



Courtesy of National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

Sculpting Equality

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The ongoing national conversation about statues and the history they represent tends to overlook an important fact: the significant lack of sculptures featuring women. As *Smithsonian Magazine* pointed out, “Of the estimated 5,193 public statues depicting historic figures on display on street corners and parks throughout the United States, only 394 of these monuments are of women.”

That dearth makes Brooklyn College Professor Patricia Cronin’s latest accomplishment all the more meaningful. The Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery announced it would include Cronin’s bronze sculpture *Memorial to a Marriage* (2002) as part of the 50th Anniversary of its ‘Recent Acquisitions’ exhibition.

The sculpture depicts Cronin and her partner, artist Deborah Kass, holding one another in a loving embrace. If including “Memorial” in the title strikes an ominous tone, Cronin intended that very effect. She told the Smithsonian, “I made a double portrait funerary sculpture because the only legal protections gay people could have were wills, health care proxies and power of attorney documents and those didn’t celebrate our life together but the end of it.”



Patricia Cronin, “Memorial to a Marriage”

At the time Cronin completed *Memorial*, same-sex marriage was still illegal in the U.S. “[M]y country treats the LGBTQ community and women with such little regard and unequal under the law,” she said. “I couldn’t be silent.”

The material Cronin chose to work with also helped her reclaim her narrative and turn it into a monument. According to Edgar Degas, bronze symbolizes eternity, and Cronin noticed it lasted far longer than other marble tomb sculptures she studied.

Cronin originally chose to display the piece at New York’s Woodlawn Cemetery by repurposing her burial plot. The setting spoke to the lack of sculptures by and about women in American public spaces. She explained, “As I tell my women artists friends – if you want permanent public art – you’ve got to buy the land!”