

HYPERALLERGIC

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From Grief to Action: Patricia Cronin on Her 'Shrine for Girls'

by **Clarity Haynes** on May 23, 2015



*Installation view of Patricia Cronin's "Shrine for Girls". 56th Venice Biennale, 2015
(all photos by Mark Blower)*

Roses, and pinks, and violets, to adorn the Shrine of Flora in her early May.

– *John Keats*

If you make the pilgrimage to the Venice Biennale this year, among the many artistic spectacles you will encounter is an actual shrine. In a space both private and public, solemn and sacred, visitors are invited to reflect, pray, imagine, and grieve. Enter the church, the Chiesa di San Gallo – dark and small, built in the 16th century – and you will see three altars, each bearing a simple pile of fabric, lit with spotlights. This is Patricia Cronin's *Shrine for Girls*.

The central altar's bright, multicolored heap of super-saturated colors and textures glows in contrast with the church's pale stone walls and subdued shadows. As you stand before the shrine, you will see that the mound of cloth is actually a pile of saris. A small photograph propped next to it shows two teenaged girls, dressed in similarly bright saris, hanging from a tree. They are two young cousins who were gang raped, murdered, and hung from a tree last May, in India.



Patricia Cronin, "Shrine for Girls" (2015)

This silent, horrific image is one of three — one for each altar in the church — that tell stories most of us would rather turn away from. To the left, an altar piled with neutral-toned hijabs honors the more than 200 girls in Nigeria who were kidnapped by Boko Haram last year. To the right, a shrine piled with pale, almost colorless aprons focuses on the exploitative Magdalene Laundries in Europe and the US where, as recently as the 1990s, uncooperative women and girls, wearing uniforms represented by the aprons in the pile, were coerced into forced labor.

These quiet shrines hold us with their power, forcing us to face the global devaluation of girls' and women's lives. They are both a sad reminder of unfathomable tragedy, and an affirmation of the beauty and sanctity of lives suppressed and lost. An art historical reference might be the Massacre of the Innocents, an ancient theme, but the reality these shrines are addressing is immediate. "The numbers that are involved in the horrible things happening to women around

the world are staggering," Cronin is quoted as saying in a recent *Huffington Post* article. "What do you do with the statement *110,000,000 women are missing?*"

It is important to note that the shrines demand more than the tears of viewers; visitors are provided with a list of organizations working for change for women and girls globally, and are encouraged to get involved by supporting those efforts. In addition, 10% of any profits resulting from this project will be donated by the artist to these organizations (a list of which can also be found on the [Shrine for Girls](#) website). While I have not been able to travel to Venice to see the work in person, I have seen photographs of the piece and have followed Cronin's work for many years. I am struck by the resonances between Shrine for Girls and Cronin's previous work and, considered together, her very distinct projects build a powerful cumulative statement. They share common threads that reveal the artist's commitment to social justice, her bold insistence on creating radical change through art, and her almost romantic belief in values some might consider conservative: beauty, classicism, and idealism.

I'm very grateful that Patricia Cronin agreed to answer some questions about her work, as she reflects on the recent opening of Shrine for Girls, Venice, to the public.

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Clarity Haynes: *I was trying to figure out how to describe the brilliant way your work superimposes the real on the symbolic – “Memorial to a Marriage” (2002), “Harriet Hosmer: Lost and Found” (2009) and “Shrine for Girls” all share this. It’s symbolic but it’s also concrete. In “Memorial to a Marriage,” which is about marriage equality, that’s you and your wife Deborah Kass in marble, as a public monument in a cemetery, a non-art space, where you will both one day be buried. With “Harriet Hosmer: Lost and Found,” you didn’t just create work about a neglected woman artist of the past; you gave her the catalogue raisonné she deserved. And “Shrine for Girls,” because it is set up like a devotional shrine in a church, feels like art as well as something else. A real shrine, perhaps. Something spiritual.*

I talked to a friend about this quality in your work – the tendency for it to be both practical and conceptual – and she described it perfectly: “She collapses the symbolic and the concrete, and that new space is action.” What do you think about this interpretation, and why have you tended to create work that is both symbolic and functional?



Patricia Cronin, “Shrine for Girls (detail)” (2015)

Patricia Cronin: I love thinking about the juxtaposition of symbolism and functionality — collapsing two diametrically opposed concepts into each other. The way I’ve conceived of these projects in my artistic practice is to create a counterbalance to an untenable reality. I think the artist looks out and sees the world as incomplete and tries to complete it in their studio. I am correcting what is so woefully lacking in this world. For example, with *Memorial To a Marriage*, legally marrying Deborah was prohibited by United States law — the marriage could not exist. So I subverted an American “Nationalist” form — American Neoclassical sculpture — to address what I considered a “Federal” failure. The indignity of the erasure of our marriage was transformed and given the weight and importance of history, our likenesses carved in monumental Carrara marble.

With Harriet Hosmer, I focused on a wildly financially successful 19th-century artist, famous in her time as the first professional woman sculptor. She exhibited in all the International World Expositions, was critically acclaimed, won commissions at a time when it was unheard of for a woman to do so, and her work is now in some of the best museum collections in the world. And yet she is forgotten. Who gets written into history and who is forgotten, and why? These are some of the questions I was thinking about. Harriet Hosmer's catalogue raisonné was my answer: an institutional critique of the intersection of the ivory tower and the marketplace.

With *Shrine For Girls, Venice*, I wanted to create a space for global bereavement over three tragic events through the symbolism of the clothing that women and girls traditionally wear in the geographical areas represented: Nigeria, India, Ireland, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Italy and the United States. As I've said before, there's the concept of the "identifiable victim effect," in which one death is a tragedy but 1,000 deaths are just a statistic. There is a way in which we tend to accept the idea of violence against women as "just the way things are" — part of the status quo. My goal here is to get people to see what is really happening to women and girls all around the world. I want to un-numb both the viewer and myself.



Patricia Cronin, "Shrine for Girls" (2015)

CH: *One of the formal tools you use to accomplish that in this work is color. The central altar in the installation features a pile of brightly colored saris. (It's interesting to note that, in the articles I've seen, photographs of the chromatic centerpiece are circulating more pervasively than the two other altars, which feature more neutral fabrics.) The two previous projects I've mentioned — "Memorial to a Marriage" and "Harriet Hosmer: Lost and Found" — are restrained in their use of color, and mostly monochromatic. I know form is entwined tightly with content for you, and I suspect that you do not use color casually. In the central altar of "Shrine for Girls," I feel that you have harnessed the emotional power of color exquisitely to speak about the joy and innocence of children. How does it feel to let color play such a strong role in this piece? Is color a vehicle to support your statement?*

PC: You're correct: the integrity of any medium I use dictates the palette. The color is never forced or artificial. Saris are by custom and culture very chromatically saturated. Because of the violent and difficult nature of the events that inspired this exhibition — and the desire to draw people into the church — I organized the installation so that the sari sculpture would occupy the central altar and could be seen from outside, to draw people in. That chromatic experience of the retina is dramatic and exciting. But once you move toward this sculpture on the high altar, perceiving the beautiful swirls of ecstatic fabric, the content slowly reveals itself to you. When you see the photograph of figures wearing some clothing with the same colors, you know...

Seducing my audience into a false sense of security with images, forms and materials they are familiar with, so that the more radical content can slowly reveal itself, is a hallmark of my work. Depending on your subjectivity, it will take the form of tears or a punch to the stomach. It's conceptual art of the slyest kind. There were many goose bumps and many, many tears shed during the Vernissage Week of the Venice Biennale. The most poetic moment for me was when, during a video interview, we had to close/rope the show off temporarily, and a group of Indian women tourists looked in at the saris on the central altar through the chained-off open doors. They left, went back to their hotel rooms and returned with a large piece of black fabric they were traveling with. It is for mourning; they gave it to me to add to the shrine. When I say many tears were shed this week, I mean mine too. How moving, how humbling as an artist to have my work communicate so clearly. Outside the church, I have a signage totem on which the phrase "Shrine for Girls" is written in eleven languages. Knowing how many Indian and Chinese tourists stay in the one hotel in the tiny Campo San Gallo, I made sure Hindi and Chinese were among the languages on the signage.

CH: *Wow. That's powerful. The unabashedly emotional nature of "Shrine for Girls" sets the work apart from much of contemporary art, which in my opinion is more concerned with intellect than emotion. What are your thoughts on the role of emotion and affect in your work in general?*

PC: I think if art doesn't move you it's decoration, an agent of escapism. That's not what I think the role of art has been nor should be. My favorite examples are Kathe Kollwitz's antiwar works, Goya's *Disasters of War*, and Picasso's "Guernica." And when emotion is present, the work communicates across languages and boundaries. Some of the most moving responses to the *Shrine for Girls* installation have been from men. I've overheard them talking as they leave the exhibition, and have read their words in the guest book: "Where are the Men? This is their fight too! To where did they run. If this was your sister, your mother, your daughter. What would you do, what should you do?" I found this to be incredibly moving because this is exactly what I needed to hear and what we all need to hear. The responsibility to combat this irrational prejudice belongs to all of us.

And the curator of *Shrine for Girls* is a man — the renowned Rome-based curator Ludovico Pratesi. He has written the most poetic, powerful curator's essay, visible on the exhibition wall and on the shrineforgirls.org website. It is vitally important for men to be part of this conversation.



Patricia Cronin, "Shrine for Girls (detail)" (2015)

CH: *I know that your Catholic upbringing has been a huge influence upon your work. When I see this work, located in a church and evoking the idea of spiritual and religious ritual, I think of the role patriarchal religions have played in the oppression of women globally. To me, the reference to religion feels poignant in relation to the realities behind these shrines. Do you intend for the viewer to consider this work as a kind of institutional critique, or even as a spiritual intervention that insists upon the primacy of women and girls?*

PC: I think it is incredibly courageous of the Diocese of Venice to present this work in one of their churches, knowing that the Magdalene Laundries were predominantly Catholic-run organizations in Ireland, England, Scotland, Wales, Germany, France, Italy AND the United States. But also, I am bringing three major world religions together under one roof (Catholicism, Hinduism and Islam), with the awareness that men for centuries have interpreted sacred texts to say that women are separate and unequal to men in the eyes of God, using this as justification for how women are treated. That the work calls attention to this is extremely rewarding to me.

But I also want beauty. I think of these three sculptures on the altars as the same as when a love song and protest song are one and the same, like Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On." There is beauty in bearing witness, there is beauty in lamenting, there is beauty in calling to action and there is beauty in speaking truth to power. Sometimes I'm asked if I would rather be considered an activist than an artist, and my answer is that I don't want to choose. Like the great author Toni Morrison said, "The best art is political and you ought to be able to make it unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time." This has always been my goal.

[Shrine for Girls](#) continues at the 56th Venice Biennale (Chiesa di San Gallo, Campo San Gallo, Venice) through November 22, 2015.

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