

Reviewed: Patricia Cronin at Conner Contemporary

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Conner Contemporary's current show, "Memorial to a Marriage," by Patricia Cronin, is a spare exhibition containing the title work, cast in bronze, and a small maquette of the same sculpture off to the side. The sculpture depicts two (nearly) life-sized figures laying on a bed, nude except for the drapery of bed sheets, embracing and asleep.

The entire piece seems apart from the 21st century, a transplant from a different age. Bronze was the medium of the ancient Greeks; it's what **Ghiberti** use for his Baptistry Doors in Florence in the 15th century. The drapery and the touching of feet recall the subtle play with the sculpted form typical of Baroque sculptor **Gian Lorenzo Bernini**.

Since the work is not in a contemporary medium, it's automatically an oddity. The American tradition of bronze sculpture took one remarkable turn in the 19th century: It became the chosen medium of memorials, and more often than not it would seem those memorials were dedicated to warriors of the Civil War. If representational bronze sculptures were as common today as they were 140 years ago, a work of this size might appear entirely unremarkable were it not for the subject. Instead of depicting a soldier on a horse, it depicts two women, presumably after having sex.

For the art community—one fairly quick to embrace gay marriage—the content isn't shocking. Given the subdued nature of the sculpted forms, it's difficult to see how it could be. Little of the sculpture could be considered erotic. It's sensual: a classical medium

calls for a tasteful approach. Instead of depicting the act of sex, it shows the vulnerable moments after. At a glance, one of the female figures seems nearly androgynous, with breasts nearly obscured by the embracing arm of her partner. The subtlety practically allows "Monument to a Marriage" to have that double read—a monument to both heterosexual and homosexual marriage.

For Cronin, who's in a longterm committed relationship with her partner, artist **Deborah Kass**, the dangers of an unrecognized union began when Kass' niece was hospitalized. First on the scene, Cronin was informed only family could see the patient. She identified herself as an aunt, though legally she wasn't. As time went on, the legal chasm expanded for the couple: When traveling through Customs and Border Protection, people must declare the number of family members traveling with them. When a gay marriage isn't legally recognized, what is the penalty for declaring a gay partner family?

Marriage is not always a union of love; it's a legal union of property, and the legal contract determines who has rights to that property. To begin the process of attempting to legalize their union, Cronin and Kass worked through power of attorney and living wills, so that at least in death, under what was permitted by law, they could simulate the mortal end of a legally recognized marriage. "Memorial to a Marriage" was born from that legal calamity: to recognize in a death marker what cannot be recognized while they live.

For all of the presumed heroics suggested in the wooden poses of the equestrian statues we ignore while driving through D.C., Cronin's work is an act of heroism. In the face of the ongoing legal battles over what should be a slam-dunk civil right—a "federal failure," as Cronin puts it—she has sculpted this memorial to what should otherwise be a dead issue. Aristotle said, "The artist looks out and sees the world incomplete and tries to finish it." Cronin has given her best shot: a beautiful, sensuous death bed upon which we can contemplate the simple human emotion of bliss with a loved one.