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Art in Old Places: Artist Patricia Cronin Confronts the Present with the Past

Posted on: February 7th, 2014 *by* Tom Mayes

We're periodically featuring posts from our colleague Tom Mayes, deputy general counsel at the National Trust and a 2013 Rome Prize winner in Historic Preservation from the American Academy. (Follow Preservation Leadership Forum for Tom's periodic essays on "why old places matter.") Here on PreservationNation, he'll be sharing his reflections on preservation at home and abroad.



Patricia Cronin's "Ghosts" exhibit at Museo Centrale Montemartini, Rome, Italy



"Context is everything," says Patricia Cronin, talking about the placement of her art in old and historic places -- from the three-ton marble monument "Memorial to a Marriage" in historic Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx, to her evanescent fabric Ghosts in Museo Centrale Montemartini, Rome.

"It's not just 'times three,'" she says. "It's exponential."

Cronin, who became a trustee of the American Academy in Rome in January and is President of the Society of Fellows, believes in the power of contemporary art in old places to give meaning to the present. Standing in the machine room of the 1912 Museo Centrale Montemartini, in front of a huge, black, 20th-century iron and steel electric power generator, a white marble Roman torso of a man, and the gently wafting image of one of her Ghosts, Cronin says simply, "I like time travel."

Cronin created the Ghosts for the machine room of the former power plant, which now serves as a museum of classical sculpture. Her works are imaginary abstractions of the missing sculptures of 19th-century artist Harriet Hosmer, a woman so famous in her day that she is supposedly the model for a character in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Marble Faun." Hosmer has faded from history, and some of her most important works are missing or unknown.

The Ghosts, fabricated through an up-to-the-moment contemporary technique, and exhibited among classical sculpture and the early 20th century machinery of the former thermoelectric plant, form what the curator Ludovico Pratesi says is "a powerful dialogue between past and present, between archaeology, industry, and, of course, contemporary art."

Often, when people talk about contemporary art in old places, they say the art challenges the past. **But listening to Cronin discuss her work, I was struck by a different idea -- that these images challenges the present. Or at least our present understanding of the past.**

Harriet Hosmer wasn't lost to the past; she was famous. It's the present that isn't aware of her or her work. The exhibit forces us to see a past that has been lost, or become anonymous and unnamed, and to question why our idea of the past has left her and countless others out of the story.

Cronin told me that, to her, the Ghosts not only bring Hosmer back into the present, they also bring to life the unnamed workers who built and worked in the power plant and the anonymous carvers of the classical marble statues. It creates not only a dialogue between the classical world and the 20th century, but also between the 19th century and the 21st century, right up to the present.

Here's the power of old places demonstrated in a former power station: to enable these stories -- lost or known -- to become alive.



Watch this brief clip of Patricia Cronin at Museo Centrale Montemartini discussing the meaning of her Ghosts:



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