



A view of Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx, N.Y.



Patricia Cronin
Memorial to a Marriage
2003
Woodlawn Cemetery



Memorial to a Marriage



Egyptian Revival masoleum architecture at Woodlawn

Forever Yours

Is it pornographic or pious? To decide, think location, location, location

By Jerry Saltz *Tuesday, Oct 28 2003*

Seen in almost any Chelsea art gallery, Patricia Cronin's realistic, life-size, carved Carrara marble sculpture of her and her artist partner, Deborah Kass, supine, semi-naked, in a somnolent, loving embrace, would stick out as conservative—little more than a middling example of 19th-century sculpture. Given her spotty track record, you might not be surprised. Cronin, 40, made a moderate splash in the early 1990s exhibiting randy watercolors of herself and Kass making love. Instead of following up on this work's promise, she undertook an uninteresting series of paintings of horses, then houses. Her last local solo, in 1998 at White Columns, was a generic installation of a tack room filled with riding paraphernalia.

Now Cronin's done something somewhat daring and unusual: Since the art world hasn't beaten a path to her door, she's opened a different one. Memorial to a Marriage, as her sculpture is called, is not meant to be seen in a New York gallery—not now or ever. It is installed, and according to the artist "will be on view through eternity," about 10 miles north of Chelsea, in a shady dale of one of the toniest cemeteries in America, Woodlawn in the Bronx—the resting place of six former New York mayors, various robber barons, ladies and gentlemen of the gilded age, congressmen, senators, a Supreme Court chief justice, victims of the Titanic, scalawags and their scions, as well as Herman Melville, Duke Ellington, Miles Davis, and Irving Berlin.

At Woodlawn, often called "America's Père Lachaise," or "our most prestigious cemetery for men and women of accomplishment," Cronin's strategy of not fitting in turns fascinating. Here, among the tombs and temples, amid the urns, broken columns, inverted torches, medieval Celtic castles, carved weeping women, forlorn angels, and heartbroken figures, Memorial to a Marriage doesn't stand out, it blends in. So much so that it's almost invisible—just another monument to death, love, and loss in this amazing garden of graves. Only when you think about why Memorial blends in does it stop being conventional and start being insurrectionary.

I knew what I was looking for when I went to the cemetery. I had seen pictures of Memorial and even a small plaster model. Yet it still stunned me when I came upon it. The sculpture is technically proficient but stylistically ordinary: Saint-Gaudens by way of



Woodlawn's celebrated Kingsley angel



In memory of devoted mother

Courbet's painting of female lovers, *The Sleep*. But after wandering through Woodlawn and understanding what this place represents and how status quo it is, Cronin's queer cloaking tactic blossoms. If it were some sensationalistic girl-on-girl porn sculpture, Memorial would be obvious, ironic finger-pointing—little more than grandstanding. Instead, she plays not only with art history but also with the law. In the process she subverts both.

Memorial depicts Cronin on her back, a blissful smile on her lips, her right breast partially revealed by peeled-back sheets, cradling Kass, who sweetly spoons her and rests her head on her mate's shoulder. The lovers' arms and feet entwine. Somehow you know these are real women, not allegorical figures, cherubs, or spirits of eternal sleep—that they've shared one another's lives and bodies. After having been dumbstruck by so many spectacular and spectacularly gaudy monuments, looking down on this slab, which lies just above the ground on a low base, shaded by evergreen and oak trees, you're ushered into a very different, very juicy realm.

Memorial forces issues. If you're left of political center, you might feel like your side scored a point. If you're on the right, you might be offended. When I asked a clean-cut, twentysomething couple who they thought the carved women in Cronin's sculpture were, the young man said, "mythical people or saints"; the woman, "angels." I said, "I think they're lesbians, and that they've just had sex." The couple peered down, widened their eyes, tottered slightly, then began shaking their heads back and forth. I don't know what, only that Memorial did something to them.

It seems to be doing it a lot. According to a cemetery official, Susan Olsen, who keenly observes that much of Woodlawn is "widows' work" (many monuments were overseen by women), news of Memorial has spread: Cronin's is now the third most visited grave site at Woodlawn, behind only Miles Davis and Duke Ellington.

Cronin makes you understand that the space around us is charged with controlling mechanisms and sexual regulations, and that heterosexual rule is law, even if this law is enforced in ways that have grown so common as to be all but invisible. Executed in a classical style, Memorial is a deeply communal but adamantly anti-classic work. In a gallery, the sculpture would be an outcast. At Woodlawn, as in life, Cronin is: U.S. law still forbids her and Kass to marry. Memorial to a Marriage is a monument to something that can't happen here—yet. It is bittersweet, but also filled with an outlaw's outrage. At Woodlawn, Cronin has turned inequity into triumph.

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