



## Patricia Cronin

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## 'Til Death Do Us Part

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In 2000 when gay marriage wasn't legal in any state, I still needed something official commemorating my relationship with my girlfriend. Since the federal government wouldn't give us the basic human right of legal marriage we hired lawyers to draw up legal documents (wills, power-of-attorney and health care proxies, etc.) to simulate a few of the 1,200-some legal protections of heterosexual marriage. But these documents are so depressing; they're only useful if one of us becomes ill, incapacitated, or dies. They're not about celebrating our life together but about the end of it. Since all I was legally afforded was death, I decided to make the most elegant a statement about it I could muster. With the help of the Grand Arts Foundation, I carved a three-ton Carrara marble mortuary sculpture titled "Memorial To A Marriage." It is a dignified double funerary portrait of my partner, artist Deborah Kass and me, lying half naked and entwined in each other's arms. I chose a nationalist form for the work, nineteenth century American neo-classical sculpture, to address what I consider a federal failure - not allowing gay Americans the right to marry.

The sculpture is installed on our actual burial plot in Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx. Funnily enough it's the first piece of real estate I ever bought! Designed in 1863, Woodlawn is one of the best examples of the 19th century "garden cemetery" movement. It's designed as America's Père Lachaise, the famous cemetery in Paris. Woodlawn is the final resting place for many historic figures. You can find artists, writers, civic leaders, entrepreneurs, entertainers, and jazz musicians there among specimen trees, gorgeous architecture, and breathtaking statues from the robber-baron years of American history.

I chose our particular plot because its a sunken garden not visible from the road because I worried about vandalism. Grand Arts had invested a large sum in my project and it took me three years to make, so I didn't want a homophobe coming along with a sledgehammer. In fact as a kind of insurance policy I made a rubber mold of the marble to preserve the form just in case someone damaged it.

We unveiled the sculpture on a beautiful autumn Sunday afternoon with an historic walking tour "The Beautiful Women of Woodlawn." We strolled past magnificent McKim Mead & White mausoleums, Daniel Chester French angels, freestanding bronzes, Tiffany stained-glass windows, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton's tomb. And at the end of the tour, in front of 200 friends, artists, and strangers, my sculpture was unveiled. It was like a wedding. That we were celebrating a replica of us--the simulacrum rather than the living, breathing version--was still out of our legal control.

The response to the sculpture over the past decade has been amazing. We're the third most visited plot in the cemetery: There's Duke Ellington, Miles Davis, then Deb and me. The cemetery organizes historic walking tours: jazz, art and architecture, Victorian, veterans--and somehow our statue is on every one of them.

I would regularly go up to the cemetery to "clean the girls" and every Thanksgiving, before the first snowfall, I would buy a car cover for the memorial and cover it for the winter.

Last year the Station Museum of Contemporary Art in Houston invited me to exhibit the marble so I decided to move it permanently indoors. The foundry had called saying the rubber mold was deteriorating and if we acted fast I could make that bronze version I had dreamed about since seeing the bronzes in the Paris cemeteries. The marble went on an exhibition tour and I began making the bronze.

Then this past summer, the New York State Senate passed Bill #5416, allowing gay people to legally marry. Not civil unionize, *marry*. So after 18 years together, we went to City Hall on the morning of July 24, 2011, with nearly 900 other New York City couples, waiting for three hours in the heat to get legally married on the first day.

The first lesbian couple to marry had been together 47 years. I couldn't imagine what they had been through. One reason I wanted to marry Deb was so that younger people who are in love and inclined to wed can do so at the *beginning* of their adult lives, and have friends and family root for their relationship's longevity. The second reason was more personal, we were able to profess our love, care for, and commitment to each other before the state. The ceremony was emotional, heavy. Even the judge cried.

I thought I would see gay marriage legalized in my lifetime but I never thought the law would change within a decade of making the sculpture. Last week I installed the bronze version. What started out as as political art turned out to be prophetic. It is now really a Memorial to a Marriage.

## The Marriage Story Behind This Bronze Sculpture Of Lesbians Embracing

