

Gender | The American artist Patricia Cronin discusses the essential role of art in feminism with Julie Belcove

# All about the body politic

About a year ago, artist Patricia Cronin was on a plane bound for Italy when she found herself sobbing through *Philomena*, the 2013 biopic starring Judi Dench as a woman searching for her son, whom she was forced by nuns at an Irish convent to give up for adoption. Once in Italy, she read about the mass kidnapping of Nigerian schoolgirls by the Islamic extremist group Boko Haram, and, a short time later, about two young female cousins in India found hanging from a mango tree.

“I couldn’t get them out of my head,” Cronin, 51, says of all the brutalised females. “Every day you wake up and it’s another horrible story.”

Back in her Brooklyn studio she was at work on a series of sculptures about the crisis in masculinity, referencing Jesus after he was removed from the cross. But, she recalls, “I thought, really what I should be focusing on are the women and the girls. They really need a shrine. Shrine!”

That eureka moment led to Cronin’s Venice Biennale solo show — a “collateral” exhibition to the national pavilions, curated by Ludovico Pratesi — opening on May 6. Installed in the Church of San Gallo, Cronin’s *Shrine for Girls, Venice* transforms the deconsecrated church into a site of what she calls “global bereavement” for the world’s countless abused girls.

On each of the church’s three stone altars she has piled high, like religious relics, clothes evoking the girls: colourful saris; more muted hijabs; drab aprons and uniforms similar to those worn in the Magdalene laundries, where scores of American, British and Irish women (like the real-life *Philomena Lee*, on whom the film was based) were forced into labour. The pared-down presentation demands quiet reflection, and the piece’s emotional power, Cronin hopes, will derive from viewers’ intuitive comprehension of what is absent.

“We all know they’re supposed to be worn,” she says on a spring morning in her studio, where a mound of polyester hijabs she bought in Brooklyn rests on a crate. “We’re not looking at a pile of curtains. What we all have in common is we all have bodies. We all have skin, bone, muscle, flesh, and some people’s are treated with dignity and some aren’t.”

*Shrine for Girls* is an unabashedly political work from an artist who has not shied from controversial subjects in the past. Cronin broke through in the 1990s with a provocative series of paintings graphically depicting lesbian sex. She unveiled her masterpiece in 2002: “Memorial to a Marriage”, an over-life-size marble sculpture of Cronin and her long-time partner, the artist Deborah Kass, lying in a tender embrace, their nude bodies partially draped with a sheet, their eyes closed in eternal slumber.

The monumental work was installed on their burial plot at the Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx. Made nine years before the couple married — on July 24, 2011, the first day it was legal to do so in New York — it served as an emphatically romantic protest.

(Cronin has replaced the marble version, which toured museums, with a bronze one.)

Cronin, a bubbly, green-eyed blonde, has a couple of maquettes of “Memorial to a Marriage” in her airy studio — it took several stabs to get Kass’s head nestled just right in the crook of her arm, and their bare toes playing footsie. She leans over one and points out that, though Kass’s left arm is draped across Cronin’s torso, there’s no sign of Kass’s right arm. “No one ever seems to notice Deb’s missing an arm!” she squeals in delight. “Three tonnes of marble and no cellulite! Idealised resemblances, that’s what I call them.”

But on a more serious note, Cronin says she sees her role as artist as much political as it is aesthetic. “I think about what other people can do — politicians, policy makers, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation — they can effect change,” she says. “What artists do is we witness things.” The ideal is “when a love song and a protest song are the same song. The goal is to be half form and half content, and if one of them is removed, the work should fail — utterly fail”.

Cronin describes her commitment to social justice as the most indelible remnant of her Catholic upbringing. The eldest of four children, she grew up in a middle-class New England family; her father worked for the government, and her mother taught third grade in Catholic schools. Cronin played the guitar at her church’s folk mass and attended Catholic high school.

Though no longer a practising Catholic, she recalls that “at one point I thought I was going to be a nun”. To quell any surprise, Cronin adds with a girlish laugh: “I spend my days quietly, methodically working by myself on something I think is important, and I’m in a community of women. I mean, I wasn’t that far off! The things I liked about it, I actually got.”

Cronin’s other takeaway from her Catholic childhood is a fluency in the religious lingo of two millennia’s worth of western art, which made her comfortable conceiving a project for a church. “Even though Deb and I have spent many years travelling in Europe, looking at lots of different artwork, on one of the last trips she said: ‘So you really know all the stories in all the paintings?’” Cronin points at an imaginary canvas and recalls her response: “‘Yeah, that’s Saint Catherine of Alexandria, not Siena.’”

While researching cemetery statuary for “Memorial to a Marriage”, Cronin was struck by examples made by a 19th-century American woman named Harriet Hosmer. “Wait a minute,” she remembers thinking. “This is fantastic. Why have I never heard of her?”

Intrigued, she spent her year in Italy on the prestigious Rome Prize exhaustively researching Hosmer, who, like the male American artists of her time, went abroad to perfect her craft. When Hosmer began winning commissions, encroaching on their turf, her male rivals waged a smear campaign.

Cronin decided to create a catalogue raisonné for the proto-feminist artist, painting a black-and-white watercolour of each Hosmer work she could identify — and making spectral images for the ones she couldn’t track down. “I think it’s easy for women to get written out of history or just not written into history,” she says.

Questioning who gets to be remembered also inspired Cronin’s new watercolour series of the subjects of *Shrine for Girls*. Several hauntingly abstract paintings, depicting the kidnapped girls from Nigeria in vivid colours, as well as ghostlike women from the Magdalene laundries, now hang in her studio. “Who gets their portraits made?” Cronin asks. “Usually the wealthy and the powerful. What if they’re not? Why shouldn’t



‘Saris’, part of Patricia Cronin’s ‘Shrine for Girls, Venice’, in which women’s clothes are piled on altars in the Church of San Gallo

someone from the lowest caste have a beautiful portrait made?”

She gazes at a portrait of one of the dead Indian girls, whose piercing eyes are almost yellow. “I’m going to spend the whole day looking at this, thinking about this young woman’s life,” she says of her approach to painting it. “You don’t want to be silent.”

The emotional power of the empty clothes derives from a comprehension of what is absent

