

Sculpture

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MAKING THE *Personal* MONUMENTAL

A Conversation with **Patricia Cronin**

by Jan Garden Castro

Patricia Cronin's three-ton marble mortuary sculpture *Memorial to a Marriage* is heroic in size, scale, and theme. At its debut at Grand Arts in Kansas City on September 6, the artist and her partner were doubled, their presence mirrored by their marble likenesses embracing in what Cronin describes as "post-coital bliss." The work takes its theme from Courbet's 1876 painting *The Sleep*, its style from 19th-century mortuary sculpture, and part of its process from 21st-century technology. *Memorial to a Marriage* was permanently installed at the Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx. Its November 3 unveiling was presented by Deitch Projects, New York. *Memorial* is a new sculptural direction for Cronin. Her work includes close-up, sensual, and explicit drawings of women making love, shown from a participant's point of view. Cronin also draws on horses as a metaphor and symbol that she associates with girls, women, sexuality, and power. Since receiving her BFA from Rhode Island College in 1986 and her MFA from Brooklyn College in 1988, Cronin has been featured in five solo exhibitions and over 50 group exhibitions. The plaster model of *Memorial* was included in the recent exhibition "Family" at the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art in Ridgefield, Connecticut. Cronin is the recipient of two Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grants. She is a visiting critic in the Graduate Art Program at Yale University, and she also teaches undergraduate courses at the School of Visual Arts.

Jan Castro: *What is the genesis of your latest project?*

Patricia Cronin: For the last two and a half years, I've been working on *Memorial to a Marriage*. Carved in marble, it's an over-life-sized double portrait of my partner and me in a loving embrace. I'm interested in subverting the 19th-century figurative style by injecting contemporary content. The project was funded predominantly by Grand Arts, the Kansas City-based foundation. They pick a few artists a year, ask them what their dream piece would be, and then pay most fabrication costs.

When I was selected by Grand Arts, I had just finished

a series of bronze horses, and I started looking around New York City at all of the public equestrian monuments. In these war memorials, the men were specific, the horses were particular, but, alas, the women were all allegorical. I loved these sculptures but found them lacking. I tried to find images of women in public places that were particular. In Manhattan, there are Eleanor Roosevelt, Golda Meir, Joan of Arc, Alice in Wonderland, and Mother Goose. The same artists who made war memorials also made cemetery art, most famously Augustus Saint Gaudens who made the Adams monument (commissioned in 1886) in Rock Creek Cemetery in Washington, DC. Soon, I was researching cemeteries and the "Garden" or "Rural" Cemetery Movement,

Memorial to a Marriage, 2000–01. Carrara marble, 83 x 40 x 27 in.

as it was known. Women, children, and men are remembered specifically there.

I looked at 19th-century American idealizing sculpture as a model, especially Harriet Hosmer, but also Daniel Chester French, William Reinhardt, Edmonia Lewis, William Wetmore Story, Hiram Powers, and others. These artists were making sculpture for the new nation, even though Powers and Story stayed in Italy. Most people believed you had to be trained in Europe to make “real” art employing the popular themes of the time: literary figures, biblical subjects, Greek myths, or historical figures. So artists would get patrons to finance a “good start”—a trip to Italy, much like Grand Arts did for me.

JGC: *Where did you go?*

PC: First I went to Paris to research the Père Lachaise, Montparnasse, and Montmartre cemeteries, then to Italy, to Pietrasanta, where Michelangelo lived when buying marble, and to the next town north, Carrara. I selected a 21-ton block of Carrara Bianco P marble. One of the most exciting weeks in my life was up in the quarries. Strangely enough, they don’t allow women in the quarries, and they wouldn’t sell me a block that large and ship it to the U.S. unless I picked it. So we had to get special paperwork signed and stamped to allow us access. To me, this was like Rosa Bonheur getting permission to wear pants in the slaughterhouses to draw the carcasses.

JGC: *How did you develop the marriage theme?*

PC: The title *Memorial to a Marriage* is taken from the Lincoln Kirstein book about Saint Gaudens’s Adams Memorial. Henry Adams commissioned the sculpture of his wife Clover Adams, a photographer who committed suicide by drinking developing solution. It’s a wonderful book—their sophisticated Transcendental Bostonian lives were intellectual, romantic, and tragic.

Second, my partner and I cannot get married. We have wills, health-care proxies, powers of attorney, and all of the legal forms one can have, but they all pertain to what happens if one of us should become incapacitated or die. It’s not about our life together; it’s about the end of it. So I thought, what I can’t have in life, I will have forever, in death. Jessica Hough, curator of “Family” at the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art this summer, wrote in the catalogue: “Cronin’s ambitious sculpture celebrates and makes official in death her ‘marriage,’ which cannot be made legal in life.” I am using a national form, that is, American 19th-century ideal sculpture, to address a federal failure.

JGC: *Your figures give us a model richer than institutional paperwork. Were you at all concerned with creating too ideal a portrait?*

Clockwise from left: *Memorial to a Marriage*. Plaster, 2/3 to scale maquette. *Memorial to a Marriage*. Plasticine clay. 2/3 to scale maquette. Harriet Hosmer, *Beatrice Cenci*, 1857. Marble.



PC: Obviously, I think there's no such thing as "too ideal."

JGC: *What was the modeling process like?*

PC: The sculpture was made in my studio in a 19th-century way—modeling in clay and plaster. I started with photographs and drawings of my partner and myself. Then I hired two individual models with similar body types and hair textures. In clay, I modeled it at two-thirds scale because I couldn't get a life-sized version out of my studio. Then I refined the plaster: plumped up the mattress, made the curls in the hair a little curlier, refined the toes, the toenails, the fingernails.

In earlier times, the sculptor would send off the plaster to the carvers in the workshop. The carvers would carve the marble using a pointing machine identical to the plaster and send it back to the sculptor to finish. Rodin, Saint Gaudens, and Daniel Chester French didn't carve. They were modelers. The Piccirilli family of six brothers did the actual marble carving for Saint Gaudens and for French, the sculptor of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC. They carved many monuments in Woodlawn Cemetery.

Instead of a team of carvers, we fabricated this piece using the newest digital technology, a five-axis milling machine at Johnson Atelier in Mercerville, New Jersey. They bought a brand-new machine from Milan specifically to carve this piece—it's the second one built in the world. The machines are called CNC—Computer Numerically Controlled carving machines. The coupling of 21st-century technology with marble, one of the oldest artists' materials, is really fascinating, especially if you think that bringing back 19th-century forms is important. First, we 3D-scanned my two-thirds scale plaster to program the milling machine to do complex carving. The whole process has been an incredible education.

JGC: *How long did it take the machine to carve?*

PC: It took about three months. We had a couple of problems with a rubber seal and water in the ball bearings. But they guessed that it would have taken a year to carve by hand. I met the mathematician who came over from Milan to calibrate the machine. It's been a real team effort to replicate my plaster.

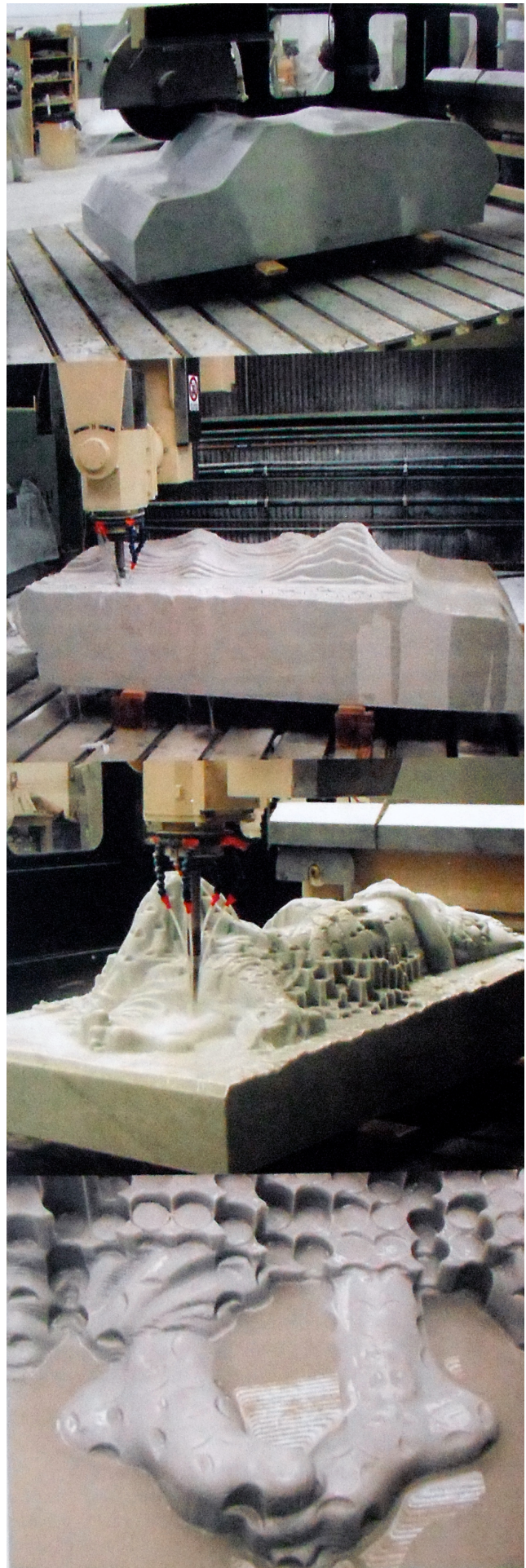
JGC: *It sounds exorbitantly costly.*

PC: Yes. Usually public sculpture of this scale is financed by an institution, a municipality, or a wealthy collector.

JGC: *What were the final stages?*

PC: Finishing the marble. We carved out the undercuts that the machine couldn't reach, making sure they were round—for instance, the way the back sinks into the mattress—then rasping, finishing, and polishing. It was nice to get back into it after modeling the clay, carving the plaster, and having the machine mill most of the sculpture. This is where Canova would come back into it to work on the finishes himself. Whether something is shiny or not—those are choices he made. You can highlight some areas and tone down others. The marble is quite responsive.

JGC: *Are you teaching yourself or have you worked in marble before? What is your learning curve?*



Four views of the computerized carving process used for *Memorial to a Marriage*.



The Domain of Perfect Affection, 1999. Wax and pine table, 40 x 48 x 30 in.

PC: The learning curve is high. A very good carver from Russia taught me as we went along. Each carver has his or her own specialty: roughing out, undercutting, decorative details, or polishing. I got a fast education.

JGC: *Your work seems quite responsive to art history. Could you discuss your critical influences?*

PC: In graduate school at Brooklyn College, I studied with Philip Pearlstein and Lee Bontecou, who have been enormously inspiring. If I had to pick somebody whose writings really influenced me, it would be Linda Nochlin. She's the top tomato of that pyramid as far as I'm concerned: "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?," "Eroticism and Female Imagery in Nineteenth-Century Art," and her essay on Gericault and the absence of women in his work.[1] She also writes about contemporary art, which makes her relevant to young feminists now.

Robert Rosenblum, who has written extensively on 19th-century art, sculpture, and animal imagery in art, has also had a large impact on my thinking. I can't say enough about Nochlin and Rosenblum. My partner, the artist Deborah Kass, has an obsessive relationship to art history—Modernism, in particular—that has informed my practice. For other art influences, I would include Rosa Bonheur.

JGC: *Yes, The Horse Fair.*

PC: Of course. In 1999, I made a piece called *The Domain of Perfect Affection*—little wax horse sculptures on a pine table. The title is Bonheur's name for her home, a chateau near Fontainebleau that she shared with her female companion and all of their animals. Cornelius Vanderbilt bought *The Horse Fair* in 1887 and donated it to the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

JGC: *Another horsewoman.*

PC: As was Harriet Hosmer, who came to Italy around the same time. She would dress like a man from the waist up but would still have to wear skirts in the studio, especially when people such as Queen Victoria would come to visit. She is known as the first professional woman sculptor, ever.

I'm not going to suggest that I'm her equal, but there are

similarities. She was born in Watertown, Massachusetts; I was born in Beverly and grew up in Brockton, Massachusetts. Her big break was Wayman Crow, the wealthy Saint Louis merchant who became her patron. It seems that my big break is this project with Grand Arts, which was entirely funded by the Margaret Hall Silva Foundation. Silva is part of a well-known Kansas City family. And while Prospect Park, which is near my studio in Brooklyn, is certainly not the Borghese Gardens, I have ridden horses there for five years.

I also think the reality of Hosmer's personal life influenced and is evidenced in her choices of subject, from Beatrice Cenci to Xenobia to the Queen of Naples. Likewise, my specificity informs my conceptual and formal decisions. Bonheur and Hosmer, in France and Italy around the same time, were big role models for me. How come they are not better known? The first generation of important American women artists has been totally erased, such as Emma Stebbins who made *Angel of the Waters* (1868) for the Bethesda Fountain in Central Park. So has the first generation of "independent women" artists. It's a disgrace.

JGC: *You seem to be re-discovering neglected sources. You give a nod, too, to Courbet's painting The Sleep (1867) in Memorial to a Marriage.*

PC: I love Courbet. I think he's one of the most important French painters. *The Sleep* might be the first painting of two women depicted in post-coital bliss. I wanted that kind of intimacy in my piece, but coupled with good old 19th-century American Puritanism. So it exists within the 19th-century American tradition, which was never as sexy as the French or Italian.

Besides that, the major difference between my piece and Courbet's is that mine is a portrait of two specific women in a particular relationship, and the work is made for those two women. Courbet hired two models to make a painting for a wealthy patron's erotic enjoyment. Despite these differences, I love *The Sleep* because it was the closest thing I had to identify with.

JGC: *In your Memorial, how did you develop the elaborate folds draping the women's legs?*

PC: I took the idea for the folds from Bernini's *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* (1645–52). His drapery seems to have no relation to reality or gravity. I thought that what he was trying to convey about her body couldn't be expressed with her body in the 1600s, so he let the surrounding fabric say it. Sadly, I still think that adult intimacy and the seriousness of a life commitment in same sex couples can't be conveyed explicitly in the early 2000s, over 400 years later, so I also am letting the fabric say it. I'm trying to make an object that is as much about love as it is about politics.

JGC: *Making this sculpture larger than life-size was a brilliant strategy. How does Memorial to a Marriage connect with your body of work on themes relating to feminism, lesbian sexuality, and horses?*

PC: The goal of my work is to go back, take very traditional forms to which I have some relationship, and insert contemporary content. I don't think everyone has gotten to speak through them yet; they are still viable means of expression/communication. The bronze horses that I made may allude to Degas, Eakins, and

Exterior and interior views of Tack Room, 1997-1998. Wood, leather, metal glass, and found objects, 96 x 116 x 125.

Remington, but they are the girl-postmodern version. If you look closely, they're cast from Breyer toy plastic horses, which is a \$50 million a year industry supported by horse-obsessed girls.

I made editions of four different sculptures—Stallion, Mare, Gelding, and Foal. I call them the four distinct sexual statuses of a horse. I think every female executive in the U.S. should have one on her desk. At first I made the original 10-inch and 12-inch ones; now I'm working on a stallion that is 28 inches high. I'm working my way up to the life-sized version. I really want this to exist as public art. New York City has an incredible equestrian sculpture collection, but they are all war heroes on stallions. As Deborah Butterfield has said, "They need a mare."

JGC: *How do you see your work crossing media and the role of sculpture in particular?*

PC: I'm really a conceptual artist who uses traditional forms—erotic watercolors, portraiture, bronze horses, landscape painting, mortuary/monumental sculpture—to address contemporary ideas that I think need addressing. These usually involve female subjectivity and autonomy, class, sexuality, power, and status. I weave back and forth between painting and sculpture—as did De-gas, Eakins, Sargent, and many artists from the 19th century. I am lucky that my technical facility is up to my conceptual choices of form. Or let's say that if it isn't, I learn fast.

JGC: *You've also read *Across An Untried Sea* by Julia Markus, about 19th-century women artists.*

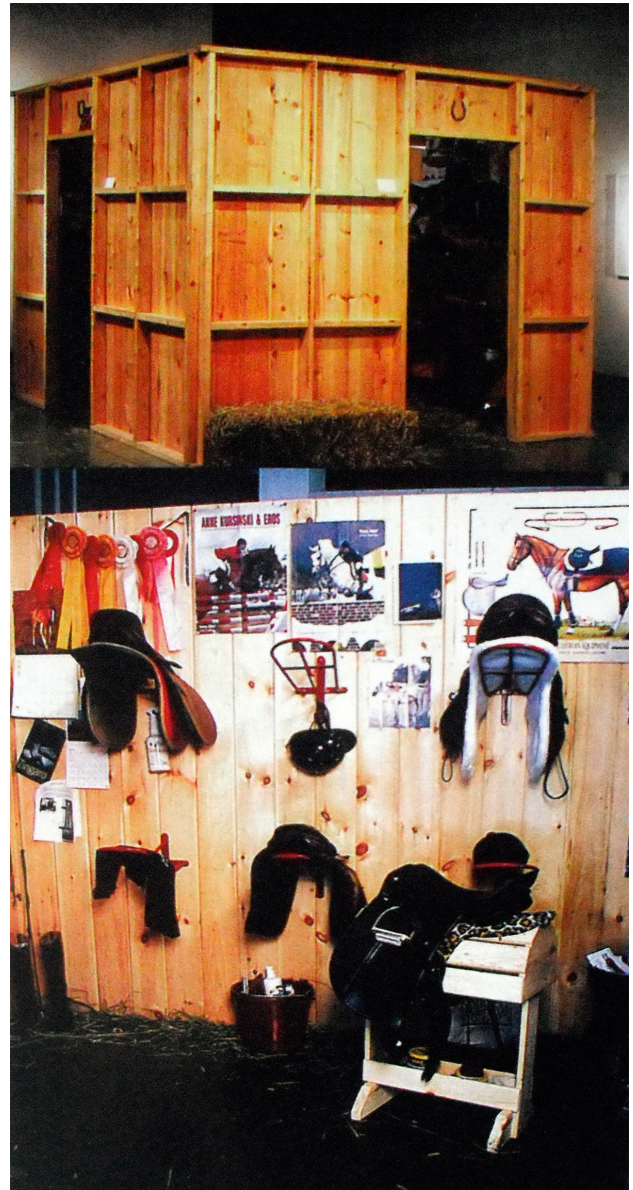
PC: Yes. I love that book, because the romantic and erotic attachments that these women had really explain their professional and financial interdependence. While there are other books, both fiction and nonfiction, from Hawthorne to James and more recent biographies, this is the first one that doesn't shy away from the reality of these women's lives. And of course I loved when the Crown Princess of Germany visits Hattie's [Harriet Hosmer's] studio and remarks about her talent for toes.[2] Much to my glee, people have remarked about the toes on my sculpture.

JGC: *Will *Memorial to a Marriage* be able to withstand environmental pollution? One friend told me that due to pollution most cemeteries no longer accept marble sculpture.*

PC: Greenwood in Brooklyn has not let in marble statuary since the 1880s, but Woodlawn is into conservation, and they're thrilled. They want to know if I want the snow brushed or blown off. They have tours of the beautiful women of Woodlawn and the historic women of Woodlawn. Elizabeth Cady Stanton is buried there.

JGC: *MIT Curator Bill Arning has suggested that, historically, lesbian relationships leave no visible trace except for coded passages embedded in diaries and the margins of photographs. You've changed that history.*

PC: What excites me about *Memorial to a Marriage* is that no-



body's ever done this before on this scale with this image. I really needed it to exist.

Grand Arts has its own sculpture studio but also funds projects created at other locations. Past artists include Glenn Goldberg, Alice Aycock, Kimberly Austin, Beth B, Tim Rollins & K.O.S., Isaac Julien, Dennis Oppenheim, Troy Richards, Jamex & Einar de la Torre, Roxy Paine, ChanSchatz, and Chris Larson. In 2003, the exhibition schedule features Sam Easterson, Ian Dawson, Teresita Fernandez, Catherine Chalmers, and Allan McCollum. Interested artists may contact www.grandarts.com for more information.

*Jan Garden Castro is author/curator of *Sonia Delaunay: La Moderne* and author of *The Last Frontier* and *The Art & Life of Georgia O'Keeffe*.*

Notes

1 The first two essays by Linda Nochlin are in *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988). See also Patricia Cronin, "What a Girl Wants," *Art Journal* Winter 2001, p. 90–97.

2 See Julia Markus, *Across An Untried Sea: Discovering Lives Hidden in the Shadow of Convention and Time* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), p. 27.