

The Boston Globe

Lorraine O'Grady outpaced the culture for years. In Brooklyn, it finally catches up

By [Murray Whyte](#) Globe Staff, Updated March 17, 2021, 12:59 p.m.



A photograph from Lorraine O'Grady's 1983 "Art Is..." performance. LORRAINE O'GRADY/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK

BROOKLYN — Coming to art as a later-in-life fourth or fifth act, Lorraine O'Grady has joked that she “only had time for masterpieces,” which doesn't

surprise. Now 86, she's only ever made the most of her time. She was an intelligence analyst for the US State Department (during the Cuban Missile Crisis, no less); the owner of a Chicago translation agency (a keepsake from this era, [she told The New York Times](#), is a crystal paperweight from Hugh Hefner, whose journals she used to translate); a rock critic in New York for the Village Voice and Rolling Stone (in her first-ever piece for the Voice, she called The Allman Brothers "the first white band I'd enjoyed dancing to"); and a teacher of literature and art (the Futurist/Dadaist/Surrealist moment, with its confluence of word and image, remains her favorite). "I don't feel I've had much un-lived life," she told the Times recently, in the understatement of the year.

One thing rings clear: A relentlessly interesting person with a slate of life experiences far afield of the art world makes for an artist just as compelling. Her show at the Brooklyn Museum is called "Both/And," and its broadly inclusive worldview feels made for this moment. "Lorraine always said her audience would catch up to her, eventually," Aruna D'Souza, one of the show's co-curators, told me. And while it's true her expansive, outsider's approach to her last and longest-lasting profession has been more way-of-life than career strategy — as if being a Black woman in an overwhelmingly white male field wasn't hard enough — it's finally O'Grady's time.

(For what it's worth, the Biden campaign agreed. In the fall, it approached O'Grady for permission to build [its one-and-only post-election triumphal TV ad](#) around her well-known "Art Is ..." performances, with the results moving the artist to tears.)

"Both/And" brims with defiance and grace, outrage and joy, its complex dualities a rejection of the off-hand polemics of Black/white, red/blue, male/female, and whatever else might come to mind. (If you're keeping score, "Both/And" is the semantic opposite of "either/or.") It

arrives with brisk, bracing currency for these divided times, daring to propose a world where difference is strength.

Born in Boston to parents who came from from Jamaica — she grew up in Roxbury — O’Grady was hard-wired with complexity and contradiction from the start. Her experience as a Black American was inflected by both her Caribbean immigrant parents and her mixed-raced heritage. (She is Afro-Caribbean and Irish. One of O’Grady’s digital photomontages, “Strange Taxi: From Africa to Jamaica to Boston in 200 Years,” hung on the Gardner Museum façade for much of last year. This was an elongated version of the 1991 original, [with the Black women in the image, all O’Grady’s family members, stretching skyward](#) in their long, slow escape from the strictures of conservative Boston.)

O’Grady was an exceptional student, graduating from Wellesley College in 1955 with a degree in economics — not a conventional path to the art world, by any imagining — one of just three Black women in a class of almost 500. She joined the civil service in Washington, D.C., where race was less a barrier than in the private sector. But she soon topped out — as a Black woman, she could only go so far — and her wanderings began.

Arriving in New York in 1973 with her music-industry husband, she started teaching English at the School of Visual Arts. O’Grady found herself at a critical juncture in American culture, and at its heart. The civil rights movement had morphed into Black Power. Popular music was the cultural terrain of revolution, and O’Grady embraced it fully, teaching by day and going to shows as a freelance critic by night.

The art world, meanwhile, had become an increasingly self-isolated hive of white intellectual elitism. O’Grady had skirted its boundaries for years when, in 1977, after a cancer scare culminated in flirtation with her doctor, D’Souza told me, she began cutting headlines out of The New York Times to

craft a text-collage poem for him. Something clicked. She spent 26 consecutive Sundays clipping words and phrases, arraying them into jagged, mysterious knots. With their echoes of Concrete Poetry — words as form, form as words — the works brought a decisive turn. She was an artist, with no looking back.



Works by Lorraine O'Grady at the Brooklyn Museum. JONATHAN DORADO

O'Grady's artistic output is as diverse as her life, working as she has in performance, video, photography, and collage. In Brooklyn, "Both/And" captures the span of O'Grady's multifarious interests with as much as it can stuff into the galleries, though chunks spill into various places around the museum. Many of the newspaper poems land in an anteroom near the fourth-floor elevator, a long corridor away from the show's main portion. A video piece, "Landscape (Western/Hemisphere)," from 2010-11, is installed in the museum's galleries devoted to American landscape painting,

pointedly between a pair of syrupy Hudson River School works. The video, an extreme close-up of O’Grady’s graying hair shivering in the breeze of an off-camera fan, is a kinetic landscape all its own, its black-and-white palette bristling with nervous energy in tune with the tensions of the country’s contested lands — a tension deliberately glossed over by prominent painters in the 19th century, crafting a thoroughly romantic American myth.

The heart of the show, though, is in the galleries that surround the museum’s permanent installation of Judy Chicago’s “The Dinner Party,” an iconic work of feminist art by one of O’Grady’s many natural kin. (O’Grady’s 1994 essay “Olympia’s Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity” centered on the servant in the famous Manet painting, enjoys its own legendary status in the field of feminist art criticism while doing double-duty as a race-based critique of Eurocentric art history. Remember: “Both/And.”)

Presenting O’Grady’s best-known work — a series of public performances — isn’t the same as experiencing it, and it’s always a challenge to capture the lighting-in-a-bottle energy of live performance in exhibition. That’s doubly so for an artist whose crystal-clear thinking could translate so sharply into action. In the early 1980s, Mlle Bourgeoise Noire (“Miss Black Middle Class”), O’Grady’s Guyanese beauty queen alter ego, crystallized the artist’s wide-lens view of the art world’s many sins. Wearing a full-length ball gown of stitched together elbow-length white gloves — the kind favored by debutantes — O’Grady crashed high-profile art openings in raucous fashion.



Lorraine O'Grady's Mlle Bourgeoise Noire costume is installed in the gallery. JONATHAN DORADO

If you leapt to think the outfit was aimed at an art world steeped in white privilege, you'd be half right. O'Grady wore it to an opening at the New Museum in 1981, a newbie artist in her mid-40s, to spotlight the New York art world's deep and intractable segregation despite its liberal claims. She handed out white chrysanthemums and began whipping herself with cat o' nine tails while reciting poetry: "Don't you know/sleeping beauty needs/more than a kiss to awake?" The year before, Mlle Bourgeoise Noire made a

very different debut: At the Just Above Midtown gallery, a hub of the Black avant-garde, where she admonished her peers for tailoring their work to a white-dominated art world in rapid economic ascent. (“BLACK ART MUST TAKE MORE RISKS!”)

O’Grady called the character an equal-opportunity critic. She would spare none on either side of the race, class, and gender lines. Indeed, duality has always been at the heart of O’Grady’s work. She favors diptychs, pairing images and ideas to create both friction and confluence; her wonderfully pointed “Miscegenated Family Album” series, installed in Brooklyn’s ancient worlds galleries, pairs works depicting ancient Egyptian royalty with photos of her own family.



Lorraine O’Grady’s “Miscegenated Family Album (Sisters I), L: Nefnefruatn Nefertiti; R: Devonia Evageline O’Grady.”LORRAINE O’GRADY/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK

The 1994 series is jarringly direct and historically nuanced. Egypt is revered as the forebear of western civilization while Africa's neighboring ancient cultures have been dismissed and degraded as primitive — a comparative of western convenience. "Family album" refuted that simplistic either/or on its face and inserted a subtle corrective. Nubia, the cradle of African culture a short stretch down the Nile, [has since been acknowledged as Egypt's cultural peer.](#)



Lorraine O'Grady's "Art Is. . . (Girl Pointing).
"LORRAINE O'GRADY/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK

Mlle Bourgeoise Noire's gown is in the gallery, draped on a cocoa-colored mannequin with its many hundreds of limp fingers flicking along the length. Nearby photographs of the two key performances are faint echoes of the character's spirited romps. Putting performance documentation in-gallery has the inevitably antiseptic feeling of specimens under glass, a problem semi-solved only once in my experience when the Museum of Modern Art re-created several of Marina Abramović's best-known works with live actors during its run of "The Artist Is Present" in 2010. (Given the pandemic and her age, O'Grady is recording a new performance, clad in a suit of armor with a palm tree sprouting from its helmet, to be presented in the Brooklyn Museum galleries on video in April.)

Even so, O'Grady's work is both conceptually substantive and approachable enough to stir in still form. "Rivers, First Draft," a semi-autobiographical performance staged in the groves of Central Park in 1982, traced her growing up in New England as a child of the Caribbean diaspora. Staged for friends, it would have been stumbled upon by happenstance; a casual stroller through the park might have bumped into O'Grady as *The Woman in Red*, the protagonist, navigating a cast of characters that included *The Debauchees* and *The Art Snobs* — archetypes O'Grady encountered as a child in Boston and later in New York, where the promise of liberation withered against an undercurrent of exclusivity and bias.

"Art Is ..." had her join the 1983 African-American Day Parade in Harlem with an unauthorized float as Mlle Bourgeoise Noire. It might be her most clarifying work. Parading down Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Blvd., O'Grady waved to the crowd from the back of a truck, a gilded frame around her. On the street, her white-clad crew pranced with smaller frames, breaking from the procession to hold them up to the Black audience lining the streets.

“Art Is ...” was as generous as it was biting, a refutation of power with community-minded glee. It was an indictment that radiated subversive, liberating joy: That sanctioned art was exclusive, and a lie, and that beauty was not only the domain of wealthy or elite. Of anything here, it functions on the gallery walls much as it did in person, with everyday people beaming from gilded frames — as an empowering, validating portrait of defiant glee. Over decades, O’Grady’s work was always about power, and how those with it used it against those who did not. “Art Is ...,” even years later, sharpens to a razor point a question that gnaws at old-world art institutions struggling for relevance in a rapidly-changing world: Who is art for, and who does it reflect? These are questions grown more complicated, and quickly. After all this time, we’re lucky to have O’Grady to help answer them.

LORRAINE O’GRADY: BOTH/AND

Through July 18 at the Brooklyn Museum, 200 Eastern Parkway, Brooklyn, N.Y. 718-638-5000, brooklynmuseum.org