

Shrine for Girls: A Micro-Interview with Patricia Cronin

by Elaine Sexton

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A Note from the Artist on the Future of this Exhibit, Shrine for Girls: Originally conceived as site-specific sculptural installation reflecting on the global plight of exploited women and girls for the 2015 Venice Biennale inside the smallest church in Venice, the 15th century Chiesa di San Gallo, now embarks on an international tour. It was most recently presented at the Richard Gluckman designed FLAG Art Foundation, a private art museum in Chelsea, New York. Next it travels to a palace at the Basu Foundation for the Arts in Kolkata, India and then onto Ireland and Nigeria – the three countries where the atrocities occurred. Whether sacred or secular architecture, these venues are all the architecture of the powerful and my subjects are the powerless. I think this juxtaposition is palpable and emotional.

ES: I know your work to be fearless, feminist, and gender-specific, as in your Memorial to a Marriage. What drew you to the idea making a work of art, a shrine, and a reliquary of the subject of the plight of girls?

PC: Three different stories of incredible human cruelty and violence against women – Boko Haram kidnapping the Chibok students in Nigeria, the movie Philomena about the Magdalene Laundries in Ireland, all over Europe and the U.S., and the gang rape and murder of 2 cousins in India – came to me within a 6 week period and I couldn't get them out of my head. When the Italian curator Ludovico Pratesi invited me to make a show for Venice, we knew Chiesa di San Gallo was the only venue we wanted. If we couldn't get the church there wasn't going to be a show.

I'm trained as a painter. Left to my own devices, I would just paint in my studio. But when extraordinary invitations come my way, I take them very seriously and analyze each institution, architecture and context to make sure I am presenting and producing the best possible solution to the moment. And painting isn't always the best answer.... I was working on a series about the global crisis in masculinity when Ludovico invited me. But when those three subjects got in my head and I was sitting in the Campo San Gallo studying the church, a group of Indian tourists were checking into their hotel. I wondered to my self what they thought about Pushpa and Murti's deaths in Uttar Pradesh two days prior. I thought, it's so terrible what's happening to women everywhere. These poor women, they need a shrine in their honor, shrine, shrine, shrine for girls! I've got three stone altars, three stories I can't get out of my head, they're from three different regions, and they wear different clothes. I consider these girls and women "gender martyrs" and these clothes represent their relics. And I put them on altars in a Catholic Church on the place where previously the religious relics were placed. I thought this was a powerful feminist statement.



ES: Fabric as a word and as a material is rich with visceral associations. There are so many layers of tension in the rich and stale colors, the fine and threadbare textures. And this is not just fabric but clothing: saris, hijabs, aprons, and the literal embodiment of absence, something a viewer can't help but experience in our own bodies. What made you choose clothing in the place of some other material to render the plight of victimized and silenced girls?

PC: I drew people in with humble clothes (no matter how luxurious the hues) and let their own individual narrative arch take place. Viewers would then turn around and see the purple, blue and black pile of hijabs or the oatmeal colored wool and linen aprons to approach. The humility of the materials belied the powerful content of the reality of the brutality to people just like you and me. So, the chromatic intensity of the saris on the high altar drew people inside the church, then, after closer examination, people noticed there was a tiny framed photo to the side of the cousins hanging from a mango tree wearing colors very similar to the saris in the pile.

The goal was to make people feel, first, and then experience the work more like a call to action. It is so easy to get complacent in our 24-hour news cycle culture. But our shared common humanity is what we have in common and we have a responsibility as global citizens not to remain silent. This is what the greatest artists have done from Goya's Disasters of War to Picasso's Guernica to Maya Lin's Vietnam Memorial. I call it social justice meets aesthetic responsibility.

ES: While the experience of your site specific Shrine for Girls must have been intensely powerful in the original exhibition, the wooden crates replacing the three actual altars in Venice are as striking as they are humble. The crates offer a different layer or experience, suggesting transport. Would you tell us about the shift from one venue to the other?

PC: My original concept had the piles of clothes on crates in my Brooklyn studio before I had access to the marble altars in the church. That image is reproduced in the Venice Biennale catalogue and it demonstrated the life an object can have before a site-specific installation and afterwards. When I returned to Brooklyn and started to conceptualize the New York presentation, the tour became more urgent and realistic, and I revisited the crate concept again. The words "tour," "travel" and "traffic" got braided together in my head. Since many of these girls and women were trafficked, the crates revealed many metaphoric uses. I designed new crates that each sculpture will travel around the world. International crates need to be made from specially treated wood and are stamped with a universal symbol that means "safe for international travel." Additionally, crates for art are also typically stamped with the words "fragile," arrows pointing this way up and an umbrella symbol meaning "please protect this from rain and don't let it get wet. The crates become a stark, minimalist reminder that we, especially in the gazillion dollar global art market, all take such good care of objects and don't take good care of human beings. I designed the crates to purposely quote coffins and reliquaries, but I think the real strength of these works are their light, minimalist interventionist approach. This is social sculpture in the Beuysian tradition – they are just actually, really piles of clothes on the wooden crates they travel in, they are contemporary art and they are simultaneously true shrines.



Patricia Cronin is a New York based conceptual visual artist. Since the early-90's, Cronin has garnered international attention for her photographs, paintings and sculptures that address contemporary human rights issues of gender and sexuality. Her work has been presented in solo exhibitions at museums and galleries. In 2013 she was honored as the only contemporary artist ever invited to have a one-person exhibition at the Capitoline Museum's converted powerplant, Centrale Montemartini Museo in Rome, Italy. Her work is in numerous permanent public collections including the National Gallery of Art, Corcoran Collection, Perez Art Museum, and many private collections including David Zwirner and Chuck Close. The recipient of numerous awards, including the prestigious Rome Prize in Visual Art from the American Academy in Rome, where is now a trustee, an Andy Warhol Foundation Grant, an Anonymous Was A Woman Award, and two Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grants, among others. She has been on the graduate faculty at both Columbia University and Yale University, and is Professor of Art at Brooklyn College of The City University of New York since 2003. Cronin lives and works in New York City. For more information, please visit her website, <http://www.patriciacronin.net>.