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People We Love: Patricia Cronin



When Patricia Cronin creates something, it speaks too loudly for us *not* to hear the message. Cronin has had a long, thriving career, but she is perhaps best known for her three-ton Carrera marble mortuary sculpture, *Memorial To A Marriage*, which depicts herself and her now-wife, fellow artist Deborah Kass, holding each other naked in bed. However, her most recent work, *Shrine For Girls*, displayed at the Venice Biennale, is becoming just as widely recognized. The installation is a tribute to different groups of abused and repressed women throughout the world. Featuring garments piled on a shrine, it speaks volumes about social injustice in a world that allows it to continue.

I recently sat down with Cronin to discuss *Shrine For Girls*, gender politics in the art world, the reality of being a “working” artist today, and the female form, which has been a huge inspiration for her work. She fearlessly speaks the truth, and even managed to change my mind about the words I use to describe women’s bodies (you’ll see what I mean). Holding nothing back, it’s hard not be completely wowed by this brilliant woman.

Why did you decide to become an artist?

I don’t think I decided. It was just what I had to do. I drew pretty obsessively as a child, writing poems and making drawings of horses, especially. I won first place at the annual art contest at my local

library in Brockton, Massachusetts for a drawing of a Palomino horse, and the prize was I got to choose a hardcover book. This seemed like a million dollars to me! I chose *Harriet The Spy*. I grew up in a devout Catholic family in New England, so a sense of social justice and doing good in the world before financial rewards was instilled in me from a young age. Because of my upbringing, when I went to college and studied Art and Art History, the narratives in the paintings and sculptures were not only completely familiar but also meaningful to me.

As a female, have you faced discrimination in the art world?

Yes, absolutely. Every day. Unfortunately it's still very much a boy's club. Older, moneyed men are professionally and socially infatuated with younger versions of themselves, and they support, collect, trade, and promote them and their work. Museum directors, curators, and gallery owners cater to those clients. It's statistically impossible that with the same access to education, that men's art would be worth 90% more than women's. Talk about irrational exuberance! But it's not just the men that are the problem. Internalized sexism is equally dangerous. For example, even though I've spent my over two-decade career making critically acclaimed work with social justice themes about gender and sexuality, I've never been included in any feminist books or museum exhibitions. Prejudice based on gender is so ingrained in our culture. It cuts across all classes, races, ethnic backgrounds, religions, and educational levels that most people are completely oblivious to their beliefs and actions.

I once was fired from a teaching job at Pratt Institute at the height of "identity politics" in the mid-1990s, because I got a great New York Times review for a exhibition of provocative watercolors of lesbian sex up close from the point of view of one of the participants. Then the chair of the Department took to me lunch and told me "OK, so now we know about you..." and I was not "invited back" to teach there ever again. It was the whole point of the lunch to tell me he was doing this! Of course, none of my older white male colleagues were even having shows, never mind getting great reviews. It's completely baffling to me why anyone would spend so much money to send their children to schools where "never rans" teach?

The female form, particularly the imperfect one, has been a recurring theme in your work. Why do you think it's so important to show female bodies as they truly are?

Well, I think of it in a different way. I think women's bodies in many shapes, sizes, colors, and range of muscular builds are amazing. I think the Photoshopped Hollywood ideal of young, thin, Caucasian feminine beauty is a cruel fiction and a double standard. You see it everywhere, even professional women delivering the evening news seem to be required to exude a kind of coy sensuality and dress as if they were on their way to a cocktail party while their male colleague looks dressed for a boardroom meeting. Is their sexual desirability really a job requirement? Women need to be seen as powerful authorities, not solely sexual beings.

I always say, I'm so glad I don't make my living with the body or face, but with what's between my ears and my hands. And that doesn't mean I don't care about what I look like!

[Note: After reading Cronin's answer, I actually regretted using the word "imperfect" because the term is judgmental and frankly, wrong. Just because a body doesn't appear to reach society's standards doesn't make it "imperfect," so to say. My change of heart just goes to show you what a convincing feminist Cronin is.]

What do you consider your most feminist work?

Memorial To A Marriage, a three-ton marble mortuary statue of my (now) wife and myself installed on our burial plot in Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx. I made it in 2002, before gay marriage was legal anywhere in the United States, when the only legal protections gay couples could get were wills, healthcare proxies, and power-of-attorney documents. It wasn't about celebrating the life we would have together, but about the end of our lives, if one of us was incapacitated or died! If all was going to be legally allowed was death, this was the most elegant political protest I could think of. A protest song and love song all rolled into one. I used a "nationalist" form, American Neo-Classical marble sculpture to address a federal failure.

Using a lesbian couple as the face of a gay marriage artwork confused gay men in some circles. When I would talk about it as my "gay marriage" piece, I had several gay men do a double take, thinking they had missed a sculpture with two men!

The difficulties for female artists making monumental public sculpture are many, funding being the biggest hurdle. Since it is so rare that women are given the opportunity with the “big boy budgets,” purchasing my own burial plot in the historic Woodlawn Cemetery beautifully combined my political protest with an untenable legal and professional reality. Woodlawn, designed as America’s Pere Lachaise Cemetery, is where famous Americans like J.P. Morgan, Miles Davis, Herman Melville, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Madam C.J. Walker are buried.

Being the kind of artist I am is akin to the smart indie feminist film director vs. the Hollywood studio director, of which there are famously very few women and where the number of tickets sold defines success. I make the kind of art that is written about in cultural studies and art history books, not because of how much money my work sells for at auction, but for its aesthetic and conceptual significance.

The questions my work asks are: whose body has value, who gets to decide, and what are the consequences to the individual and the community?

What is *Shrine for Girls*?

Shrine For Girls is a series of site-specific sculptural installations in different cities around the world, reflecting on the global plight of exploited women and girls. The first version, *Shrine For Girls, Venice* is a solo Collateral Event of the 56th International Art Exhibition—la Biennale di Venezia 2015. It’s the most prestigious international exhibition, held every other year since 1895 in Venice, Italy. It’s like the Olympics of the Art World. This year, 89 countries and over 300 artists were chosen to participate with an over-arching theme of “the disquiet of our time.”

Although the United Nations passed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, women and girls around the world continue to be among the most vulnerable members of our global society. So, I created a shrine in their honor.

I’d 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.

The central altar exhibits brightly colored saris worn by girls in India, three of whom were recently gang raped, murdered, and left to hang from trees. The left altar displays hijabs representing the 276 schoolgirls kidnapped by Boko Haram in Nigeria. And the third altar presents a pile of aprons and uniforms symbolizing those worn by girls at the Magdalene Asylums and Laundries, forced labor institutions for young women without options in Ireland, the United Kingdom, and America as recently as 1996.

Shrines, part of every major religion’s practice, provide a space for contemplation, petition and rituals of remembrance. In this exhibition, dramatically illuminated mounds of their clothing are elevated to the status of art to bring awareness to this urgent crisis, while providing a space to reflect and, hopefully, compell viewers to action. One framed photograph of each of these three tragic events will accompany the installation, which hopes to propose a new and reflective dialogue between gender, memory, and justice.

Also, in the exhibition I give viewers a way to act. I provide information about three nonprofit organizations related to these three tragedies: CamFed, the Campaign for Female Education in Sub-Saharan Africa; the Gulabi Gang, a group of hot pink sari-wearing women activists in India; and Justice For the Magdalenes, a survivors resource group in Ireland. I have pledged to donate 10% of my profits to these organizations.

How is *Shrine for Girls* different from your previous work?

My aesthetic strategy is to inject my contemporary political content into art historical forms made with traditional artists' materials, from erotic watercolors to bronze horses, oil portrait paintings, marble, and bronze statues. And since Duchamp brought his "ready-made" urinal into a gallery in 1917, utilizing actual objects for conceptual art purposes has been historicized too. *Shrine For Girls, Venice*, where I bring the clothing into the church is my second "ready made." The first was my "Tack Room," an installation where I re-created the part of a barn where all the saddles, bridles, whips, chaps, and equestrian accouterments are stored. It was like reliving an adolescence I never had and trying to be prophetic about my future, albeit an erotically charged one. But like *Shrine For Girls, Venice*, the actual female bodies are absent.

There are very few "working artists" who get to make a living doing what they love. What does that feel like?

Well, I'm a full-time working artist and a full professor at Brooklyn College of The City University of New York. It takes both jobs to get all the bills paid. Studios are insanely expensive in New York, and bronze and marble sculptures have large fabrication costs. I like to say that artists are the last small manufacturers left in New York. But even with all the professional and economic challenges, it is incredibly rewarding to spend your life doing something you love (I know, completely cheesy) but also something you truly believe is important and really reflects your values.

I think the artist's job is to look out and keenly observe the world, reflect, and respond, and bear witness. I see the world as incomplete and I try to complete it in my studio. I only make work that I need to exist in world. You have to have an inner core of steel to work alone every day and be able to sustain that level of rigor, focus, and commitment. It's almost like a monastic practice.

What advice do you have for other aspiring artists?

Find a city you can afford to live in that will allow you enough time to perfect your craft and deepen your practice. Become a good audience member for whatever art scene exists there and then contribute in concrete ways to making that scene more robust. It can be as simple as writing art reviews for your local weekly newspaper, starting an art blog, holding monthly soirees in your studio or home, organizing meetups to see all the local shows, or a roving studio visit group or reading group. With social media it's even easier to do now than when I started in the late 1980s. Philadelphia, Detroit, Cleveland, and New Orleans are cities I think have a lot of potential for the creative class, right now. You get out of it what you put into it. Passively waiting for people to "discover" your genius is a myth.

What is your next project?

In addition to traveling *Shrine For Girls*, the global crisis in masculinity weighs heavily on me. What people are doing to other people is so disturbing. It's easy to hear the numbers of people who are trafficked, refugees, migrants, child brides, or soldiers and lose track of the fact that these are people. The magnitude of the atrocities is numbing. And the human body is at the core of what I'm obsessed with and that everyone deserves to be treated with dignity. If I could make heartbreaking bodies the rest of my life, I think I could fulfill my life's purpose. Heavy, I know! I

may go back to Dante's *Inferno*, a series I was working on for a few years before this. Poets are still debating about his