

Interview

ART

PATRICIA CRONIN'S COMPLICATIONS

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PATRICIA CRONIN IN HER STUDIO IN BROOKLYN, NEW YORK, MAY 2016.
PHOTOS: [VICTORIA STEVENS](#).

Artist Patricia Cronin complicates normative Western feminism by trying to find the role of contemporary art in global discussions about sexual violence. Her *Shrine for Girls*, first shown at the 2015 Venice Biennale, is the poignant opposite of much contemporary art that refuses an engagement with politics in favor of a cool, detached formalism. Originally erected in a deconsecrated Catholic church in Venice, *Shrine for Girls* visually recounts three different stories: the sexual and psychological violence enacted by the Catholic Church against prostitutes, orphaned women, and mentally ill women in the Magdalene Laundries; the kidnapping of 276 young women by the Boko Haram in Nigeria; and the rape and lynching of two cousins in India. Cronin's subtlety of presentation provides a startlingly complex and affecting combination of artistry and social commentary, offering a memorial for women around the world that they were never previously afforded.

“An artist has to organize these ideas,” Cronin says. “I’m not an army. I’m not a policy maker. I don’t write laws. So what is the role of contemporary art in this really horrible world we live in? What impact could it possibly have? I can’t do anything to bring those 276 girls back,” she continues. “I’m powerless, so what can I do? I can raise awareness, and I can feel.”

After premiering to enormous acclaim at the Venice Biennale, *Shrine for Girls* is now being shown around the world. Today, it opens at the FLAG Art Foundation in New York City and will then travel to India later this year. We discussed the art historical roots of Cronin’s project, her inspiration, and her hopes for *Shrine for Girls* as an instrument for coalition-building.

WILLIAM J. SIMMONS: Maybe you could tell me a little bit about the inception of this project and how it has transformed, now that it is being shown in the United States.

PATRICIA CRONIN: I will start at the beginning. When the Italian curator Ludovico Pratesi came to my studio, he had already curated a solo show of mine at the Capitoline Museum in Rome. So we had already done our museum show together, and I thought, “Just come over and see what’s new in the studio!” What Ludovico had seen in the studio was a project that was more in a response to what I call the “global crisis in masculinity.” He said, “Patti, you do not need another museum show in Rome. You need to show on a world stage. You need a show in Venice.” And I went, “That’s a great idea Ludovico. How the hell do I pull that one off?” But we did.

Ludovico said, “I know where I want your show in Venice to be—the Chiesa di San Gallo.” It’s the smallest church in Venice, right near Saint Marco. I am flying to Rome as a trustee of the American Academy, and Ludovico calls me and goes, “Do you have any break in activities? Can you fly to Venice? I want you to see this church.” On the plane to Rome, I see the film *Philomena* and was sobbing. I knew nothing about this, the Magdalene Laundries, even growing up Catholic in New England. So I see the movie, then I hop on the train to Venice. The month before, Boko Haram had kidnapped the 276 Chibok students; it was that spring where every day you woke up and there was another horrific story about some brutality happening to young women in the world, such as these two cousins who were gang raped and lynched.

So I’m sitting in the Campo, watching a group of Indian tourists checking into their hotel. I wonder what they think about what happened to Murti and Pushpa—it is such a horrible story. I think, “These women deserve a shrine in their honor.” I think, “Shrine, shrine, shrine for the girls!” The church was still owned by the diocese, deconsecrated, but there were still rules. You couldn’t hang anything on the walls. All you could do was use the three stone altars.

I had three stories in my brain that I could not get out, that I was obsessed with: the Chibok students, the Magdalene Laundries, and the Indian cousins. I had three altars, and they were from three different parts of the world. Usually, I love looking

at not contemporary art when I am in Europe, so this trip to Europe I thought to myself, “I am only going to look at contemporary art, because I want to see what everybody else thinks they are bringing to the party, to the richness that is the Venetian tableau.” I spent a few days going around looking at looking at all the museums of contemporary art. I was writing in my sketchbook and I finally figured it out.

It was really an amazing experience to be able to bring three of the world’s major religions under one roof, inside a church, a Catholic church. Even if it is deconsecrated, it is sacred architecture. You can’t change that architecture, especially in a Catholic country. The Magdalene Laundries were predominantly run by Catholic nuns. When the priest who was in charge of the 200 churches in Venice wanted to meet me, I thought for sure he was going to say, “Oh forget it. I don’t want this.” The proposal laid everything out, and I said you do know this is about the Magdalene Laundries? He said, “Yes, it is very important that this piece is in this church.”

[Now it is] going from sacred architecture into secular and different kinds of architecture. So it goes from a Catholic church in Venice to a private arts foundation in New York, and then it’s going to travel to the countries where these events happened. *Shrine for Girls* is going to keep changing as it goes to all these places because site-specific installations have to adapt.

By putting them on crates [instead of altars] that I have designed especially for this venue, I am pointing to the movement of bodies. The show is traveling, a lot of these girls have been trafficked, and all of a sudden the worlds were so close together. Now each pile of sculptures will travel in its own crate to all these continents, with the labels and stamps, and nicks and scuffmarks that become part of the piece. The entire life of the piece is going to be legible and visible as it travels around. How the crate gets treated is like another film or skin, in a way, that resonates with me, considering how roughly these women have been treated. When an important piece of art is shipped, they have to make a crate for it. They put “Fragile” and “This end up” and don’t let any rain get on it, but it is nothing compared to what’s been done to these women. Whose body has value? Who gets to decide? What are the consequences to the individual, and to the community? Some of that is going to be visible with some of the work.

One of my favorite quotes by Toni Morrison is something like “The best works of art are undeniably political, but you better be able to make them incredibly beautiful at the same time.” That might be one of the strong attributes of this piece and also part of the beauty of readymades. They are what they are; it’s clothes in a pile. The simplest or humblest act I could do was think of these girls as gendered martyrs and that these clothes symbolized their relics. I could come and put them in a pile—not fold them too much, but not crumple them up and make them look like dirty laundry. In some way, the piles just try to acknowledge what’s happened. It is a humble act to come and place something on a table, on an altar, on a pedestal, and say, “Look at this. Let’s pay attention to and think about this. What does this mean?”

SIMMONS: What just came to my mind when you were describing the placement is

that you've taken indices of bodies and placed them on a shrine. It's interesting and affecting to think about the opposite, which would be, say, the mass graves of the Magdalene Laundries. I'm interested in this interplay of presence and absence. This is equally powerful as watching *Night and Fog*, and I wonder why that is.

CRONIN: The medievalist historian Brian Stock said in my American Academy studio almost a decade ago, "Nothing provokes meditation more than loss." Something that we can't really remember is something that we are dying to remember, something we can't quite see, something that is unattainable, something that is gone, that we long for. Think of Susan Stewart's *On Longing*. When I look at these piles of clothes it is deceptively simple, because we have the sequence, these beautiful silks and patterns, and the saturated color. For a few minutes, we're taken through this false sense of psychological security. We are looking at something that is semi-pleasant and then you start thinking, "Wait a minute, that's not the shape clothes are supposed to take." How our clothes look on us sitting here right now, that's the shape clothes are supposed to take because it's supposed to have a body inside.

So when you realize, "Who's missing, whose body is absent?" and then, "Why is that body absent?" Then you go, "Oh, what's this little thing over to the side?" There is one framed photograph from each event over to the side; you don't notice it at first, but it's so that the whole project, the whole meaning of it cannot be misconstrued. There are goose bumps and tears because, as a human being, you know how wrong this is. And that is powerful.

SIMMONS: It makes me imagine going to see a Felix Gonzalez-Torres candy pile and seeing empty wrappers. Imagine how horrifying that would be. That connects to what you are doing, in subverting our expectations by assembling a beautiful object and then making us realize that there is a desperate problem underneath.

CRONIN: Absolutely. Something I have been thinking about is, what if a protest song and a love song are the same song, they are rolled up into the same song? That's kind of what I tried to do. I use art historical forms to lull my audience into a false sense of security. They have invested their time, they have moved their body through or around my work, and as that's happening the content is slowly revealing itself. That's how, I think, you change hearts and minds.

PATRICIA CRONIN'S SHRINE FOR GIRLS OPENS TODAY AT THE FLAG ART FOUNDATION. FOR MORE ON THE ARTIST, VISIT HER WEBSITE.