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Ruth Stanford's "From the Ground Up" installation in the 2018 'Golden Hour' exhibition at Oakland Cemetery in Atlanta. Courtesy of Oakland Cemetery

The New Art Galleries: Urban Cemeteries

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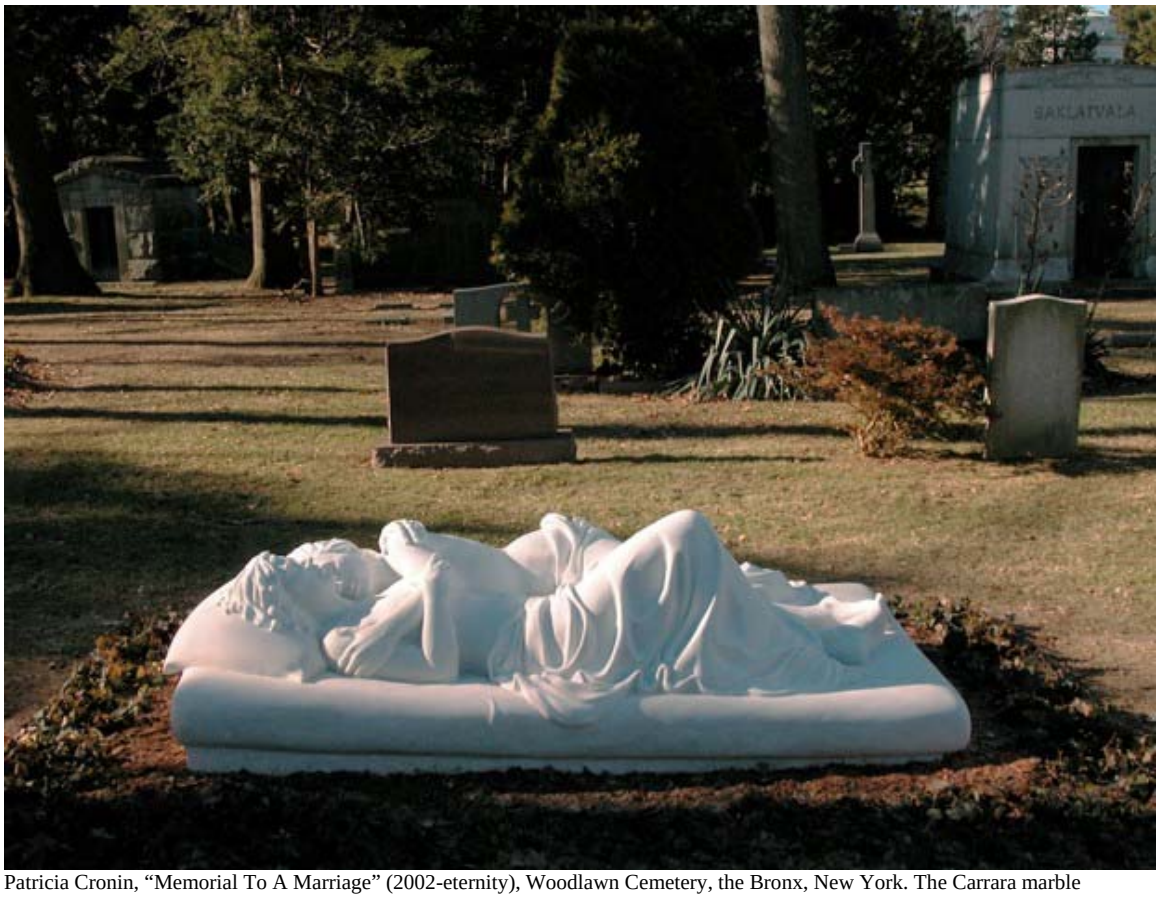
In 2002, artist Patricia Cronin purchased a burial plot in Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx and installed a three-ton Carrara marble sculpture of her and her then-partner, fellow artist Deborah Kass, in bed. Eyes closed, hair flowing together, they are depicted in a moment of quiet bliss. Called "Memorial to a Marriage," the piece was a comment on the fact that they were not permitted to be married, and that the legal ways the two

women could bind themselves to each other—like through wills or as healthcare proxies—related more to their deaths than their lives.



Patricia Cronin, “Memorial To A Marriage” (2002-eternity), Woodlawn Cemetery, the Bronx, New York. The Carrara marble sculpture has since been replaced by a bronze version. (Photo by Tom Powell Imaging, courtesy of the artist)

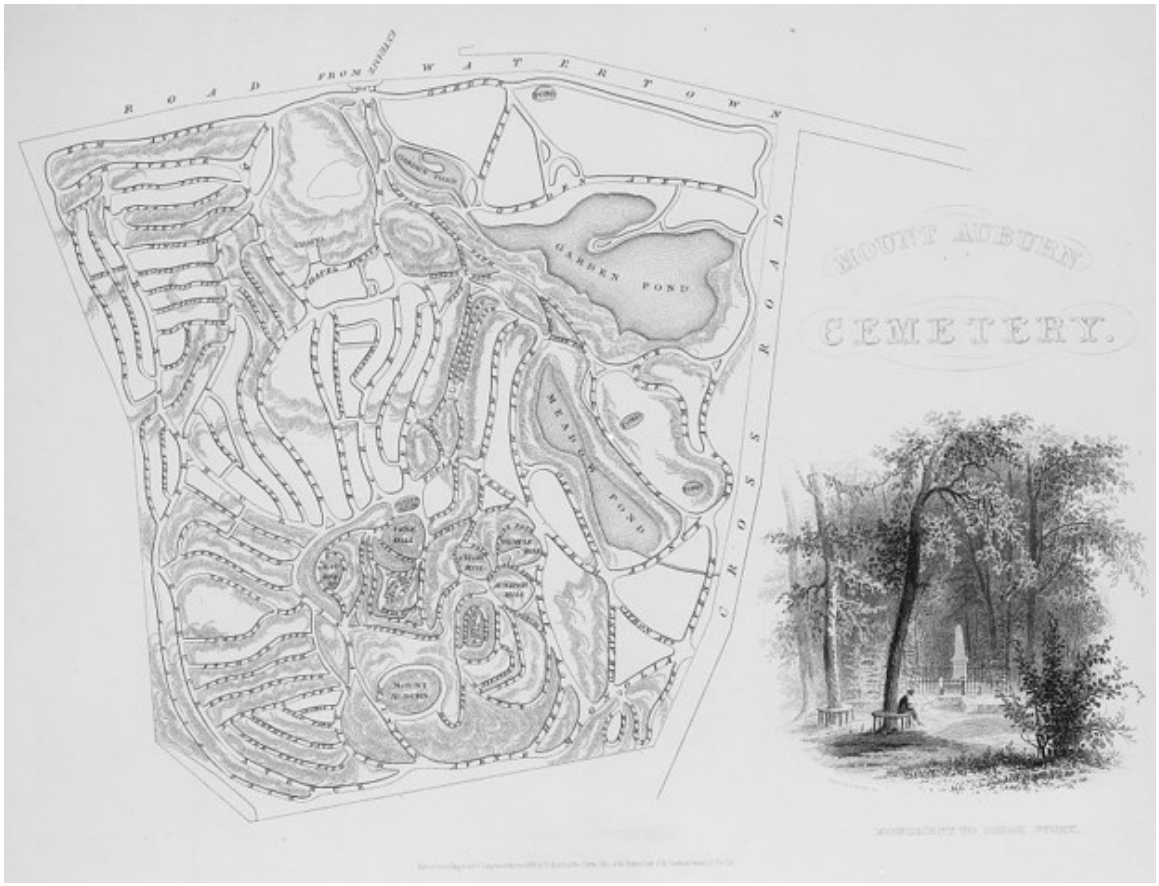
“If all I was legally allowed to formally acknowledge my relationship was death, I wanted to make the most poetic protest artwork I could think of,” Cronin explained. In 2011, Cronin and Kass married on July 24 (the day same-sex marriage was legalized in New York) and a new version of the sculpture cast in bronze replaced the marble.

“My goal was not to be avant-garde or provocative,” Cronin said. “I was restoring art to its original 19th-century venue, the rural and garden cemetery, popular ... before almost any art museums existed in the United States. And as I like to tell my women artist friends, if you want permanent public art, you’ve got to buy the land.”

Although a highly individual statement—this plot will be the artist’s tomb—Cronin’s sculpture demonstrates how cemeteries offer a distinct and historic context for art.

Before the opening of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1872, one of the best places to see art in New York City was the cemetery. At Woodlawn (established in 1863), mausoleums mimicked French chapels, Egyptian temples, and the Athenian Parthenon. At Brooklyn’s Green-Wood (founded in 1838), you could see marble angels soaring over monuments on a site that overlooked the New York Harbor. These cemeteries were lush

settings for carriage rides and picnics at a time when Central Park was still being developed.



A circa-1848 map of Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts. (Library of Congress)

Similar burial grounds were constructed around the United States as part of the rural-cemetery movement, which solved the problem of small urban graveyards reaching their capacity by relocating the dead to park-like new spaces on the city edges. (They were called “rural” because of their rustic aesthetics and because they were often in countryside just beyond the city; they have mostly been absorbed by subsequent urban growth.) Although similar cemeteries emerged in Europe, many cities in the United States were young enough to not have many parks or museums, so these spaces became destinations for art and urban escape.

Now, some of the sprawling cemeteries are themselves running out of space for single grave plots. Families related to those buried more than a century ago have moved away or died out, and newer parks without graves underfoot have opened. Visitation has declined. But the custodians of historic cemeteries hope that reviving this early focus on the arts will build new connections with the living.

Across the country, several “rural cemeteries” have made contemporary art part of their programming. Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge—the oldest American rural cemetery, established in 1831—hosted its first artist-in-residence in 2014. Laurel Hill in

Philadelphia has a Cinema in the Cemetery series and a nighttime performance event, Ghostly Circus.

In 2017, Green-Wood debuted a 25-year-long installation by French artist Sophie Calle, organized with Creative Time. The marble obelisk, which blends in with the surrounding hill of Victorian funerary sculpture, is emblazoned with the words "Here Lie the Secrets of the Visitors of Green-Wood Cemetery." Notes can be inserted in a slot and are planned to be burned in a periodic ritual.

Sophie Calle, "Here Lie the Secrets of the Visitors of Green-Wood Cemetery," Green-Wood Cemetery, Brooklyn, New York. (Photo by Leandro Justen, courtesy of Creative Time)

"I think cemeteries make people think about things that they don't necessarily think about in their everyday life," said Jessica Baumert, executive director of The Woodlands in Philadelphia. "That's why I like working there. Having something that reminds you that time flies and being surrounded by dead people every day makes you think about your own life a little differently. And I think that is something that creates an emotional response with artists and resonates with them."

The Woodlands is the 18th-century former home and garden of botanist William Hamilton, and its transformation into a cemetery in the 19th century protected the land from the rapid development of West Philadelphia. Now it's a popular green space for the immediate community and is open to respectful recreation, with a jogging path on its perimeter and a Grave Gardeners program, whose volunteers adopt Victorian-era cradle

graves and fill them with plants that once would have been maintained by the deceased's family.

Artistic programs are among these efforts to make The Woodlands a neighborhood resource. Back in 2014, Martha McDonald's "The Lost Garden" invited visitors into Hamilton's home for an installation drawing on Victorian crafts such as wax flowers and hair jewelry. A performance among the tombs, with the artist dressed in a black hoop skirt and veil, looked back to the site's rural-cemetery origins.

"Honestly, if we want to survive as a place, we can't just be a cemetery," Baumert said. "And historically, even though we were founded as a cemetery, we also acted like a park. People that have a negative reaction to it, when you educate them about the history of the rural and landscape cemetery, oftentimes, they come around." She added that her staff has seen more people wanting to be buried there as the result of these community programs. (One of the Grave Gardeners, for example, decided to rest eternally near the flowers she helped cultivate.)

Recently, The Woodlands opened *Graffiti & Ornament* in the Hamilton mansion, on view through April 28. Roberto Lugo's ceramic vessels infuse traditional pottery shapes with inspiration from hip-hop style and black culture, memorializing people from his Philly neighborhood of Kensington. Leo Tecosky pays tribute to his grandmother through neon works of her name and hanging glass stars, arrows, and crowns that recall her Depression-era glass collection.

Art by Leo Tecosky in the 'Graffiti & Ornament' exhibition at The Woodlands in Philadelphia. (Photo by Ryan Collerd, courtesy of The Woodlands and Past Present Projects)

These pieces could be installed in a white-walled gallery, but having them in a cemetery, with tombstones visible outside the windows, makes the artists' statements on remembrance particularly powerful. Exhibitions like this one can also elevate narratives that were marginalized or banished from cemeteries that historically reserved the grandest memorials for white, wealthy families.

Oakland Cemetery in Atlanta invites artists to create temporary interventions in the burial ground, which dates to 1850 and greatly expanded during the Civil War. Its May 2018 exhibition *Golden Hour*included Sara Jimenez's "Cenotaph," which suspended hundreds of strips of red fabric from an old magnolia tree. The installation was next to a huge sculpted lion and a tall obelisk commemorating the Confederate section of the cemetery. The fabric pieces, shaped like inverted obelisks, drew visitor attention to the cemetery's roughly 900 unmarked African-American graves identified in 2016.

This May, "Illumine," an after-hours experience of lights and art, will include a tribute to the "Slave Square" area of the cemetery in which enslaved people were interred.

"We've used sound, visual art, light, and site-specific installations to interpret Oakland's history and beauty," said Richard Harker, director of programming and volunteers at the Historic Oakland Foundation. "We're always trying to think of creative ways to share Oakland, and we realized that art has been an untapped medium."

The Historic Oakland Foundation was established in 1976, aimed at restoring and preserving the cemetery. After decades of neglect, the monuments were cracking, sidewalks were falling apart, and few Atlantans were interested in spending a weekend afternoon strolling the grounds. Events like "Illumine" raise funds that go back into the restoration of the cemetery for future generations to enjoy, Harker said. They're good for fundraising, but they also create meaningful experiences that encourage locals to see the cemetery as more than just an old burial ground—which is especially important since Oakland long ago ran out of new lots to sell.

The character of these cemeteries makes them ready platforms for art that draws on their heritage and beautiful landscapes. Americans tend to not have as much comfort with spaces of death as people in other parts of the world, such as Mexico or Japan, where festivals are held in cemeteries to celebrate ancestors. Yet as historic cemeteries continue to run short on burial space and the descendants of people buried there become more removed in time, cities need to consider what these spaces mean and how they can be part of their future.