

# The New York Times

## Art in Review

Published: June 18, 2009

PATRICIA CRONIN

### **‘Harriet Hosmer, Lost and Found’**

*Brooklyn Museum, 200 Eastern Parkway, at Prospect Park  
Through Jan. 24*

Patricia Cronin first became aware of the American 19th-century sculptor Harriet Hosmer when she came across images of Hosmer’s marble figures while doing research for a sculpture of her own, “Memorial to a Marriage,” a larger-than-life marble tomb carving depicting herself and her lover, the painter Deborah Kass, locked in an embrace. Ms. Cronin saw examples of Hosmer’s surviving monumental work a few years later while on a fellowship at the American Academy in Rome.

Ms. Cronin’s reaction on both occasions was to wonder why Hosmer wasn’t better known, and she decided to do something to ensure that she would be. The result was the project just installed in the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum: a show of 20 of Ms. Cronin’s black-and-white watercolors accompanied by a book, which together constitute a document of, and homage to, Hosmer’s work.

Born, like Ms. Cronin, in Massachusetts, Hosmer (1830-1908) studied sculpture in the United States, but in 1852 moved to Europe to expand her career and find a more tolerant atmosphere for her life as an independent woman and a lesbian. Both aims were at least temporarily realized in Italy. There she landed significant commissions, enjoyed a congenial circle of female friends, and was part of a cultural network that included George Eliot, the Brownings and Nathaniel Hawthorne, who used Hosmer as a model for a character in his book “The Marble Faun.”

Hosmer’s neo-Classical sculptures included two figures of fauns, though most were of women. Some, like Daphne and Medusa, were mythological; others, like Queen Isabella of Castile, from history. A few were contemporaries, as in the case of the reclining tomb figure of a 16-year-old named Judith Falconnet. Commissioned for the Church of Sant’Andrea delle Fratte, the work was, Ms. Cronin notes in the book accompanying the show, the first sculpture by an American to be permanently installed in a Roman church.

The Falconnet tomb is the subject of one of the watercolors that make up the show and that together depict all of Hosmer’s known works. The sculptures that are extant or that survive in printed reproduction are painted by Ms. Cronin in an idealized version of photographic accuracy. Sculptures that are considered lost but that may still exist somewhere appear as near-abstract ghostly auras.

The complete set of paintings, arranged in chronological sequence, is reproduced in the book, along with scholarly data about each sculpture and commentary by Ms. Cronin. This exhibition catalog doubles as a catalogue raisonné of Hosmer’s art as seen through the eyes and hand of another woman and artist.



Patricia Cronin’s watercolor homage to Harriet Hosmer’s missing 1868 sculpture “Queen of Naples,” at the Brooklyn Museum.

In short, Ms. Cronin’s Hosmer show — organized by Lauren Ross, interim curator of the Sackler Center — is a complex package: a total work of art that is also a historical document of the careers of two artists, past and present, and a salvage operation to secure the visibility of both artists over time.

Visibility is, of course, unpredictably elusive. The Metropolitan Museum of Art owns a version of Hosmer’s “Daphne,” but hasn’t included it among the sculptures in its recently revamped American Wing.

By contrast, Ms. Cronin’s “Memorial to a Marriage” is on what will presumably be permanent view at the gravesite she and Ms. Kass jointly own in Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx, a monument that Hosmer, one suspects, would have loved.

**HOLLAND COTTER**