

ART

MEMORIAL TO A MARRIAGE: ARTIST PATRICIA CRONIN CASTS ETERNITY

by Legacy Russell Sep 19, 2011

Legacy Russell spoke to artist Patricia Cronin about the installation of her *Memorial to a Marriage*, to be installed at Woodlawn Cemetery this Fall. With *Memorial to a Marriage*, art and politics will be forever wedded and bedded.



Patricia Cronin, *Memorial To A Marriage*, over-life size, bronze, 2000-09, courtesy of Ross Willows.

“Until death do us part!” has been a cornerstone of many nuptial negotiations throughout history. I say “negotiations” because, ultimately, that is where the seedlings of marriage find their genesis—in the realm of the legal, and therefore the contractual. Patricia Cronin’s *Memorial to a Marriage*, however, adds another element to the mix—the sculptural. We are born, we live, we die, and, from chapel to cemetery, pairs and partners swear to make these steps from the wedding bed to the coffin bed, together.

This is why Cronin’s piece, to be installed at the Woodlawn Cemetery on September 20th, strikes me as simultaneously an intensely pragmatic and graceful expression of the dawn of a new era in the politics of marriage and its relationship to art. Though the work draws on a Neoclassical aesthetic, it is inherently contemporary in its current relevance, cutting to the quick by depicting both Cronin and her wife, artist Deborah Kass, in repose, draped in sheets, and caressing in their coupledness. *Memorial* is a work of bronze a medium that Cronin adroitly notes was dubbed by Degas as the “medium for eternity”—a perfect wedding of form, material, and content, attended to by the ghosts of art history.

In conversation, Cronin called the install of this work at the Woodlawn Cemetery “a return of sculpture to its original site”, hearkening back to perhaps simpler times before the canal between the artist studio and the acquiring institution was solidified as the primary path of provenance. In cemeteries like Woodlawn one can find early examples of public art that chart the shifts in use of materials ranging from marble to bronze and beyond. Thus, these spaces act as archives of artistic movements as much as they chronicle the lives of those no longer with us.

Though Cronin and Kass are still very much alive, *Memorial* acts as a brazen harbinger for an inescapable means to an end. Their being present to continue to engage in social critique (what Cronin calls “dissent without victimhood”) is a welcome reprieve from the trend of the deceased (female) artist being spoken for by a sea of commentators, critics, and curators.

Originally produced in marble, this September the marble will be switched out for bronze, in the interest of conservation, with the marble piece going on tour to other (indoor) sites in the country. The work itself marks the final stop on a three-year journey wherein Cronin worked with Grand Arts of Kansas City aiming to produce her “dream piece”, yet in a material that she had never worked in before.

Memorial’s path to production therefore straddles the line between the *before* and *after* of same-sex marriage being legalized in New York. When I ask if the goal of the work has changed since starting out, Cronin does not miss a beat: “Until the Federal government overturns the Defense of Marriage Act, we still don’t have the same rights as others do.” Her hope is that perhaps the relevance of this work will at some point be retired, ending up eventually as a marker of a staid and archaic time of intolerance.

“If all I am going to be legally afforded is death,” Cronin said in a recent conversation, “I’m going to make as eloquent a statement as possible.”

Patricia Cronin and Deborah Kass were married in July at the Marriage Bureau in Manhattan.

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