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Shadow Boxing with the Status Quo

By PATRICIA ROSOFF. 1995

"Lorraine O'Grady, *The Space Between*, MATRIX/127," The Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT, May 21 – Aug 20, 1995. Review discusses this two-part installation exhibit: *Miscegenated Family Album* and *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire*.

Artist Lorraine O'Grady refuses to treat the art world with kid gloves

Lorraine O'Grady, transfigured into a tiaraed beauty queen and identified by her sash as Mlle. Bourgeoise Noire 1955 [Miss Black Middle Class], barged her way onto the New York art scene in the early 1980s. Quite ceremoniously, though completely unannounced, she literally stormed in as a cultural critic, crashing hoity-toity art openings and demanding straight out that black artists "take off the white gloves" and "invade" the art world.

In this single considered act, O'Grady, English professor, *Rolling Stone* rock critic, former State Department economist and self-taught Egyptologist, brought together a variety of disparate threads in her life—her patchworked personal background, her intellectual strivings, her eclectic interests, her I-refuse-to-be-conventionalized outlook—and found herself mid-career standing in a place that denied none of these roots and expressed them all. Under the commodious umbrella of performance art, O'Grady became, in short, an artist.

Now, as the scope of her work widens, leaving behind the more ephemeral theatricality of performance art and reaching for a more contemplative visual arena, O'Grady is featured in her

first one-person museum exposure, *Lorraine O'Grady: The Space Between*, at the Wadsworth Atheneum. It's a choice that acknowledges O'Grady's emerging status "as an important national figure in contemporary art," according to Andrea Miller-Keller, Emily Hall Tremaine curator of contemporary art at the Wadsworth Atheneum.

O'Grady is a black woman whose work subjectively addresses her own experiences, yet she refuses to be characterized in any way as a spokesperson for the black experience. It's a big point with her, an issue of self-determination and of fundamental respect for the complexity of blackness. Her work in general targets just this kind of oversimplification, which she feels comes from the hierarchical Western notion that things must be either all white or all black, all good or all evil, all male or all female, all culture or all nature. Instead O'Grady's fascination is with "hybrid" culture. In her images she seeks to establish the very connections between what society chooses to call opposites. She tries to demonstrate that culture is not a matter of racial stratification but of complex and ongoing negotiation, sometimes white or black but more often both white and black at the same time.

This concentration on ties rather than rifts is the core of her radicalism and gives her work its distinctly shaded character. Its determined focus on the richness of a blended culture revisits the old WASP idea of the melting pot from an entirely new angle. "I was drawn to O'Grady's work," says Miller-Keller, "because it challenged a variety of accepted cultural paradigms: the binarism that holds our Western thinking in a vice, the concept of race which is not in fact a scientifically verifiable concept, and the notions of elegance and where it can be located. Above all," Miller-Keller adds, "the work is so beautiful and so damned smart."

O'Grady's art targets the Western notion that things must be either all white or all black, all good or all evil, all male or all female.

The exhibit at MATRIX illustrates Miller-Keller's points and demonstrates what O'Grady means when she calls visual art "a heightened form of writing." The gallery is divided in two. Each half presents a different body of work, both of which began as performances and have been developed into documentary form of a less-transitory character. The relation between them is neither direct nor directed in the exhibition, which is unusually explication-free for MATRIX, a space that prides itself on making ideas accessible to the uninitiated public. The point of this curatorial restraint is revealed in the character of the show, which is animated by what the artist calls its "spatial" rather than "linear" relatedness, that is, by the fact that it makes sense somewhat mysteriously overall but not in neat little logical steps. This is precisely the point.

"The Space Between" is the title on the wall that greets the viewer. At every turn it is spaces we meet; juxtapositions, rather than entities, are the salient experience. In one room a gown made out of white gloves (one worn by Mlle. Bourgeoise Noire) is laid out under Plexiglass like an Egyptian mummy. Above this case, a shrill poem on the wall reads:

WAIT
wait in your alternate/alternate spaces
spitted on fish hooks of hope
be polite
wait to be discovered
be proud
be independent
tongues cauterized at openings no one attends
stay in your place
after all, art is only for art's sake
THAT'S ENOUGH!
don't you know
sleeping beauty needs more than a kiss to awake
now is the time for an INVASION!

A series of 13 documentary photographs wrapping two walls record O'Grady's actual intrusion as Mlle. Bourgeoise Noire into an exhibition of nine white performance artists at the New

Museum of Contemporary Art, New York In September 1981. Shown here as an intermingling of words, images, and physical memorabilia, there is little of the immediacy and shock that O'Grady must have generated when she swept into the gallery. There she distributed flowers, threw aside her cloak and lashed herself with a cat-o-nine-tails, then after pronouncing her poetic challenge, swept just as suddenly out of the room. Yet, as O'Grady explains it, what the shift from the event of performance to the quiet permanence of installation may have lost in confrontational dynamism, it has gained from the chance to "sit still" and let the ideas come together for the viewer.

Likewise, in "Miscegenated Family Album," the installation in the other half of the MATRIX space, an evolution from slide presentation to black-and-white photographs allows a more patient savoring of imagistic irony. The presentation pairs ceremonial images of Egyptian Queen Nefertiti with family photographs of O'Grady's sister, Devonia Evangeline. The linking is incongruous, accomplished by singular parallels of feature, pose or gesture but involving as well all manner of connections between O'Grady's intimate knowledge of both subjects.

Some of these links can be deduced from the diptych titles: "Worldly Princesses—Left: Nefertiti's daughter Merytaten, Right: Devonia's daughter Kimberly," for example. Many, however, can only be sensed. It is the enlarging aspect of these musings that give this room its lingering powers. The very-familiar image of female family members gussied up at a reception, distributing smiles, beverages and pieces of cake, is placed next to ritualized relief carving of Nefertiti making an offering to the sun disk Aten, arms raised, beverages in hand, each ray of light also possessing hands reach back reciprocally. The bizarre mix of elements—hand, plates, arms, offering, formality of dress—bridge the two images with a sense of "rightness" that overcomes laborious limitations of fact and make tedious any questions of "why." The truth of these positionings is a subjective matter, involving neither art history nor sermons on social posturing, and likewise the strength of the work, while unverifiable in any specific proof, is in the fact that it is simply fascinating. Significantly for the artist, however, the very fact that it is a hybrid invention is its essential positive.

“I have always acted on how I felt,” O’Grady says, “but I am just beginning to arrive at a clearer sense of what that might be.”

O’Grady traces the mixed threads of her upbringing along racial (black and Irish) regional (West Indian), social (upper middle class, British colonial), educational (private classical), and aspirational (I am what I am, not what you want me to be) divides. Long ago, though, she decided to refuse to be one thing or the other. Looking back on it now, she sees her personal experience, “however arduous,” as far from unique. Instead it’s increasingly typical in a world where, she says, “we will all have to become bi- or tri-cultural.” O’Grady’s attempts first to rebel against and then to reconcile such threads in a society split along racial, sexual, and cultural hierarchies have led her to confront a world that refuses to acknowledge its hybrid nature. The opportunity of this MATRIX installation comes to her, says O’Grady, at a turning point in her realization of mission. “I have always acted on how I felt,” she says from West Virginia, “but I am just beginning to arrive at a clearer sense of what that might be.”

“Mobilization of emotion is necessary for the sharpening of intellect,” O’Grady says, going on to define how a concept such as anger can seek its form as art. The persona of Mlle. Bourgeoise Noire was born out of O’Grady’s anger about black artists internalizing white condescension. She insists, however, that while “anger is enabling of thought, . . . a shout that’s not aesthetically and conceptually is going to drop to the floor five inches in front of your face. Only a shout that has been modeled is going to project,” and projection has been her intent. Through her art, O’Grady has made a career of speaking up—literally—walking into situations controlled by others and making a calculated scene, taking images that people accept without a second thought and inserting things-that-don’t-belong right along side them. She does not accept what most people take for granted, that the ordered systems of expectation that constitute

the world as we know it today are the way things will always be. She is impatient of entrenched hierarchies, and refuses to accept that things should be this or that simply because "that's the way it is done."

O'Grady's work is intrinsically defiant in its insistence on subjectivity and evokes her conception of a black woman as an agent rather than object of history. This is the central principal of all her forms. It is certainly the genesis of her first metaphor, Mlle. Bourgeoise Noire, self-personified, smiling on the arm of her tuxedoed male escort, wrapped in a cloak and dress made entirely of white gloves—180 pairs of muted empty palms and 900 pairs of muffled fingers stirring to her graceful swagger, clapping soundlessly as she moved, delivering her shout to the world:

THAT'S ENOUGH!

No more boot-licking...

No more ass-kicking...

No more buttering -up...

No more pos...turing

of super-ass...imilates...

BLACK ART MUST TAKE MORE RISKS!

Lorraine O'Grady will present an informal MATRIX lecture in the Aetna Theater, Thursday, July 6. 5:30 p.m. The lecture will be followed by a reception for the artist, and a gallery talk at 7 p.m. Other lectures on Lorraine O'Grady will be offered on Tuesday, July 11, and Tuesday, July 25, noon, by Andrea Miller-Keller, and Thursday, Aug. 3, noon, by James Rondeau, assistant curator of contemporary art at the Wadsworth Atheneum.