

VISIONAIRE



HIJABS, SARIS AND APRONS IN MOURNING OF...

By Lars Byrresen Petersen

In any movie, photo, animation, and TV show, what is synonymous with teenage girls? You got it; colorful, messy piles of clothes spread throughout a room. That image is at the center of Patricia Cronin's exhibition *Shrine for Girls*, which is currently on view at FLAG art foundation through August 12. But instead of illustrating what should be a happy coming of age that all girls are entitled to, the piles of clothes exhibited each symbolizes an unforgettable tragedy.

We talked to the NYC-based artist, who since her debut in the 1990s have focused on humanitarian issues (especially the ones linked to women), to discuss the importance of clothes for this project and garments' general role within art.

Lars Byrresen Petersen: What significance does clothes have in your work?

Patricia Cronin: In *Shrine for Girls*, the three separate piles of clothes, presented on marble altars in the Chiesa di San Gallo Venice and now on shipping containers, represent the bodies of the missing girls from three horrific events that originally inspired the project. The pile of hijabs represent the 276 Chibok Students kidnapped by Boko Haram in Nigeria, the pile of saris represent two cousins gang raped (and many others) and lynched in India, and the aprons represent the tens of thousands of girls enslaved in the Magdalene Laundries and Asylums in the Europe (especially the U.K. and Ireland) and the United States. I consider these girls to be "gender martyrs" and their clothes – relics. By looking at the piles of empty clothes, I want to honor these people who were not treated with dignity while they were alive and remind the viewers of what, and who is missing – and ask why.

LBP: Having grown up in country (Denmark) where religion was not part of the school system and not that significant in society, I only saw Muslim women wear clothes of religious importance. How does *Shrine for Girls* investigate/comment on such a thing?

PC: You didn't go to Catholic School! Many religions have strict dress codes for their followers, and especially their female worshipers. This is the first project I've worked on where I brought three major world religions under one roof – Islam, Hinduism and Catholicism. A culture of containment of women exists in many religions. And because this installation was conceived for sacred architecture, imbedded in my concept is an acknowledgement that sacred texts have been misinterpreted to say that women are separate and unequal in the eyes of God to justify mistreating them. Also embedded in this project is an acknowledgement that religion, for some, can be a legitimate source for healing and avid use for justice.

LBP: Western fashion trends might be inspired by various religions but are often hard to pinpoint as "religious wear". Do you think there's a political message behind "trends"?

PC: I remember [John Galliano's](#) early 1990 Jewish Orthodox inspired apparel (and I'll leave it at that). [Alexander McQueen](#) certainly drew inspiration from Highlands's piety, religious persecution and paganism. And [Dolce & Gabbana](#) always do Catholic! I think often what is happening in society and culture very much affects designers – sometimes in very overt ways and sometimes very subtly like in the latest collaboration with TOME. Designers Ryan Lobo and Ramon Martin saw *Shrine for Girls* at the 2015 Venice Biennale and came to me with their interest to learn more about the project and ask if it could serve as an inspiration for their Resort 2017 collection. They reference the artwork for the ideas and the emotions the project conveys to them. You can see various influences throughout the collection from bright colors and flowing fabrics inspired by the saris, to tailored works referencing the uniforms of the Magdalene Laundry girls. When we were doing a walk-through of the exhibition, Ryan said: "The emotional weight of clothing is something that Ramon and I always talk about. And to see an artist elevate that beyond what fashion can do is a really inspiring thing."

LBP: Do you think clothing and fashion is important in art? If so, why?

PC: I think it really depends on the project and the intent. For *Shrine for Girls*, the clothes immediately reference the missing bodies and have a visceral effect of loss when you encounter the sculptures. In addition, the different fabrics offer a variety of inherent references, from one's role and stature in life (uniforms) to specific geographic culture (saris and hijabs). The visuals ideally engage viewers to understand that exploitation of girls is a global issue that affects all of us. In fact, while in Venice, I experienced *Shrine for Girls* come full circle. One day a group of Indian women tourists were passing through the campo and read "Shrine For Girls" in Hindi on the exterior signage totem and saw the saris on the central altar. They went back to their hotel room, went through their luggage, and found the one black sari they were traveling with for mourning and gave it to me to add to the shrine. Art communicated across geographic boundaries and language barriers.

LBP: Do you follow fashion?

PC: Absolutely! I'm excited to see the worlds of art and fashion colliding and to have had this project serve as a muse for Tome that will now be shared with hundreds of women wearing the collection (including me!).

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