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considering the past through the lens of the present—ideas of history, memory and the future...

MMXVI

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Two teen girls sexually assaulted and lynched...

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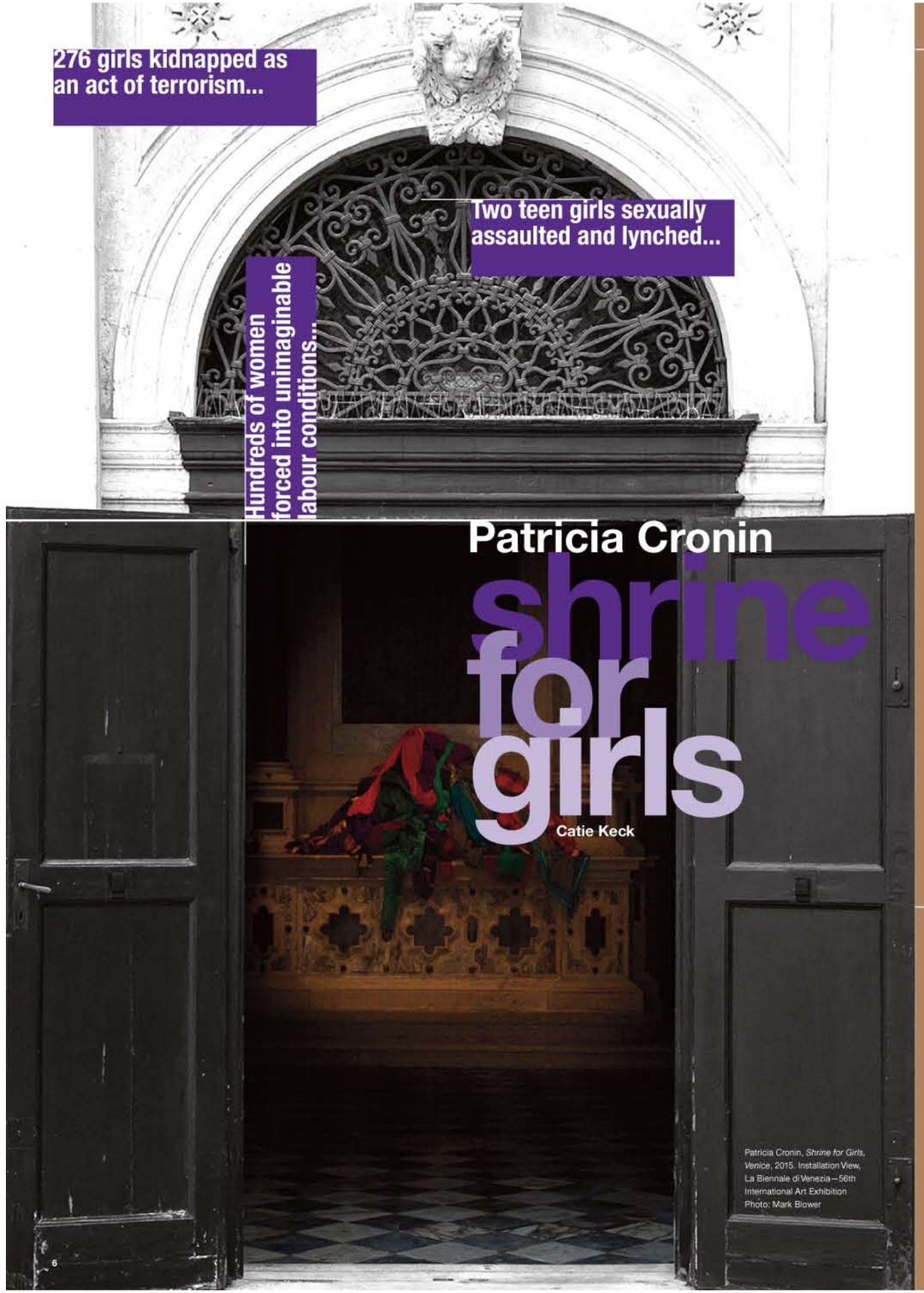
Patricia Cronin

shrine for girls

Catie Keck



Patricia Cronin, *Shrine for Girls, Venice*, 2015. Installation View, La Biennale di Venezia—56th International Art Exhibition Photo: Mark Blower

Shrine for Girls, Venice **is a hymn to woman, to her often unexpressed potential.** *Ludovico Pratesi*

Patricia Cronin, *Shrine for Girls, Venice*, 2015. Installation View, La Biennale di Venezia—56th International Art Exhibition Photo: Mark Blower

Patricia Cronin, *Hijabs and Photograph*, 2015. La Biennale di Venezia—56th International Art Exhibition Photo: Mark Blower

To deny that contemporary art plays an integral role in shaping the way we think about social justice would be foolish. While relatively marginal in comparison to the scope of the majority of works hanging on gallery and museum walls, the proliferation of both represented and guerrilla artists alike—some of whom are undoubtedly the art world's brightest—who use their respective mediums to address matters of violence, racism, sexism, homophobia, and many more topics of social injustice, is invaluable.

Patricia Cronin is one such artist. Currently stationed in New York, her work has often addressed these very issues through a lens of intersectional feminism that spans the stretch of her career, perhaps most notably in her critically acclaimed works *Memorial To A Marriage* (2002) and *Harriet Hosmer, Lost and Found* (2009). Her well-earned prestige afforded her an invitation to participate in 2015's Venice Biennale—a hub of its own political art—for which she tasked herself with one of the greatest undertakings of her career to date, *Shrine for Girls*.

Her subjects are an estimated 276 girls kidnapped as an act of terrorism against the education of Nigerian women. Two teen girls sexually assaulted and lynched in India as a gross display of the disregard for women of lower castes. Hundreds of women forced into unimaginable labour conditions in the Magdalene laundries in Ireland for their alleged and often unsubstantiated crimes of promiscuity, defiance, and mental illness. Three monumental historical occurrences. And while seemingly isolated and unrelated, all three share a common thread: a pandemic of violence against women and girls across cultures, customs, and history—a topic familiar to Cronin's rapport.

How does an artist address these atrocities while honouring the lives of the affected women, and how should aesthetic be used to engage dialogue?

Her second-ever ready-made installation, *Shrine for Girls, Venice* pays homage while evoking a necessity for meditation. While the three subjects of her shrines are indisputably sombre, the works themselves, perhaps defiantly, bear an unmistakable beauty.

Cronin was presented with a very particular set of restrictions for how she could show her work. Showing in the Chiesa di San Gallo, a deconsecrated space still maintained by the Church, defined not only where the work would be shown but how. Each of the aforementioned

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Patricia Cronin, *Saris*, 2015. La Biennale di Venezia—56th International Art Exhibition Photo: Mark Blower

Patricia Cronin, *Saris and Photograph*, 2015. La Biennale di Venezia—56th International Art Exhibition Photo: Mark Blower

events was given its own of the Chiesa di San Gallo's three altars. The altars were piled with articles of fabric native to the cultures they represented. Linen and cotton, for example, created masses much different than those of wool. "Different climates, different customs, different materials," Patricia says. As for the origin of the materials used, she adds that authenticity was paramount. "It was really important to me that the clothing be sourced from the locations where these events happened."

The fabric piles, representative of clothing worn by women in their three respective cultures, take on new meaning with their odd shapes devoid of human forms. "This is not the form the clothes are supposed to take," Patricia says. "The clothes are supposed to have the body inside them. When you take away the body, they take up so little space. It reminds you of who's missing."

One of the things Patricia talks about was weighing up the aesthetic of her altars. Should they be beautiful? Shouldn't they, given their topic matter? As an artist, she felt it was her responsibility to allow viewers to take in the installation and its symbolism without assaulting them with violence—though upon closer examination, the enormity of the crimes against these women becomes abundantly clear. In this way, Patricia has more than achieved her ultimate intention of creating a space for reflection.

She didn't envision the piles right away, she says. Suspending the fabrics didn't feel right—it evoked religious connotations a la the crucifix. "I had to make it look as beautiful as possible so I didn't denigrate their memory by making it look like dirty laundry. There's a tension between the two—to bring this to people's consciousness and awareness, I have to in some ways make it look elegant." Additionally there was also the space itself to consider. "I knew I had to think very specifically about the religious architecture. This architecture already had its own meaning, function, and its own history. I knew I wasn't putting this installation in a white cube gallery space in Venice."

The altar that sits centre of the three upon entering the church honours Pushpa and Murti, two teen girls in Northern India whose deaths in 2014 were seemingly showcased following their gang rapes and lynching from a mango tree as villagers awaited police to arrive on the scene to cut them down. One of the few photos taken of the scene—one of the few of the two women ever taken in their lifetimes—sits atop their altar in the church. "Pushpa and Murti are from the lowest caste in India, yet they have the most beautifully coloured, chromatically rich clothing," says Patricia. "To our Western eyes, they look so beautiful and luxurious."

When the girls had initially gone missing, local police had refused to investigate the case due to their caste. Even after the girls were found and three brothers of a higher caste confessed to their gang rape (but, importantly, not the murders), police later ruled their lynching as suicides. They alleged that one of the young girls had been sexually active with one of her rapists and had hung herself out of shame. Similarly horrific stories regularly affect Indian women of all castes. It is unlikely the families of Pushpa and Murti will be afforded any closure.

To its left, a heaping pile of hijabs—an estimated 276 in total for each of the Nigerian girls kidnapped by Boko Haram in 2014—in neutral and muted colours take on their own shape and meaning. This altar too bears a photograph, one captured shortly after the girls were kidnapped.

Patricia is careful to point out the socioeconomic context of acquiring these garments in particular. "Boko Haram were giving the women away to different soldiers as their new wives and they were also selling them," she says. "Something that disturbed me was that some of them were being sold for the equivalent of $10—for a person—and yet to buy the hijabs, for me here, they were about $25 each." The idea that clothing would be more expensive than an actual person, she says, was harrowing. The very nature of the materials acquired made a political statement.

Patricia Cronin, *Chibok Student #2*, 2015

Patricia Cronin, *Hijabs*, 2015. La Biennale di Venezia—56th International Art Exhibition Photo: Mark Blower

Patricia Cronin, *Aprons and Photograph*, 2015. La Biennale di Venezia—56th International Art Exhibition Photo: Mark Blower

It's estimated that Boko Haram has kidnapped as many as 2,000 women and children since 2009. Despite ongoing efforts to free women and children who've been abducted—either directly or indirectly related to the 276 Chibok schoolgirls—a staggering majority who've managed to survive have became pregnant by their rapists. Those who remained unaccounted for are thought to have been either sold into slavery or murdered.

The third altar sits to the right of the church's entrance. It honours the thousands of women who suffered unthinkable mistreatment between the 18th and 20th centuries at Ireland's Magdalene laundries. Their crimes? Abuse suffered at the hands of family members, pregnancy out of wedlock (including victims of rape), and those who brought 'disgrace' on their families—particularly women who suffered mental illness of varying degrees.

These fabrics, muted and woollen, sit beside a picture of nameless women poised before piles of laundry in rows where they'd work the entire day. "Since the last Magdalene laundry closed in 1996, it was impossible to get my hands on that many of the aprons," she says.

"I found a woman on Etsy who lived in the UK who was for 30 years a historical costume seamstress. She also happened to be partially raised by nuns and had some terrible memories, so when I located her and she really got into the project, it was almost like making them was a cathartic process for her too."

The last laundry closed in 1996, but there's no accounting for more than a century's worth of women who suffered immensely at the hands of their captors. Many were erased entirely, forgotten by history and their families, and many more still alive today are awaiting compensation on some level for the emotional, physical, and psychological abuses they endured.

When reflecting on the political importance of these and other works as mechanisms to enact social change, curator Ludovico Pratesi puts it best. In an excerpt from the installation's eponymous book companion, he writes. "*Shrine for Girls*, *Venice* is a hymn to woman, to her often unexpressed potential. This still very current reality is worthy of artistic expression…The installation in the Church of San Gallo represents the construction of a ceremonial place where the expressed ritual is the consecration of an historical and current reality that relates to the beauty and power of young women."

A 2006 figure from the United Nations estimates that violence against women—defined as both sexual and physical in nature—accounts for the experiences of nearly one in three women worldwide. This is a global crisis. However, Patricia has managed the extraordinary feat of creating something meaningful in the aftermath of these most heinous violations of human rights.

"By activating the church's natural structure and spiritual atmosphere with minimal intervention," wrote curator Phong Bui, "Patricia has been able to create a haunting installation that reveals her compassion and capacity to absorb and repurpose the pain inflicted by men's violence upon young girls around the world."

Patricia is currently in the process of rendering a number of watercolours for the girls as well—for the often nameless women of the laundries, for Pushpa and Murti, for the hundreds of girls who suffered tremendously for their crime of pursuing an education. "It's very sad—it's very depressing. But I felt like, why shouldn't they have beautiful portraits made of them?" Indeed, her watercolours of Pushpa and Murti stare out at you as a haunting reminder of their short lives, but the intrinsic beauty and vibrancy of each is undeniable.