

From Courbet to the Bronx, The Love That Dare Not Speak Its Names Gets Marriage Memorial

by **Allison Meier** on October 10, 2011



Patricia Cronin, "Memorial to a Marriage," bronze. (all images courtesy Resnicow Schroeder Associates)

When Woodlawn Cemetery was established in the Bronx in 1863, the art of funerary commemoration was in its height. Sculptures by renowned artists like [Augustus Saint-Gaudens](#) and [Daniel Chester French](#) were as likely to be found decorating tombs as galleries and public spaces. The Metropolitan Museum wasn't opened until 1870 and Central Park had only just been created, so many people would take their weekend fresh air among the monuments in the rural cemeteries like Woodlawn and Green-Wood in Brooklyn.

That era of memorial sculpture ended, and most of us are laid to rest under somber slabs of dark granite with only the barest of ornamentation. [Patricia Cronin](#) saw the revival of this tradition as a way to not only create a lasting tribute to her and her wife's love on their burial plot in Woodlawn, but to build a memorial to a marriage she thought they would never be able to have. I recently talked to Cronin over the phone.

“When I first installed the marble, there was one reporter I talked to who thought I was doing something really avant garde, and I had to explain to him that before there was a Central Park, people went to the cemeteries,” she said. “You brought food and the kids and picnicked.”



Patricia Cronin at the installation of “Memorial to a Marriage”

“Memorial to a Marriage” was installed in 2002 in marble form, funded by a grant from Grand Arts. However, despite seeming like a substance of eternity, marble is incredibly fragile, especially in New York pollution, and it was already beginning to deteriorate not even a decade later. On September 20 of this year, Cronin installed a new version cast in bronze.



Detail of "Memorial to a Marriage"

She said she picked bronze not only for its fortitude, but also to add a level of interaction with visitors. While she was researching cemeteries in Paris, she observed how it tends to polish down in certain touched areas. (The sculpture of assassinated lady's man [Victor Noir in Père Lachaise](#) comes to my mind.)

"I like extending the performatory participatory nature of my project," she said.



Detail of "Memorial to a Marriage"

One of her major influences was Gustave Courbet's "[Le Sommeil \(The Sleepers\)](#)" (1866), where two women sleep heavily in each other's arms. Like the lovers in Courbet's painting, Cronin and her wife Deborah Kass are naked in a bed, asleep under Bernini-like folds of sheets. It's a very tactile bronze, and I can imagine the years of hands that might caress over it in worn patterns, but at the same time it's very traditional in its creation. Monumental sculpture isn't a focus of many contemporary artists, especially not bronze sculpture specifically created for cemeteries.

"I was just trying to really calibrate this so it was as sensual as I thought it needed to be, but also referencing American culture in its puritanical roots," she said.



Patricia Cronin and Deborah Kass

While Cronin and Deborah Kass married on July 24, the day same-sex marriage was legalized in New York, that wasn't possible when she started the grave marker.

"It's almost like a little bit of time play," she said. "I'm alive, and I made a memorial to something that didn't exist."

She states that the federal Defense of Marriage Act does still have to be repealed so that same-sex couples can be assured of their rights, but there was another landmark moment that coincided with the installation of her neoclassical bronze sculpture, which was the day that gay soldiers could serve openly in the military.



Installation of "Memorial to a Marriage"

Although she calls it an "anti-monument," in that it's not stabbing the sky like an obelisk or commanding attention like a temple mausoleum, it does weigh three tons as it hugs the ground, "pulling you in the direction of what it's about." The formidable mass of "Memorial to a Marriage" had an even bigger significance before she was able to be married.

"This had to have the weight of history, this had to be more real because I didn't have it," she said. "Aristotle said that the artist looks out and sees the world incomplete and tries to finish it. I think the piece, because it's so emotional and can get under people's skin about death and loss, there is a really type of aggressive aspect to it."

Since 2002 when the marble was first installed, the burial plot has become one of the most visited of Woodlawn, right along with Duke Ellington and Herman Melville.

Cemeteries are mostly unrealized as places for contemporary art, but with each burial plot having its own small space for free reign, they could again become grounds for expression, especially for those things that need to be memorialized for eternity.

[“Memorial to a Marriage”](#) by *Patricia Cronin* is on view in perpetuity at Woodlawn Cemetery (East 233rd Street, Bronx).

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