



Desperately Seeking Harriet

The American artist Patricia Cronin on the trail of a forgotten sculptress

Patricia Cronin's sculpture Memorial to a Marriage has attracted considerable attention. She installed the pair of naked women in white marble in the middle of the Woodlawn Cemetery in New York, on the grave she will one day share with her girlfriend. Currently, the artist is a fellow at the American Academy in Rome, where she's busy researching the work of a 19th-century sculptress once steeped in scandal. The project is also funded by the New York Foundation for the Arts, which awarded her the Deutsche Bank Fellowship 2007.

While George W. Bush met with minister president Romano Prodi and opposition leader Silvio Berlusconi on a recent visit to Rome, his wife Laura set sight on the city's culture. The First Lady visited the Quirinal Palace, explored the necropolis beneath St. Peter's Cathedral, and dropped by the American Academy, where she also visited an exhibition by the artist Patricia Cronin. Cronin's monochrome watercolors depict sculptures by Harriet Hosmer, an American sculptress who lived thirty years in Rome. The artist was famous during the final decades of the 19th century, if not a bit infamous. Today, she is largely forgotten. And so Laura Bush was confronted with not one, but two women whose way of life defies conservative conventions.

It's doubtful that the president's wife was shown the erotic gouaches Patricia Cronin made her name with in the mid-nineties. The explicit close-ups depict the artist having sex with her girlfriend, the painter Deborah Kass. Monument to a Marriage (2002) also celebrates their love – this time in marble, in the Neo-Classical style of the 19th century. The white sculpture shows the two women on a bed in an intimate embrace; their naked bodies are clearly visible beneath a thin sheet. Cronin installed the three-ton work in the Woodlawn Cemetery, on the grave she will one day share with her lover.

The cemetery, which is frequently regarded as the New York version of the Père Lachaise in Paris, is home to the graves of American icons such as Herman Melville, Duke Ellington, and Miles Davis; the last six mayors of New York City and a number of honorable congressmen and senators also rest in peace here. Cronin smuggled a subversive monument into the midst of the melancholy angels, broken columns, and mausoleums built in the style of medieval castles or antique temples. A lesbian love death as a monument to a marriage that, according to the law, never existed.



Patricia Cronin
Memorial to a Marriage
Woodlawn Friedhof
Photo: Lee Sandstead



Patricia Cronin
The Sleeping Faun By Harriet Hosmer, 1865
The Harriet Hosmer Catalogue Raisonné Project
© Patricia Cronin



Patricia Cronin
Memorial to a Marriage
© Patricia Cronin



In the course of her research for the sculpture, Cronin happened upon Harriet Hosmer – the first woman to make a career as a sculptress. The life of the 1830-born American would supply an ideal subject for a feminist novel. Because he lost his other children and his wife to tuberculosis, Harriet’s father raised her like a son. The doctor was convinced that he could only arm his daughter against the dreaded disease through strenuous physical exercise. It quickly emerged that the athletically talented girl could not only ride and shoot splendidly, but was artistically gifted as well. As a result, her father set up her first studio, while a doctor friend taught her the basic principles of anatomy. Harriet refused to comply with the traditional women’s role, preferring men’s clothing and even daring to travel the Mississippi without a chaperone. One of her early sculptures attracted the attention of Charlotte Cushman. The lesbian actress with a weakness for male roles was about to embark for Rome. She convinced Harriet’s father to allow his daughter to accompany her there. There was hardly a chance for the young artist to develop in the United States, because most art academies refused to admit women.

In Rome, Hosmer’s talent impressed the English sculptor John Gibson, who took on the 22-year-old as his only student. His Neo-Classical works, influenced by Canova and Thorwaldsen, left their mark on her developing style. She quickly enjoyed her first successes with her marble sculptures and sold 50 copies of her Puck – one of them to the Prince of Wales.

She often based her works on heroines of antiquity, such as the Syrian queen Zenobia who stood up to the Roman Empire, and successfully defended herself in court against rumors that she herself didn’t create her sculptures, but her workshop staff. In Rome, she belonged to a literary circle that included Henry James, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and sculptresses such as Anne Whitney, Edmonia Lewis, and Emma Stebbins. Women without men, whom James called a “strange sisterhood of American ‘lady sculptors.’” Even the Queen of Naples posed for Hosmer, who remained true to herself in Italy as well, wearing men’s jackets and sporting short hair. Today, hardly anything has remained of her former fame: although she is represented in the collections of many important museums, Harriet Hosmer has been largely forgotten.

Now, Patricia Cronin has set out to change this with her series Harriet Hosmer Catalogue Raisonné. In researching the causes of the artist’s disappearance, Cronin asks who becomes part of (art) history and who is deleted from it. She began her search in New York and continued the project upon her arrival in Rome, tracking down Hosmer’s works as though for a customary catalogue raisonné, an illustrated overview of an artist’s entire work. Cronin does not



Will o' the Wisp, 1858
Harriet Hosmer
Courtesy Smithsonian American Art Museum



Zenobia By Harriet Hosmer,
The Harriet Hosmer Catalogue Raisonne Project
© Patricia Cronin

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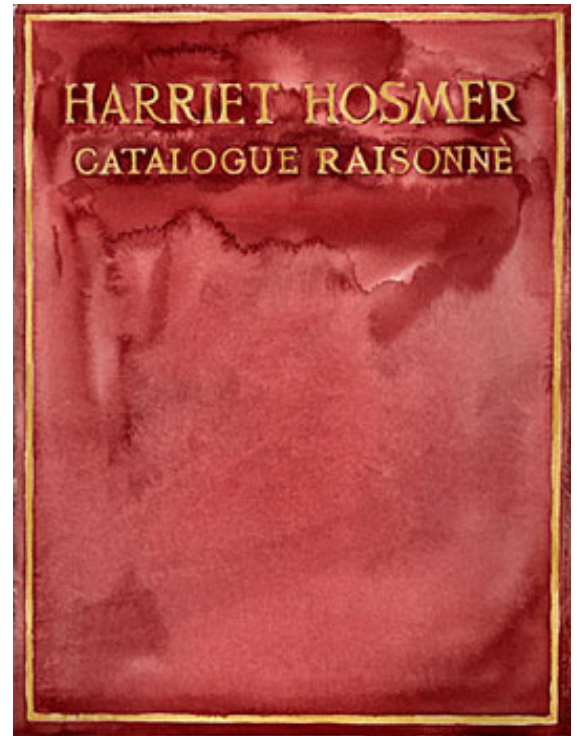


photograph the sculptures, however, but records them in watercolor, a medium that lends itself particularly well to the play of light on marble. The watercolors are accompanied by handwritten texts on the history of the sculptures. The New York Foundation for the Arts fellowship, sponsored by Deutsche Bank, will enable her to soon publish the painted catalogue of works as an artist's book.

Cronin's exhibition in Rome depicts Hosmer's sculptures in chronological order. In between are often sheets of paper on which a statue is merely alluded to. "There's one sculpture of Hattie's which has completely disappeared, a life-sized rendering of Maria Sofia, Queen of Naples, with whom Hattie had an affair," as the artist explains in an interview. All that exists are descriptions of the work, which the London Art Journal once termed her "crowning achievement." Cronin has converted these notes into forms that seem almost ghostly. They not only evoke lost sculpture; they also stand for an extinguished career that Patricia Cronin's project seeks to salvage from obscurity.

Achim Drucks

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Medusa By Harriet Hosmer,
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Mermaid's Cradle By Harriet Hosmer,
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