Patricia Cronin's Social Sculpture: Shrine for Girls

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In 2014, American artist Patricia Cronin was en route to Italy when she found herself sobbing through Stephen Frears' film *Philomena*, the 2013 biopic about a woman searching for her son, whom she was forced by nuns at an Irish convent to give up for adoption. Having grown up Irish Catholic in New England, Cronin was shocked that she knew nothing about the Magdalene Laundries and was incredibly moved. The month before, she had read about the 276 teenage girls kidnapped from a secondary school by Islamist terrorist group Boko Haram in Nigeria, and, a short time later, about two young female cousins in Northern India who had been gang-raped and then lynched.

"I couldn't get the girls out of my head," Cronin says of all the brutalized females. "Every day you wake up and there's another horrible news story about violence."

Back in her Brooklyn studio she had been hard at work on a series of sculptures about the global crisis in masculinity, with references to deposition scenes (of what she calls the most famous male body in western art at his most "hopeless moment")—a series that was in part inspired by Hal Foster's review of three new Medieval and Renaissance art history books in the *London Review of Books*. But, Cronin recalls, "I thought, why am I focusing on men when I really should be focusing on the women. They really need a shrine. A shrine!" It was a eureka moment, which led to Cronin's Venice Biennale solo exhibition, *Shrine for Girls, Venice*—a "collateral" show to the national pavilions, organized by Italian curator Ludovico Pratesi. (Collateral exhibitions are chosen by the Venice Biennale Artistic Director, this year—Okwui Enwezor—as well as relate to the exhibition's overarching theme, which seeks to articulate "the current disquiet of our time.")

Located in the tiny 16th-century Church of San Gallo, Cronin's *Shrine for Girls, Venice*, transforms the deconsecrated church into a site of what she calls "global bereavement" for the world's countless abused girls. The installation itself sits on three altars, each honoring young girls who have been mistreated. As you enter the church, the altar on the left displays black-

and violet-colored hijabs, representing the mass kidnapping of the Nigerian schoolgirls by Boko Haram in 2014. Most have never been seen since. It is feared, as reported by other girls previously held captive in the area, that they have been killed, repeatedly raped, sold as sex slaves, and/or forcibly married to the terrorists. The only public "trace" of the girls to-date comes in the form of a widely disseminated photograph in which they sit on the ground in a semi-circle, clad in Islamic dress, which is featured as a tiny framed photograph on the altar beside the pile of hijabs.

The central altar displays a mass of brightly colored traditional saris worn by girls in India, two of which were gang raped and hung from a mango tree in 2014. When the girls went missing, one of their fathers immediately asked the police for help; they refused and ridiculed him because the family was of a lower caste. When the bodies were discovered the next day, angry villagers silently protested the police inaction by refusing to allow the bodies to be cut down from the tree. Some took photographs of the bodies swaying gently in a breeze as testament to the horror, one of which is placed in a tiny frame on the altar. (India's "rape problem" was thrown into high relief in 2013 when a 23-year-old physiotherapy student on a bus heading back from a movie with a male friend was gang raped and later died from her injuries—an incident that threw India into the global spotlight.)

The right altar displays a pile of monochromatic aprons and uniforms, signifying the gross mistreatment of girls at the secretive Magdalene Asylums and Laundries, forced labor institutions for young women in Ireland, the UK and America that closed only as recently as 1996, and at which they suffered physical and psychological abuse from the nuns and priests. Sentenced to a life of labor, the Catholic Church believed that through suffering and hard work for the greater glory of God, the girls might find salvation in heaven. As a reference point, Cronin has placed a small historical black and white photograph of a working laundry on the altar beside the aprons. (The photograph that accompanies each pile of clothes is critical to the installation. It allows for the specificity of the three subjects to be legible. As Cronin explains, "I lure my audience into the church by elegantly arranging the chromatically rich saris on the central altar, they move

closer out of curiosity and then notice a small framed photograph to the side and all becomes clear. With such disturbing content I thought it was important not to beat them up with it, but to let their own individual emotional/psychological arch take place.")

Together, the three altars—each dramatically spot lit from above—pack a potent political punch, inviting visitors to reflect, pray, and grieve. The installation as a whole commemorates these three groups of girls as "secular martyrs," persecuted simply because of their sex—because they were female. As Cronin explains, "Since their bodies weren't treated with dignity while they were alive, and their bodies are missing or murdered, I consider the girls as martyrs and their clothing as relics. Unlike religious martyrs, however, there is no glory in their death, no otherworldly triumph."

While there are many historical examples of secular martyrs depicted in a fine art context—one need only think of Goya's *Third of May 1808* (1814–15) or David's *Death of Marat* (1793), for instance—Cronin takes a different approach altogether. Instead of referencing Christian iconography directly—e.g. crucifixion and deposition scenes—she has instead opted for a less obvious, metaphorical representation. In other words, her secular martyrs are presented as *absent presences*. As she explains, "Their bodies are gone. The idea then of looking at clothing without bodies inside them seemed to me a poetic, powerful and poignant metaphor." In other words, Cronin has chosen not to re-present the violence perpetrated against these young women but has instead relied on the metaphorical potentiality of her medium (clothing) and site (church). Together they produce a palpable absent-presence

Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825), *Marat's Death*, 1793, oil on canvas, Collection Musees Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels, Belgium

that speaks louder than if she had chosen to represent the violence outright. However, one might ask: As an artist, how does one depict a widespread epidemic like the global violence against women? How can one represent kidnappings, rapes, lynchings, murders and other atrocities without embracing age-old stereotypes, which some may find titillating?

The history of Western art, for instance, inspired in classical antiquity by the stories of Ovid and others, and later by the numerous martyrdoms of Christian saints, and above all, by the Passion and crucifixion of Christ, has been filled with images of tortured, raped, and brutalized women. One thinks of Titian's *Rape of Europa* (1562) and Delacroix's *Abduction of Rebecca* (1846) and of the countless images of nymphs beings raped by satyrs. One thinks, too, of Veronese's heart-rending image of Saint Agatha holding a bloody cloth up to her chest after the cutting off of her breasts by the pagan executioner, but there are many, many others, like Saint Catherine broken at the Wheel or Saint Lucy having her eyes plucked out. Although meant to inspire awe and pity—which they well may have—they also, consciously or not, must have produced a frisson of sexual pleasure in male (heterosexual) believers who got turned on by the depiction of the abuse and suffering of pretty women, as movie-goers today enjoy snuff and slasher films or other violent genres in which the brutalization of women is the featured dish on the menu.

Titian (Tiziano Vecellio) (1488–1576), *Rape of Europa*, 1559–62,
oil on canvas, Collection Isabella Steward Gardner Museum, Boston

It is this tradition of images of male domination that contemporary women artists like Cronin face up to and create alternatives for, transvaluating the outright enjoyment of women's pain and abjection that has characterized so much of the male dominated art of tradition. While many artists, writers and film directors do not

shy away from showing violence against women in all its goriness—as in *The Accused* (1988), Yinka Shonibare's *Gallantry and Criminal Conversation* (2002), or television's *Game of Thrones*—others are standing the tradition of male domination on its head, refusing the implications of male sexual enjoyment and aesthetic delectation implicit in both the abject victim and the classical nude of the past, and constructing new, often transgressive meanings around the feminist representation of the body, male and female. For instance, in a year long performance titled *Carry That Weight* (2014–15), artist Emma Sulkowicz chose to "carry" the mattress upon which she was raped, symbolizing the rape without depicting it outright.

The dilemma of how to represent the (ostensibly) un-representable is also one tackled by artist Ken Gonzales-Day, whose interest lies, in part, with the history of lynching in America. Unlike the horrifyingly realistic depiction of the lynching of Solomon Northup in the film *Twelve Years a Slave* (2014), for example—during which the main character chokes for breath, a rope tight around his neck, while he desperately tries to prop himself up by his toes that are sinking into a muddy ground—Gonzales-Day presents enlarged reproductions of historical postcards of lynchings in which the hanged body has been literally erased from the photograph. The absent-presence is loud and clear. By erasing the bodies, Gonzales-Day shifts the focus onto both the lynch mob spectators and onto the manner in which history and popular narratives of the West have "forgotten" these events. He points to the invisibility itself, thus bringing attention by memorializing the tragedy. In doing so, Gonzales-Day asks viewers to question cultural memory. And, as with Cronin's installation, one wonders who becomes the subject of the image in the body's absence? Does it flip the spotlight onto the audience? Yes, it does, as it should. Cronin's installation, like Gonzales-Day's series, reminds us that these are not isolated incidents of kidnapping, rape and lynching. These offences are rampant, and we all play a part in their continuation by not intervening in the injustices.

Indeed the numbers involved in abuses against women around the world are staggering. As Cronin asks, "What do you do with the statement 110,000,000 women are missing? That's what Amartya Sen, economist and winner of the Nobel Prize, said in 1990.[1] What do you do

with that number?" Every day millions of women and girls worldwide experience violence. The statistics reported by the World Health Organization (WHO), United Nations Committee on Women, and Amnesty International demonstrate convincingly that violence against women is *a global epidemic*. In 2014, for instance, the WHO estimated that one in three women around the world is subject to sexual violence at some point in her life. Every year, about 14 million girls under the age of 18 are given away as child brides, and an additional 4 million women and girls are bought and sold into slavery. And according to the United Nations, at least 125 million girls in Africa and the Middle East have undergone female genital mutilation (FGM).[2]

Equally troubling is the fact that some of these abusive acts have been justified using religious doctrine. (For instance, FGM is excused by some Muslim communities under the banner of religion, especially in Africa.) Even Former US President Jimmy Carter has argued that male religious leaders have been falsely interpreting holy teachings for centuries in order to subjugate women on the grounds of religion or tradition, as if prescribed by a Higher Authority. He furthers, "Their continuing choice [to discriminate] provides the foundation or justification for much of the pervasive persecution and abuse of women throughout the world. This is in clear violation not just of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights but also the teachings of Jesus Christ, the Apostle Paul, Moses and the prophets, Muhammad, and founders of other great religions—all of whom have called for proper and equitable treatment of *all* the children of God."[3] In other words, according to Carter, prejudice based on one's sex is irrational and immoral.

Unfortunately, society has become desensitized to the rampant abuse and violence against women. As Cronin explains, "We tend to accept the idea of violence against women as 'just the way things are'—part of the status quo. Our 24 hour new cycle times delivers such tragedy and devastation all the time that it becomes easy to numb yourself to the reality of relentless human cruelty. My goal here is to 'un-numb' people, to get them to see what is really happening to women and girls all around the world."

Shrine for Girls, Venice, then, is a fiercely political work, produced by an artist who has not

shied from controversial subjects in the past. In the mid-1990s Cronin exhibited a series of pornographic watercolors depicting lesbian sex, which functioned to reclaim lesbian subjectivity from the traditionally (heterosexual) male producer/consumer of such imagery. In 2000, she produced a series of paintings of what she calls "yuppy porn"—pictures of luxury homes found in Sotheby's real estate catalogues—which are about materialism and desire.[4] Then, in 2002, the artist unveiled her masterpiece, *Memorial to a Marriage*, a monumental marble sculpture of Cronin with her life-partner (now wife), artist Deborah Kass, who are depicted lying in a tender embrace, their nude bodies partially draped with a sheet, their eyes closed in eternal slumber. The monumental work (a bronze version) is installed on their burial plot at the Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx. Produced before gay marriage was legal any where in the United States and nine years before the couple married—on July 24, 2011, the first day it was legal to do so in New York—it serves as "an emphatically romantic protest."[5] The sculpture is based on an infamous erotic painting created by 19th-century French painter, Gustave Courbet, titled *The Sleepers* (1866).[6] (The painting was commissioned by the Turkish

top: Patricia Cronin (1963–), *Memorial To A Marriage*, 2002, marble

bottom: Gustave Courbet (1819–1877), *The Sleepers*, 1866, oil on canvas, Collection Petit Palais, Paris

ambassador, Khalil Bey, who also owned Courbet's pornographic painting, *Origin of the World* [1866].) When the painting went up for sale in the 1880s, it caused a public scandal, and furthered Courbet's reputation as a radical. Cronin's usurpation of this now well known painting, made *for* a man and *by* a man, signifies her own radicality. Her appropriation situates her squarely in relation to a famous 19th-century canonical artist, as she inserts herself into a canon that has historically excluded lesbians, in particular, and women, in general. From a feminist perspective, it also functions to re-frame meaning in her own terms, as an "authentic" versus fictional lesbian depiction. By re-presenting herself and her lover as Courbet's couple, Cronin recovers lesbian subject matter from art history, and re-inscribes lesbian subjectivity into a painting (that had lacked it originally).

Cronin's next major project was equally political. While researching mortuary sculptures for *Memorial to a Marriage*, Cronin had encountered the work of a 19th-century American woman artist named Harriet Hosmer, whom she had never heard of before. Intrigued, she spent a year in Italy, from 2006–7, on the prestigious Rome Prize at the American Academy in Rome, meticulously studying Hosmer, who, like many male American artists of her time, went abroad to perfect her craft. When Hosmer began winning major sculpture commissions, encroaching on their turf, her male rivals waged an outright smear campaign. (Indeed, so shockingly negative were the barbs hurled at Hosmer during her lifetime that Cronin felt compelled to document the statements in a book, *The Zenobia Scandal: A Meditation on Male Jealousy*, which she published in 2013.) For her Hosmer project, Cronin published a catalogue raisonné,

Patricia Cronin (1963–), *Queen of Naples Ghost*, 2007, watercolor on paper

for which she researched and wrote the catalogue entries, as well as produced a black-and-white watercolor of each Hosmer work she could identify, and spectral images for the ones she could not track down. It now functions as the definitive scholarly text on Hosmer. As a counter-hegemonic project, then, *Harriet Hosmer: Lost and Found, A Catalogue Raisonné*, calls special attention to work by women as cultural producers—Cronin's as well as that of Harriet Hosmer.

Cronin's *oeuvre* to-date has continually blurred the line between art and activism. Like her contemporaries Theaster Gates and Tania Bruguera, she is a proponent of "social practice art," which asserts that social change can indeed result from art. In the case of *Shrine for Girls, Venice*, for instance, Cronin provides her viewers with easy next steps, ways to get involved with the issues for which she advocates. Inside the church, beneath the curator's statement, Cronin lists three organizations striving to change girls' futures for the better: one is the Campaign for Female Education, which funds women's education and helps girls become leaders in sub-Saharan Africa; another, Gulabi Gang, Cronin describes as a "group of pink, sari-wearing female activists in India"; and then Justice for Magdalenes, an Ireland-based organization that works to ensure survivors of the Magdalene Laundries are acknowledged, protected and never forgotten.[7] Moreover, Cronin plans to donate 10 percent of any profits from the project to the listed associations.

Also accompanying the installation, a banner reads "Shrine for Girls" in the 14 most commonly spoken languages around the world. As Cronin puts it: "I want people to come to this venue from all over the world, and say, 'Wow, this is speaking to me, too.' But it also says, 'The problem is everywhere.'" "We all have bodies," she continues. "We're all made up of the same ingredients, bone, blood, organs, muscles, brains, and hearts, etc. The American Billionaire Warren Buffet has coined the phrase, 'ovarian lottery'. It is just a stroke of luck that I am not one of the Chibok students, Magdalene Laundry girls or one of the raped and lynched cousins in India. And just because I'm not one of them doesn't mean I shouldn't think about them, care about them, have an emotional response, or do nothing and remain silent."

After the *Shrine for Girls, Venice*'s opening in Venice, back in her Brooklyn studio, Cronin is surrounded by additional ancillary materials that relate to the project—e.g. mass media images of the Chibok girls, school pictures of the murdered Indian girls, and stunningly heroic oil and watercolor portraits of the Nigerian and Indian girls in vivid colors, as well as ghostlike ones of the women from the Magdalene laundries. She says she felt compelled to paint the portraits of *specific* individuals, as companion pieces to the piles of anonymous empty clothes. Moreover, as Cronin explains, "Spending the day painting the portraits of these dead or kidnapped girls is really difficult, but very necessary. There is something caring about quietly applying oil paint with a soft brush, pouring bowls of watercolor on smooth hot press paper." A master watercolorist, some of the portraits seem slightly out of focus, as if the subject might come closer and into focus yet never does. They are forever out of reach, it seems. Cronin's oil portraits are equally potent. In one, for instance, a portrait of one of the Chibok girls, Cronin has placed the young girl in a purple hijab against a garish, neon-yellow background. The chromatic intensity and juxtaposition of colors almost hurts the retina, as is Cronin's intention: "It should hurt to look at these images because the topic is so painful."

As a series, the watercolor and oil portraits are haunting representations of the missing, forgotten, and murdered. "Why shouldn't someone from the lowest caste in India have a beautiful portrait made?" Cronin asks. In art historical tradition, it is generally the aristocracy and the wealthy that are featured in heroic portraits, or those persons known to the artist—e.g. Cassatt's *Portrait of her Mother Reading Le Figaro* (1878) or Van Gogh's *Portrait of Postman Roulin* (1888). Very rarely, if ever, does one encounter a painted portrait of a child or teenager who has been brutalized during her short lifetime.

Mary Cassatt (1844–1926), *Mother Reading Le Figaro*, 1878, Collection Mrs. Eric de Spoelberch, Haverford, PA

When asked about her next project, Cronin replies, "My wish is to do a *Shrine for Girls* in many cities around the world, in different communities, with different clothes, producing different portraits, addressing different issues, and involving different non-profits organizations to donate some of the profits." But she will also be returning to the work she'd put on the back burner while working on *Shrine for Girls, Venice*, which will examine the current crisis in masculinity. When pressed why she felt compelled to return to it, Cronin explains, "Because it is too urgent, too necessary, and unfortunately I don't see that changing anytime soon. Every institution is failing us, all run by men: nations, governments, corporations, economic markets and policies, religions, and education and health care systems. All are dysfunctional and imploding."

The consummate political artist, I've no doubt Cronin's approach to the topic will be brilliant, sharp and intelligent. I'm already looking forward to it.

1 See: http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1990/dec/20/more-than-100-million-women-are-missing/.
2 United Nations Women Committee http://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures; WHO (World Health Organization) http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs239/en/; http://www.thelancet.com/series/violence-against-women-and-girls.
3 Jimmy Carter, "Losing my religion for equality," *The Age*, July 15, 2009.
4 David Frankel, "Liebestod," *Patricia Cronin: Memorial To A Marriage*, Kansas City, MO: Grand Arts, 2002.
5 Julie Belcove, "Patricia Cronin and the Body Politic," *Financial Times*, May 1, 2015.
6 Incidentally, the same painting was a featured element in Deborah Kass' painting How Do I Look? (1991).
7 See: https://camfed.org/; http://www.gulabigang.in/; and http://www.magdalenelaundries.com/.