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The Second Life of Harriet Hosmer

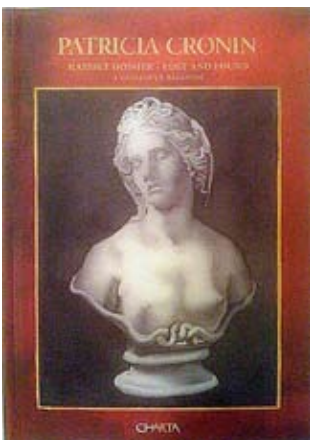
Patricia Cronin

HARRIET HOSMER (1830–1908) was a lesbian sculptor who emigrated from the United States to Rome at an early age to become part of an expatriate community of writers and artists, including a circle of prominent “independent women.” She worked in marble, and the quality of her surviving sculptures is extraordinary. The operative word is surviving: much of Hosmer’s work has been lost or destroyed, preserved in sketches and descriptions in dusty catalogs but otherwise forgotten.

Enter Patricia Cronin, who came across Hosmer’s work while searching for inspiration for a marble create. Eight years later, Cronin has brought her tribute to Harriet Hosmer to fruition in the form of a book of paintings and an exhibit at the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. The 62 black-and-white watercolors, twenty of which were on display in New York, are featured in a catalogue raisonné entitled *Harriet Hosmer: Lost and Found* (Charta Books, 2009), and represent Cronin’s attempt to capture on a flat surface the lost or in some cases unrealized sculptures of her 19th-century counterpart.

Indeed the two artists have a number of things in common: both were born in Massachusetts; both studied sculpture in the U.S.; and both ended up spending time in Rome to ply their trade. Hosmer moved to Europe in 1852 to expand her career and find a more tolerant atmosphere for a life as an independent woman and a lesbian. Her gaze is a lesbian gaze, as lesbian artist Tee Corinne has pointed out, focusing on female desire. Cronin’s interpretations create spaces where women can interact with female subjects in erotic and non-erotic contexts. Her style of art is an expression of tangible pleasure that deliberately builds tension by stressing the uncertain character of sexual feelings and spiritual connection across generations.

Last summer I had the pleasure of viewing the exhibit in Brooklyn, and also of conversing with the artist about Harriet Hosmer and her homage to this nearly forgotten artist. As for the marble sculpture that Cronin was planning back in 2000 when she discovered Hosmer’s work, she ended up producing the exquisitely beautiful piece, *Memorial to a Marriage*, that appears on the cover of this issue.



Cassandra Langer: You recently won a prestigious fellowship to the American Academy in Rome. What impact did this grant have on your work and did it inspire you to make Harriet Hosmer your subject or had you already decided to focus on her?

Patricia Cronin: I was already working on the project but doing it helped me win the Rome Prize. They were looking for Rome- or Italian-specific proposals. They don’t want to give somebody the Rome prize who really wants to be in Berlin. Hosmer lived and worked in Rome for over forty years so I wanted to go there and trace her footsteps.

CL: Did your sexual orientation play any part in your choice of Hosmer rather than another artist?

PC: Her Neoclassical forms were very inspiring to me when I made *Memorial to a Marriage*. I made this three-ton marble mortuary statue of my partner and myself in what I considered to be an American nationalist form, to address what I considered a federal failure, which is that same-sex couples can’t legally wed throughout the United States. The federal government bars us from getting all the IRS benefits that heterosexuals are automatically given when they marry. I think it is great that a few states are doing it but just not enough and we are not protected in the way straights are. Not to digress, I picked Hosmer because she was the youngest and first woman of a number of women artists to move to Rome. She was 22 years old; it was 1852. This was unheard of for a young middle-class woman—we’re talking pre-Civil War. This was just incomprehensible—that she ended up living a lesbian life.

Of course, the more I dug into her history, the more I learned about her personal life as well. I thought it was just fantastic. She had a good time. Henry James said she was the “life of every party.” And she spent 25 years with Lady Ashburton. This is not nothing.

CL: I remember as a student of American art in the late 1960’s wondering why no one had ever done work on her. When I looked into it there was just not enough primary research material available, only a few tantalizing mentions of her “English patroness.”

PC: Actually, I say this a little casually and flippantly, she was a dog and involved with virtually every real woman she could get her hands on.

CL: I’m curious as to what your spiritual beliefs are. Were you religious as a child? Did you experience any significant losses that may have influenced you? I ask because I am particularly struck by your “ghosts” that substitute for Hosmer’s lost works. These figures look as if they are floating on black velvet. Are there any hidden spiritual meanings in these twilight images?

PC: Yes, I was brought up Roman Catholic. But I don’t know specifically if spirituality has anything to do with the work. Spending that year in Rome, walking around in those opulent churches, hearing all these stories about saints’ lives and miracles, and watching those shards of light cascading into these really overwhelming, monumental, and ornate interiors helped me to answer the big question I was grappling with, which was this: how do I visually represent these few statues of hers for which we have written descriptions in the *London Journal* or in letters home from people on the Grand Tour, but no visual documentation? How do I make a visual object out of something I can’t see? And so, spending that time in some of these very spiritual places, I thought an apparition, a ghost, would be the perfect visual answer for a phantom sculpture. And I wasn’t talking about one missing visual sculpture. I was talking about her whole lost career. So in trying to give some presence to her absence, the ghosts seemed like the ideal solution to me.



CL: I wonder if what you are really talking about is the absence of lesbian presence in visual art?

PC: Well, it’s so sad. I wanted—if I’m going to talk about her whole missing career and make the case for this person’s contribution to Western art—I wanted to make these ghost images as meaningful as possible but also poignant. I don’t know if it’s quite spiritual, but I wanted to tug at something in every viewer. And the people who have responded to the show that have gotten it—that aspect of it, which makes me happy.

CL: I’m curious about your technique. Why watercolors? They are usually thought of as a transparent medium, floating on the surface, yet you have imparted to these watercolor ghosts a kind of depth and density.

PC: Watercolors by chemical make-up are luminous, and I want to mimic how the light hits the marble, goes underneath the surface, goes around it, and kind of pops out again. I also use this super-hot press paper that’s ultra smooth, so there’s zero margin for error. I like the ghosts because they hold out the promise that they might come into focus if you look long enough, but they never do.

I tried everything, and I struggled for a long time with how to represent her *Queen of Naples* (1868). I tried clay and I thought about a hologram. Finally, I realized that my job was not to remake her sculptures. My job was to point out that they were missing. That was my primary focus. These drips started to happen. I could never work on the statues and the ghosts at the same time. Then one night I came back from dinner in Rome and I had them lying side by side and saw them alternating—statue/ghost, statue/ghost—and I realized this is it: a dialogue. There are 62 watercolors in the whole series, not the 36 that are in the book, and I made a ghost for almost every statue.

When I was doing my research to make my marble statue, I went through every enormous book on the history of sculpture. When I saw her *Beatrice Cenci* and her *Tomb of Judith Falconner*, I thought: who made these? Then I went to the bottom of the page and I saw that it was Harriet Hosmer. Then I thought, wait a minute, these are phenomenal. Why don’t I know who she is? You know, I’m going to try to do something about it. You know I try to make only the work that I feel needs to exist in the world.

CL: It’s good that you did; she’s a fascinating woman—right in the middle of the literary community in Rome and part of the cultural circle surrounding the Brownings and Henry James. Given how lesbian artists and queer artists in general have been erased from the history of art, do you see your work as a much needed corrective in the art historical record?

PC: Yes, because I think that all of these forms whether it is Neoclassical sculpture or portraiture or a catalogue raisonné, I think they are all still viable vehicles for communication. They are not dead. They are not dead until everyone’s done speaking through them. You know, I think of this catalogue raisonné, the book itself, as an institutional critique of the field of art history.

CL: Absolutely, when we try to trace lesbian lives and sexuality, the little that has been written is misleading. I think of Rosa Bonheur, who's buried next to her lover but until recently was not acknowledged as a lesbian who lived a lesbian life.

PC: You might find this interesting. Until the Metropolitan Museum redid their American wing, Hosmer's Daphne was always on view, and the funniest thing is her bronze-cast hands of Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning [*Clasped Hands of Robert and Elizabeth Barret Browning*]. Not only are they usually on view in one of the period rooms, you can buy a plaster knock-off in the gift shop! It's next to the fake Degas. Part of my point is that Hosmer has been hidden in plain sight!

CL: Does this work piggyback in some way off the Etruscan homage-inspired pieces you did of yourself and your lover, Deb Kass, a few years ago in *Memorial to a Marriage*? In addition, what do memorials signify for you as an artist?

PC: After I got the grant from Grand Art in 2000, it took me three years to make it. It was supposed to be my dream piece. And the two stipulations for the grant was that it had to be in a material I had never worked in before and that it be outside my personal budget situation. So I thought, what material would I never be able to work in? Marble! The title, *Memorial to a Marriage*, is taken from a Lincoln Kirstein book on the Daniel Chester French monument in Rock Creek cemetery.

CL: I know you see your work as an ongoing challenge to the sexist, racist, and lesbophobic institutions of both the art world and society in general. How do you see your interventions influencing these institutions?

PC: I would never have had to make *Memorial to a Marriage* if we could just get married. But I needed something official; I needed something with dignity. If the world doesn't give me the dignity for the relationship, I thought, fine, I'll make it myself. Yes, they are interventions, critiques. Everything I do has some kind of social justice theme. Usually around civil rights, social justice, feminist, gay and lesbian. With *Memorial to a Marriage*, the AIDS crisis had gone on for so long, I think I'm actually the first gay person to make a funeral monument, and no one has kind of talked about that yet.

CL: What's next for you?

PC: I'm reading *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death* (1951). I'm obsessed with [the period] between 1250 and 1450—Italian art, mostly late medieval, early Renaissance. It's that cusp that I just love. Basically, I'm doing Dante's *Inferno* in sculpture. I have the *Inferno*—the notes and all the sketchbooks for what they're made of. But I'm also rereading *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*. Of course, it is the *Inferno* that inspires me and holds my imagination. William Blake, Botticelli, Rodin in *The Gates of Hell*—so many great artists have worked with this that I just think it's so rich and exciting. Nobody has taken a stab at it for a while, and I just want see how I respond to it. I keep thinking about the architecture of the space as well. I'm making the *Inferno* out of wood. It's birch on cabinet-grade plywood, and it's gorgeous. I put one of the big watercolors next to it the other day, and the bleeding of the watercolor goes with the grain of the wood.

CL: One of those happy accidents that are totally unpredictable and improbable and work so well. Before we conclude, is there anything you'd like our readers to know about?

PC: Yes, there is one thing. The Harriet Hosmer archives are in the Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe Institute at Harvard. It's pretty extensive. But some of the letters are missing and cut out. I imagine that it was done by her friend Cornelia Carr. She went through and cut out things she didn't think people should know, or that she thought Hosmer might not like to be seen, in order to protect Hosmer's reputation. She also didn't spend much time on the Zenobia scandal, in which jealous male competitors accused Hosmer of not making the sculptures herself. She sued and won, thus restoring her reputation.

So we know she had an agenda. We know that Hosmer has letters in the Lady Ashburton Archives in Scotland. I went there, and they brought out the box. Not one letter was cut, and they were much more explicit. It's clear that in America they cared about her reputation because she was American. They didn't care in Scotland, so those letters are much more forthcoming. They are fantastic.

CL: So you get a fully erotic human being. Not some cardboard spinster who was "married to her art"!

PC: Ah, the gulf between lesbian lives and what is written about them.

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