

Lorraine O'Grady: Unnatural Attitudes

by Alana Chloe Esposito on May 8, 2012



Lorraine O'Grady, *The Fir-Palm* (1991/2012), Silver gelatin print (photomontage)

Lorraine O'Grady is engaging audiences across the spectrum of Manhattan cultural institutions these days, sharing her insights as a conceptual artist and cultural critic. Last Monday she participated in a scripted conversation at MoMA with the visual and performance artist Adam Pendleton, who presented a live “portrait” of her. From there, she skipped down to the East Village, where she was the subject of Performa’s inaugural public event series examining the works and lives of seminal artists. Over the next week she will perform in concert with the Alicia Hall Moran and Jason Moran installation at the Whitney Biennial and converse with Linda Goode-Bryant at the Studio Museum in parallel to the exhibition *Shift*. Meanwhile, her recent video work *Landscape (Western Hemisphere)* (2011) is currently on view at Alexander Gray Associates, presented along with two reformatted photomontages from her iconic *BodyGround* series, 1991-

2012, in an exhibition entitled *New Worlds*.

It is hardly the first time O’Grady’s presence can be felt simultaneously at “establishment” and “alternative” New York art venues. Indeed, she carried out her debut guerrilla performances at the New Museum and Just About Midtown, making sure to shake up the art world from all sides with her insistence that maintaining parallel, racially segregated cultural circles was bullshit.

Today, O’Grady’s ideas about race and feminism no longer seem radical, yet they still contribute powerfully to the public discourse in a society that has yet to fully come to terms with its messy past. This spring has been marred by right-wing attacks on women’s rights and the tragic shooting of Trayvon Martin, a 17-year-old African American whose white killer has been released from prison on bail. Perhaps these events produced a yearning for a sophisticated, nuanced discussion about oppression and cultural subjectivity, the very issues that have been central to O’Grady’s work throughout her career? Is that why she is so hot right now?

Alexander Gray isn’t so sure. “I don’t think [discussions of feminism and racism] ever went away, but maybe they became less visible in the art market,” he tells me. Rather, he believes a curatorial interest in O’Grady’s work drives the attention she is now enjoying. It might also have to do with the current trend of looking to the past to search for clues that might help us better understand the contemporary moment; when younger artists rediscover the work of early explorers like O’Grady, the effects can be mutually reinforcing.

O’Grady was born in Boston, in 1934, the daughter of two affluent West Indian immigrants. Though her parents raised Lorraine in a quintessentially upper-crust New England context—she attended first the prestigious Girls’ Latin School, then Wellesley College—they themselves spoke with a heavy accent. “It was just too much to take it all in,” O’Grady says of her dichotomized world.

Yet, it led to a lifelong exploration of identity that contributed greatly to the cultural discourse. At last week’s Performa Institute event, O’Grady revealed that she owes her artistic career to her fascination with her mother’s passage from Jamaica to Boston as a young woman in the early 20th century. At the age of 45, O’Grady began pursuing performance art to tell her mother’s story, but it came about rather by happenstance:

In 1979 she began attending weekly performances at Franklin Furnace, a ritual she now calls her “MFA program.” Yet she never imagined performing herself until she saw Eleanor Antin debut the character Eleanor Antinova—a black ballerina dancing for a Russian expat choreographer in post-WWI Paris—on stage in San Francisco. “Somehow, Eleanor reminded me of my mother and it inspired me to tell my mother’s story,” O’Grady explains. That desire has driven her work ever since.

Lorraine O’Grady broke out onto the art scene in the early 1980s as *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire*, a glamorous debutant who crashed art openings in defiance of the reigning convention keeping the black and white art worlds segregated. She staged her first guerrilla performances at Just Above Midtown, an avant-garde gallery showcasing black artists, and at the New Museum.

“That whole segregated art worlds business was such an unnatural thing and we had to take such unnatural attitudes in order to oppose it,” O’Grady recounts. Donning a gown made from 180 pairs of white gloves, she would disrupt gallery openings, lashing herself with a cat-o-nine-tails-cum-bouquet of chrysanthemums while shouting out poems that railed against the complacency of “black art.”

The gloves bring the entire history of black oppression to the visible surface, signifying what O’Grady describes as “middle class internalization of oppression.” She implicated her spectators in that oppression by handing them chrysanthemums she extracted from her bouquet to reveal the whip. As such, *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* is the essence of O’Grady’s entire body of work.

Over time, however, O’Grady lost confidence in the ability of performance to fully express the sophistication of her ideas. She worried that live action made it too onerous for viewers to zero-in on particular aspects of the work, which led them to miss fundamental concepts. Consequently, in the 1990s O’Grady moved away from performance and began making photomontages. “I had to go into a two-dimensional format so my images could sit still,” she explained, meaning that she wanted viewers to linger longer over the details. However, this medium, too, proved insufficient to communicate “what mattered most,” her thoughts about the complexity of the African diaspora. So, she moved to video “in order slow down the response to the two-dimensional work.”

For anyone inclined to study O’Grady’s two-dimensional work, two of her early photomontages from the *BodyGround* series, *The Fir-Palm* and *The Clearing* (both 1991/2012), are on view at Alexander Gray. Recently reformatted on a larger scale and refined through improved technology, the photomontages are visually striking and evince the themes of sexuality, identity, and social norms. They are presented along with the video *Landscape (Western Hemisphere)*, 2011, a close-up of O’Grady’s hair fluttering in a breeze set to a soundtrack of chirping birds and cicadas and made to resemble a natural landscape. Together, the pieces invite reflection on the nature of cultural hybridity.

O’Grady’s reflections on the African diaspora also punctuate her celebrated 1992 cultural critique on the black female body, *Olympia’s Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity*. In it, O’Grady posits that for centuries the Western cultural canon has incorporated the African female only as the embodiment of “otherness.” It relegates her, “by virtue of color and feature and the extreme metaphor of enslavement” to serving as a foil to the white female body. This understanding informs O’Grady’s famous analysis of the black maid’s presence in Edouard Manet’s iconic painting *Olympia*: “She is Jezebel *and* mammy, prostitute and female eunuch, the two-in-one.”

O’Grady’s penchant for deep thinking and literary background (she used to write rock criticism for Rolling Stone), was also on display at the Performa event, where she delved into her admiration of two cultural icons, seemingly worlds apart: Charles Baudelaire, who “embodied the 19th century moment from Romanticism to Modernism” and Michael Jackson. Amazingly to those of us in the audience who initially failed to grasp the correlation between them, she built a convincing case likening Baudelaire to Jackson as “the first and the last of the Modernists.” (She also presented a photomontage juxtaposing images of the two, titled *The First and the Last Modernist*, presented at the 2010 Whitney Biennial.)

In the wake of Jackson’s death, O’Grady “descended into fandom” and began to revere the completeness of his vision; in her telling, the same vision that led Jackson to unite the world through universal music—there is a track on *Thriller*, she explains, for every audience—led also to his meticulously crafted appearance as a mixed-race “universal physical figure.” Consequently, O’Grady came to the conclusion that “there is no one with a more God-like vision of art than Michael Jackson.” He reminds her of Baudelaire, the “father of Modernism,” who paved the way for the Modernists to become the first artists to make art without God. “They had to become God to make art,” O’Grady explains.

In her own way, O’Grady, too, took destiny into her own hands in order to realize a vision: she had to start making art in order to become herself.