Patricia Cronin
Memorial to a Marriage

"Liebestod"

All the flowers of the spring
Meet to perfume our burying.
John Webster, *Vanitas Vanitatum, c.* 1617–19

Patricia Cronin's *Memorial to a Marriage* is something both new in memorial art, and old: a seam between on the one hand the domestic and erotic, the world of creature comfort and warm flesh, and on the other the mortal and dead, the world of absence and cold. The first partner in this join is easy to grasp, since the work is a portrait of Cronin and her lover, the painter Deborah Kass, embracing each other in bed. The second emerges in the title, and in the associations of the work's form and medium—marble—with the iconography of the tomb: for *Memorial to a Marriage* is designed as a work for the cemetery. It is to be imagined as standing on Cronin's and Kass's grave.

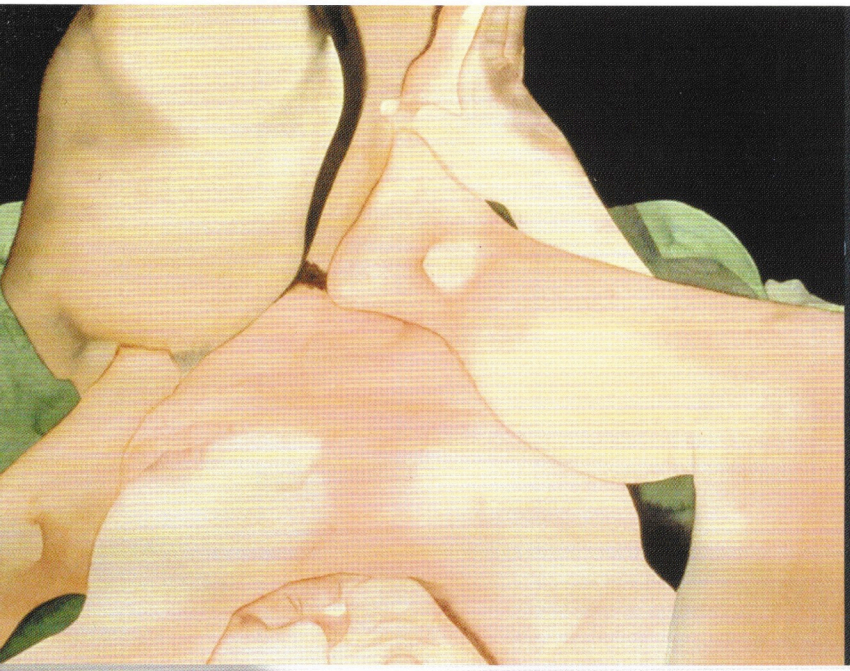
In the long view, the line of descent into which *Memorial to a Marriage* falls is ancient indeed. Commemoration of the dead is among the very oldest human rites. The urban historian Lewis Mumford even speculated that it was crucial to the development of permanent communities: "Early man's respect for the dead . . .," he writes, "perhaps had an even greater role than more practical needs in causing him to seek a fixed meeting place and eventually a continuous settlement. Mid the uneasy wanderings of Paleolithic man, the dead were the first to have a permanent dwelling: a cavern, a mound marked by a cairn, a collective barrow. These were landmarks to which the living probably returned."[1] The home of the dead, then, is linked at the beginning of history to the home of the living, tendering an end to nomadic travel, a place of constancy. "Indeed," writes Mumford, "the city of the dead is the forerunner, almost the core, of every living city."[2]

The cavern, the cairn, the barrow: the forms are natural or technologically modest. The cairn and barrow survive in cemeteries today, in the simple grave mound paired with an upright stone. But the memorial line has other, grander episodes, in the royal statues and friezes of, for example, the Egypt and Near East of the ancient period. These early monuments were intended both as instruments of discipline during the king's lifetime, their scale and drama intimidating his subjects and foes, and as ways of extending his greatness beyond his death. Also, in an age when most buildings were mud or straw, they were worked in hard stone. This patent expenditure of effort and skill announced power; more important, unlike mud and straw, stone would last. Mumford writes, "In the early cities, human life and energy were translated into the form of art on a scale that had been unattainable before. Each generation could now leave its deposit of ideal forms and images: . . . statues, portraits, inscriptions, carved and painted records . . . that satisfied man's earliest wish for immortality by being present in the minds of later generations. . . . pride and ambition clung to the stones of the city; for art preceded the written word in fixing into 'eternal' symbolic forms that which would otherwise pass away."[3]

The desire to be present to later generations persists in *Memorial to a Marriage*—"I'm making this for when I'm not here," says Cronin—but the work distinguishes itself from the classic memorial tradition by forsaking hubris. (That kind of ambition, after all, was long ago discredited: "My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!," wrote the poet Shelley in 1817, imagining the inscription on an Egyptian monument whose past mastery is mocked by its present ruin.) Instead Cronin reasserts the more ancient domesticity of the grave.[4] She may work in marble—sign of permanence beyond life's span, and of ideal form beyond the body's blemishes—but her figures are intimate and warm. The two women lie along each other's bodies, the head of one tucked against the cheek of the other, Cronin on her back, Kass on her side, embracing. While the folds of the drapery that tangles across their lower bodies recall the sculpture of Bernini, and his handling of fabric, the mattress is contemporary and they lie on a fitted sheet. A corner of the pillow sags sweetly off the edge of the bed. The women's eyes are closed in sleep, or in the relaxed, shared half-sleep that happens in relations of closeness. It is a family scene staged for eternity.

In this respect the precedent Cronin has most clearly looked toward is the memorial statuary of nineteenth-century Europe and America, a body of art rooted in Renaissance and ultimately classical sculpture but infused with particular qualities of Victorian sentiment. Cronin is fascinated by the garden cemetery movement that emerged in the United States in the 1830s; in the crowded and congested nineteenth-century city, people in search of greenery and air came to picnic in cemeteries, which were redesigned as bourgeois destinations. "Tourists as well as mourners visited the parklike surroundings of the new memorial gardens, such as Mount Auburn Cemetery outside Boston," writes Joy S. Kasson. "A visit to a garden cemetery combined the pleasures and consolations of landscape with those of sentimental narrative."[5] Offering culture, in the form of memorial art, as well as space and visual stories, the cemetery tour became a social and family activity. In parallel, its sculpture often implicitly invoked a notion of family unity: "The family burial plot," Kasson argues, "was the scene not only of parting but of potential reunion."[6]

It was logical, then, that Victorian cemetery sculpture, particularly figures of children, favored a tradition of "portraying its subjects peacefully asleep." But Kasson also detects another strain,



Untitled #104, 20" x 26", watercolor on paper, 1994

$3,500,000 (Figure Eight Island), 9" x 11", oil on linen, 2000

Cover: *Memorial to a Marriage,* 53" x 27" x 17", plaster maquette, 2002

Footnotes
1. Lewis Mumford, *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1961),p. 7.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., p. 69.

exemplified by Horatio Greenough's *Medora* (1832), that "suggested some of the tragedy and turmoil" of death: "Lying on a marble slab, with her head tilted backward, her nude body draped below the waist, . . . the figure of the dead Medora seemed vulnerable, exposed. . . . an object of desire as well as of pity."[7] Both currents—the sense of peaceful sleep and the not-so-secret eroticism—are carried forward in *Memorial to a Marriage*. But this work in fact scales down the sexuality of some of Cronin's earlier work, particularly a group of watercolors from the mid '90s based on Polaroids she took of herself and Kass in bed. Describing the two bodies from so close as to verge on abstraction, these works have the strange quality of both attracting us through their sexiness and pushing us away through the intensity of the women's exclusive involvement with each other—a straightforward way to circuit the male voyeurism that the subject might otherwise draw. Cronin's later portraits of horses, based on photographs sent to magazines like *Young Rider* by mainly teen-girl readers, were more subliminally erotic but no less openly concerned with the systems of desire.

Cronin began *Memorial to a Marriage* after a semester of teaching in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, where she produced a group of small bronze sculptures of horses. Returning to New York City, she began looking at other equine sculpture—public sculpture, such as Augustus Saint-Gaudens's statue of the Civil War general William Tecumseh Sherman marching southward down Fifth Avenue—and in the process she realized there was very little public sculpture of women in the city's streets and parks. She found Eleanor Roosevelt, Joan of Arc, Golda Meir, and then Mother Goose and Alice in Wonderland, and "that," she says, "was kind of it." But Saint-Gaudens, Chester French, and other nineteenth-century sculptors, she knew, did in fact produce figures of women in public outdoor work—that is, in their work for cemeteries.

Around the same time, Cronin began to paint a series of canvases of what she calls "yuppie porn": the photographs of luxury houses found in real estate catalogues. Once again she was investigating desire—the machinery of seduction, the self-advertisement of the unattainable—and despite the self-implicating irony in her studies of these lavish properties, they answered a real pressure: domestic longing. Cronin and Kass are a loving and long-established couple, but, as lesbians, they cannot legally marry. *Memorial to a Marriage* addresses this issue head-on: "It is a memorial," says Cronin "to something that can't happen. It is created out of grief, in a way, in that there's a constant level of grief in being unofficial because we're two women. The world is set up for this other kind of thing. So I resolved: if I can't have it in life, I'm going to have it in death. I'm basically trying to find a permanent home. A permanent resting place or home."

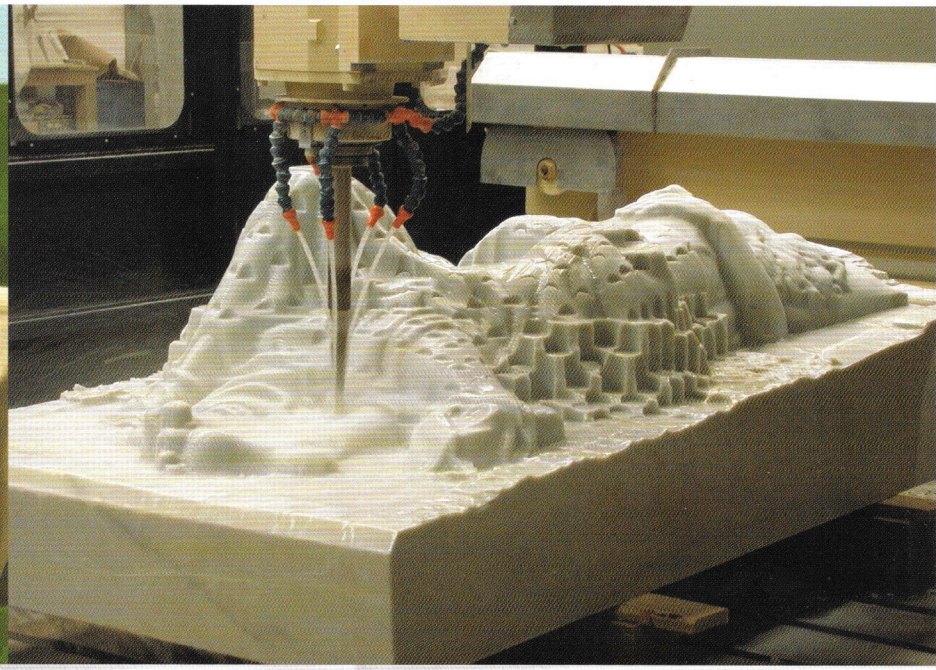
Cronin is best known as a painter, but she has also produced installations and, in the Chapel Hill horses, was beginning to move into sculpture. She made *Memorial to a Marriage* through a process combining the oldest kind of form-making with the newest technology: she modeled the work in clay, working from life (and from photographs taken from life) and from images of earlier artworks, then turned the model over to the Johnson Atelier foundry in Mercerville, New Jersey. The shop made a rubber mold from the clay, then made a plaster from the mold; Cronin refined the plaster, then returned it to the foundry for a three-dimensional computer scanning process. The binary data this scan produced was then fed into an automated mill, which carved the work out of a block of marble that Cronin herself had chosen in Carrara.

In parts of this process the marble block looked definitively twenty-first century: the movement of the drill in minutely calibrated stages produced a surface pocked with tiny regular markings that almost made it look like a video image, a pixel-ated blur. (A later hand-finishing has removed this trace.) Other stages, meanwhile, when the drill was removing stone in larger bites, recalled the Cubist treatment of landscape: the stone was broken into terraced rows of geometric forms. In fact, though, despite her high-tech means, there was a sense in which Cronin was working in the old-fashioned way. Many sculptors of the nineteenth century and earlier were studio artists rather than stone carvers: they would make a model to send to artisans who would then shape the marble. Cronin is doing the same thing, but the artisans with whom she collaborates use computers.

Memorial to a Marriage is a beautiful contradiction. It is "designed as if it were a nineteenth-century mortuary sculpture," says Cronin, "but it's not the nineteenth century, and we're alive." The cemetery art that absorbs her phrased the theme of the sundered family—it acknowledged that death had broken the family apart—but Cronin inverts this equation: if the state divides her family by refusing to instate and honor it, her art will put it together, making the family whole. What is elsewhere an art of remembering, of mourning, here becomes an art of anticipation. The emotional tone is complex; a tombstone can't help but be sad, even when it announces some kind of fulfillment. But there is also a triumphant note. In effect Cronin has put the lie to an age-old truth, expressed in the seventeenth century by the English poet Andrew Marvell: "The grave's a fine and private place / But none, I think, do there embrace." For Cronin that isn't so.

David Frankel
New York, NY
July 2002

Cookie & Napoleon, 42" x 42", oil on linen, 1997



Memorial to a Marriage (process detail), 2002

Back Cover: *Memorial to a Marriage* (detail)

4. Although in iconography the roots of Cronin's sculpture must be traced through earlier sculpture, in spirit *Memorial to a Marriage* recalls the deeply personal painted grave memorials of Fayum, Egypt, made around second century A.D.
5. Joy S. Kasson, *Marble Queens and Captives: Women in Nineteenth-Century American Sculpture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 109.
6. Ibid., p. 113. 7. Ibid., pp. 110-11.

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