

## Coming Apart at The Seams

### American artist Patricia Cronin on creating ‘Shrine for Girls’

American artist Patricia Cronin gathers the threads from three different sites of atrocities against women in a shrine at the Venice Biennale.

Written by **Vandana Kalra** | New Delhi | Published on: June 14, 2015 1:00 am



Patricia Cronin's installation, Shrine for Girls, at the church of San Gallo

In a city dotted with churches and palaces, the church of San Gallo perhaps is one of the least magnificent. Located in the bustling San Marco district in Venice, the building measures no more than 21ft x 30 ft. But if it wasn't for this 16th century sanctum, American artist Patricia Cronin might not have designed her shrine dedicated to girls across the world. The site is pertinent to her shrine: its three altars are piled with hundreds of garments placed as religious relics dedicated to young women martyrs in different parts of the world. In the centre, lie saris from India; they represent the two teenagers from Badaun, Uttar Pradesh, who were allegedly murdered and hung from a mango tree last summer. The neutral-toned

hijabs on the left honour the 276 schoolgirls kidnapped by Boko Haram in Nigeria in 2014. And a pile of uniforms resemble aprons worn by girls forced to work at the Magdalene laundries across Europe and the US as recently as the 1990s. “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,” says Cronin, 52, about the site-specific installation titled “Shrine for Girls”.

Collateral at the ongoing Venice Biennale, the thought of honouring female victims occurred to Cronin almost exactly a year ago, when she was on an airplane to Italy. On the flight, Cronin wept through *Philomena*, the 2013 biopic about Philomena Lee, an Irish woman’s search for her son, who was forcibly given up for adoption by nuns. News about the incidents in Nigeria and India followed. “Every day I was waking up to a horrible story,” says Cronin.

Back in her Brooklyn studio, Cronin was working on a series on the crisis in masculinity, referencing deposition scenes (of what she terms the most famous male body in western art at his most hopeless moment), when she envisaged the shrine. “I thought, really, what I should be focusing on are women and girls. They really need a shrine,” recalls Cronin, who is a tenured professor at Brooklyn College of the City University of New York.



Patricia Cronin

Her big break was a provocative series of Polaroid prints and watercolours depicting lesbian sex between her and partner Deborah Kass, in the 1990s. In 2002, she unveiled “Memorial to a Marriage”, a three-ton marble mortuary sculpture of herself and Kass lying in tender embrace, before gay marriage was legalised in the US. The monumental work was later installed on their burial plot at the Woodlawn Cemetery in Bronx. “Legally marrying Deborah was prohibited by the 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,” says Cronin.

In Venice, the project curated by Ludovico Pratesi takes inspiration from artists Sophie Calle and Bill Viola, who also transformed religious places of worship into sites for art. “When people walk into the space they’re not walking into a white box gallery, they are entering a space that speaks about solemnity,” says Cronin. The clothes represent the numerous faceless girls, beyond those involved in the incidents. “These people, when they were alive, weren’t treated with any dignity. Their bodies are gone. The idea then of looking at clothing without bodies inside them seemed to be a poetic, powerful and poignant metaphor,” says the artist, who sourced the garments from the countries where the tragedies occurred. Small, framed photographs taken during the corresponding tragic event have been placed on each altar. “They are really small, and can be viewed only when people walk in and come close,” says Cronin.

The installation cost her about \$2,00,000 in all, including \$78,000 for church contract and \$22,000 fee to the Venice Biennale to be a collateral event, she hopes for the work to travel and raise discussions on related issues. “Studies have found the identifiable victim effect, which basically says ‘one death is a tragedy, 1,000 deaths is just a statistic.’ My goal was: how do we get people to focus on what’s happening to women and girls around the world? How do I un-numb people, and you and me?”

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