

The New York Times

SLEEPING TOGETHER; A Daring (and Icy) Duet

Published: February 23 2003

A new sculpture at Woodlawn Cemetery that is the only piece of statuary in the venerable memorial park to depict pubic hair is causing trouble, not because it offends modesty but because it collects ice.

Small pools of ice and rainwater also tend to form under the chins, near the bellies and around the toes of the two women depicted in the recently installed grave marker, which the sculptor, Patricia Cronin, calls "Memorial to a Marriage."

Ms. Cronin said she hadn't given a thought to whether intimate details like breasts, nipples and pubic hair would offend cemetery-goers.

But she did worry about pooling when, with the help of an arts grant, she designed the seven-foot-long sculpture, which depicts her naked in bed with her real-life partner, Deborah Kass.

Ms. Cronin said she had hoped to keep puddles to a minimum by eliminating unnecessary folds in the bodies and bedclothes while faithfully portraying the intimacy of her relationship with Ms. Kass. Prudery, she figured, is a deeply-rooted American trait that has little to do with art. Anyone who is offended by the sculpture doesn't have to look.

Three months after being installed, the "Memorial" is now one of the most visited sites in the Bronx cemetery; only the graves of Duke Ellington and Miles Davis draw more attention. To minimize ice, grounds crews try to cover the sculpture with a blue tarp. They can remove it for visitors, and then, if they're lucky, they put it back in place before snow falls again.

Some New Yorkers may have worried that a sculpture of two nude women embracing in bed would stain Woodlawn's reputation, but that concern seems to have been misplaced. "This is the most over-the-top cemetery in the country," said Susan Olsen, executive director of Friends of the Woodlawn Cemetery.

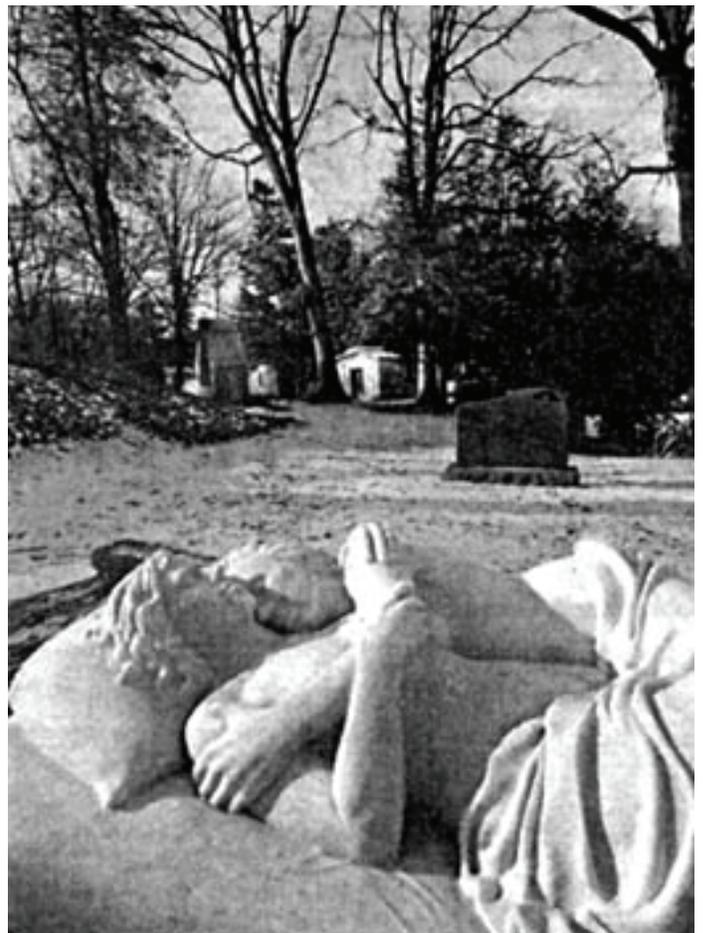
Surrounded by eccentricities like F.W. Woolworth's Egyptian-revival tomb and the fantastic gargoyled replica of Leonardo's Chapel of St. Hubert that is the eternal resting place of the banker Oliver Belmont, Ms. Cronin's "Memorial" is just another example of self-expression, one that, despite its sensitive subject, simply carries on tradition. "The theme of two people sleeping together goes back to the Middle Ages," said Edward F. Bergman, author of "Woodlawn Remembers," a pictorial history of the cemetery. "What's new about this is that it is two women."

Ms. Cronin, who lives and works in Park Slope, Brooklyn, said she and Ms. Kass had tried to memorialize in death the civil union they were prohibited from forming in life. Both women intend to have their cremated remains placed next to the sculpture.

Looking at her own grave marker doesn't make Ms. Cronin, 39, at all uneasy.

"Now I know where I'm going to end up," she said. "All the choice I have left is how to live my life between now and then."

ANTHONY DePALMA



Photograph by Fred R. Conrad / New York Times