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Mr. President, How Long Must We Wait for Liberty? The Female Body and Society

Patricia Cronin

Like all artists, I make art in the political and social context of my time. And the last six years have been particularly grueling for female-identifying humans. On the centennial of the Nineteenth Amendment granting women the right to vote in 2020, I did not think I would be recalling suffragist Alice Paul's famous question to President Woodrow Wilson: "Mr. President, how long must women wait for liberty?" After the results of the 2016 election, I was sure I was witnessing the end of female ambition. The most qualified human who ever ran for president "lost" to the least qualified white man. We had no female president, no national holiday to honor a single exceptional woman. Only 15 percent of Fortune 500 companies are run by female CEOs, and only 8 percent of US museums' art collections are created by women. What is the point of working so hard to develop our potential to participate in public life only to always lose out to mediocre men or far worse? The centuries-long fight for equality seemed to have slowed down to a snail's pace, halting and even turning backward.

It has never been popular to make feminist art, in any time period. I made the world's first marriage-equality monument, *Memorial to a Marriage* (2002), when same-sex marriage was still illegal in the United States, and there were hardly any women honored in public monuments. I researched, wrote, and illustrated the *Harriet Hosmer Catalogue Raisonné* (2009) of the first professional female sculptor when there was little interest in feminist art history, and I addressed the international human rights of women and girls with my work *Shrine For Girls* (2015) at the fifty-sixth Venice Biennale, when there was scant public outrage about global gender violence. It was difficult to muster the energy, to devote the scarce female-derived resources, to believe in my own voice and to keep working. Yet, to quote Senator Elizabeth Warren, I persisted.

After the 2016 election, at my lowest moment of artistic inspiration, the Tampa Museum offered me a lifeline by inviting me to be the inaugural artist in their Conversations with the Collection series, in which they ask a contemporary artist to respond to their antiquities collection with a newly commissioned work, a solo exhibition, and a catalogue. During the rampant misogyny of the Trump administration, with democracy under serious threat, my deep research dive into the birthplace of democracy that focused my attention on one of the most important female figures in the ancient world was a tonic. Aphrodite—one of the twelve Olympians, the Greek goddess of love, beauty, good contracts, and safe sea voyage—offered a prototype of a female figure who had status in society, religion, domestic life, and public space.

The resulting Aphrodite Reimagined series of sculptures and paintings (2018) was inspired by the Tampa Museum of Art's sculptural fragment of a life-size Aphrodite (first century BCE) and nineteenth-century photographs of flawed seventeenth- and eighteenth-century restorations in the object file. I returned the goddess of beauty and love to the monumental scale of her cult statue and completed her form by hand, sculpting the missing parts of the fragment and casting them in translucent beach glass-colored resin. Outside on the second-floor terrace gallery, *Aphrodite Reimagined* appears sometimes whole and at other times fractured, depending on the changing light—a transition that comments on our shifting considerations of beauty, truth, and history (fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Patricia Cronin, *Aphrodite Reimagined*, 2018. Cold cast marble and resin, height 121 x 36 x 32 in. Tampa Museum of Art; © 2022 Patricia Cronin / Artists Rights Society (ARS) New York

In a cultural climate so hostile to women, it was satisfying to focus on the history of the cult worship of a female deity, a symbol of female authority in public. Reevaluating and subverting historical approaches to sculpture allowed me to revisit and reinvent ideas about the human, the heroic, and the divine. As toxic masculinity took over America, focusing on Aphrodite, one of the most powerful female figures in the ancient Mediterranean world, was the perfect antidote.

Then came the pandemic, and many women were pushed to the brink as they sought to balance work, home, and family; 1.1 million women dropped out of the workforce. Several studies show a significant reduction in papers submitted to conferences by women. In the cultural sector, museums were closed, and many exhibitions and projects were postponed. Ironically, a major outdoor sculpture commissioned by the Smithsonian Institution to commemorate the centennial of the Nineteenth Amendment, titled *Monument for Feminist Future*—which featured Alice Paul along with other feminist pioneers, suffragists, and voting-rights activists and on which I had worked for two

years—was also abruptly canceled. Because the demand for correcting the lack of women represented in public monuments is so great, many institutions timidly fear getting it wrong and bearing the brunt of negative public reaction. As part of our ongoing national conversation about monuments—probing into who is missing, questioning who should be honored, and demanding equal representation in the public square, it is essential that we commit to gender parity at every level in governmental, civic, and cultural institutions.

On March 15, 2022, Pay Equality Day, Megan Rapinoe spoke at the White House. Her words took my breath away: "There's no level of status, and there's no accomplishment or power that will protect you from the clutches of inequality. One cannot simply 'outperform' inequality, or be 'excellent enough' to escape discrimination."¹ This painful revelation stunned me. I had been going about my entire life all wrong because I had thought I *could* outperform misogyny. If I worked harder, developed my intellect more, mastered yet another artistic medium (marble carving, glass casting, monumental bronzes, even writing a catalogue raisonné, and more), all at the highest skill level, then surely I would succeed. I was wrong.

And then came the most devastating blow to women's rights, the 2022 *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* decision by the US Supreme Court, overturning *Roe v. Wade* and turning back the clock on women's progress toward full equality. This decision will drastically reshape American life for decades to come and, I believe, alter the history of the United States. The goal of this ruling is to mandate heteronormative gender roles; affirm the theory of biology as destiny; keep women home, economically dependent on men; deny their bodily autonomy; and limit their speech and travel by keeping them out of public life and creating a permanent underclass. And if women resist, they will be criminalized. The possible horrific ramifications include abortion care not being taught in medical schools in over half of the United States, forced birth, soaring maternal mortality rates, and even rapists' parental rights. One chilling reality is criminalizing future, present, and past abortions as felonies. You know who cannot vote? Felons. This is a diabolical and radical ideology to legalize second-class citizenship for women and to normalize it. Women and girls are socialized to expect and accept less, to desire less for our potential, and to wait longer for scraps. This situation is psychologically and legally untenable, and I believe unconstitutional.

It is a time for monumental paintings and sculptures of women and by women. We are 51 percent of the population, and we should demand representation in every way, in every governmental office, every corporate boardroom, every place of employment, every institution of higher learning, every museum, and, yes, every public square.

I know I will continue imagining a world where misogyny and homophobia do not exist, making art about female love and the female body taking up space in the public sphere, spotlighting missing women's histories, demanding true equality, and promoting the basic human rights of women, girls, and LGBTQ+ people, who should all be powerfully represented with dignity. My work insists on it. Mr. President, we will not wait any longer.

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Notes

¹ Megan Rapinoe quoted in Benjamin Siegel and Katie Kindelan, "Soccer Star Megan Rapinoe Testifies before Congress on Gender Pay Gap," *ABC News*, March 24, 2021, <https://abcn.ws/3tLOudZ>.