale Collateral Event, and that the Diocese of Venice chose our proposal for Chiesa di San Gallo, I was making these oil paintings and watercolors while I was researching and thinking about what I would do with the three stone altars.

Amartya Sen, the Nobel Prize-winning economist, wrote in 1990 in the New York Review of Books that at any given time 110 million women are missing. What do you do with that number once it's in your head? Supposedly Stalin said one death is a tragedy; 1,000 deaths are just a statistic. How do you get people to focus on, to care about, such a large crisis? Especially today with our 24-hour news cycle, when every day brings another catastrophe. I was also thinking about the "identifiable victim effect" and decided that painting portraits of the specific individuals would be the perfect companion objects to the piles of anonymous empty clothes. The process of painting is meditative and reflective for me. Spending the day painting the portraits of these dead or kidnapped girls is really difficult but very necessary. There is something caring about quietly applying soft paint with a brush, pouring bowls of watercolor on smooth, hot press paper. And why shouldn't these people have a beautiful portrait and be treated with the dignity usually afforded kings and heads of state?

The watercolors have a slightly out-of-focus effect, as if the subject might come closer and into focus but never does. They're out of our reach, permanently.

With the oil paintings, I've tried to use colors with chromatic intensity so it hurts your retinas a little. It should hurt to look at these paintings because the topic is so painful. - Bradley Rubenstein

Mr. Rubenstein is a painter, story teller, and smart culture aficionado.