

IMPULSE

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“Army of Love”: An Interview with Patricia Cronin



Portrait of Patricia Cronin. Photo: Clara Ha. Courtesy of Patricia Cronin Studio LLC and CHART, New York.

Patricia Cronin is Pygmalion recast for our unsettled present. In the classical Greek myth, Pygmalion, a young male sculptor, brings a statue of a woman, Galatea, to life—from ivory in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, from marble by the 18th century. The tale has endured as a metaphor for artistic creation and its gendered dynamics: women as largely passive objects of representation within a historically male-dominated academy. If Pygmalion’s miracle arrives only after his plea to Aphrodite, it feels apt that Cronin’s *Army of Love* at CHART Gallery reanimates Aphrodite and her entangled histories as a mirror for the current political moment.

Cronin and I met for a walkthrough of her first show in New York in nearly a decade. “It all starts right after the 2016 election, and I thought it might portend the end of female ambition for a lot of people,” she tells me, tracing the project’s origins. Several works began with her 2018 exhibition *Patricia Cronin, Aphrodite, and the Lure of Antiquity*, when she was the inaugural artist invited to respond to the Tampa Museum of Art’s Greek and Roman holdings. There, Cronin found inspiration in the limbless *Torso of Aphrodite* (1st century CE).



Installation view, Patricia Cronin: *Army of Love*. Photo: KC Crow Maddux.
Courtesy of Patricia Cronin Studio LLC and CHART, New York.

“I thought [Aphrodite] would be a great place to put my brain and imagination at a moment when they were trying to push women out of public life and our democracy was on the brink: the fact that she had no legs below the knees, no forearms, hands, or head,” reflects Cronin. At Chart, three maquettes restore the deity’s attributes and limbs, each grounded in close historical study. Here, the copy of the original torso remains visually distinct from its manipulations: one element opaque, the other cast in blue glass—a reference to ancient glass and to the sea foam from which Aphrodite was born. The contrast also nods to the long, contested history of restoration and the ways contemporary culture has shaped its conventions, from assigning the “right” attributes to calibrating how visible restoration should be (e.g., Eugène Viollet-le-Duc’s drive to return works to an ideal whole versus John Ruskin’s insistence on preserving time’s scars).

For Cronin, this collision of past and present is always front of mind. *Army of Love* is not only about Aphrodite; it's also about the histories that have accrued around her. "The American archeologist Iris Love discovered the Temple of Aphrodite in Knidos, Turkey on the same day man was planting a flag on the moon," Cronin says. "It's July 20, 1969, the height of Arte Povera, the Italian art movement, and most of the celebrated artists we know from that movement are men, who were very interested in using humble materials in their work." Cronin counters this male-centric history by incorporating unconventional materials into the works: bleach in the paintings, salt on her watercolors, and tarps in the assemblages to create a material vocabulary that can reflect the domestic labor of women.



Installation view, Patricia Cronin: *Army of Love*. Photo: KC Crow Maddux.
Courtesy of Patricia Cronin Studio LLC and CHART, New York.

A new series in marbled wallpaper nods to Cronin's sculptural base and to the subtle ways politics can quietly charge a work. One piece echoes the green marble of the U.N. General Assembly Hall, the iconic female silhouette embodying the backdrop of where global debates (many on women's rights) unfold. Marble, after all, is Cronin's bedrock: *Memorial to a Marriage* (2002)—widely regarded as one of the first LGBTQ+ monuments in the United States, thirteen years before nationwide marriage equality—was carved by Cronin in Carrara marble and first installed at Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx. The monument shows Cronin and her partner, the artist Deborah Kass, in an embrace modelled after Gustave Courbet's *The Sleepers* (1866), turning a canonical male-gaze image into a feminine and feminist monument. "Almost twenty-four years ago, monuments were white noise," she tells me. "Now we understand public art is a place where we can work out our values about democracy. I don't think any art form is closed or done until everyone who wants to speak through it can use it as a tool of free and artistic expression."

Cronin embraces the classical and neoclassical idiom—conceptually and technically—but keeps pressing the question of whose bodies, and whose lives, get memorialized. The conversation feels newly urgent amid a climate of censorship. She spoke on NPR at the end of August about fearing that the National Portrait Gallery’s version of *Memorial to a Marriage* could be censored. “I think there is currently a great misunderstanding of classical art and classical architecture. The Alt-Right is cherry picking without understanding who was historically included and how diverse ancient Mediterranean populations were.” She points to artists who have similarly redirected marble’s presumed authority, such as Marc Quinn, whose *The Complete Marbles* (1999–2005) memorialized people with “incomplete” bodies resulting from accidents or disabilities. “While they want to go backwards, we are subverting it, expanding it to show that it can be inclusive and we can use it as a tool for change and for the future.”



Patricia Cronin, *Memorial To A Marriage*, 2002. Carrara marble, over life size. Photo: Stephen Bates. Courtesy of Patricia Cronin Studio LLC.

Aphrodite may seem an unlikely protagonist for that hope, but Cronin reminds me that people once prayed to her “not only for love, beauty, sex, and a good marriage, but also for a safe sea voyage, a military victory, and a good harvest.” Throughout the show, the goddess’s silhouette recurs, like sentries holding an invisible antagonist at bay.

Cronin’s work ultimately operates in the realm of art as social practice. As she explains, “When you broaden the lens, you see how there’s so much hatred for the history of our country—the legacy of slavery, immigrants, the workers, the planet, the environment—and the people in our government are always talking about the lethality of our military.” For her, the title is a direct rejoinder. “I just thought, can I subvert the language of the army and attach it to these paintings? And have the future not be about domination but about compassion, especially at a time of so much censorship for artists and writers?” If Pygmalion prayed for animation to find love, Cronin wagers that love may animate the future.



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Patricia Cronin: *Army of Love* is on view at CHART Gallery from September 5 through October 18, 2025.

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