

**Lorraine
O'Grady**

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**Where
Margins
Become
Centers**





Where Margins Become Centers

James Voorhies

In a career spanning four decades, Lorraine O'Grady has consistently pursued a multi-disciplinary practice that challenges the societal conventions through which we understand and interpret gender, class, sexuality, art history, and race. She burst onto the New York scene in the early 1980s with her performance *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire (Miss Black Middle-Class)*, a beauty queen persona in a pageant gown made of 180 pairs of white gloves, whipping a cat-o'-nine-tails at openings and shouting poems against the racial divides permeating the black and white art worlds. O'Grady subsequently found her way through photography, performance, writing, photomontage, and film to critically engage complicated power structures, institutions, and social constructs. Her potent observations on feminist histories, interracial relationships,

biculturalism, and Western subjectivity are no less topical today and, in fact, even more urgent as we routinely bear witness on social media and news outlets to the dualisms between black identity and white identity, rich and poor, females and males.

The exhibition *Lorraine O'Grady: Where Margins Become Centers* features art from five bodies of work, including photography, film, collage, performance documentation, and writing. The works of art and archival documents collected for this exhibition reveal the artist's ongoing interest in critiquing the systemic powers affecting social behavior. O'Grady was born in Boston to upper-middle-class West Indian parents and educated at Wellesley College. Her inherited biculturalism—a young black woman coming of age in Anglo-Saxon New England—and participation in interracial relationships are grounds for a unique perspective from both within and on the periphery of diverse social spheres. These binary oppositions provide the basis for astute observations on human civilization, often deployed in the form of the diptych—notably, in the series *Miscegenated Family Album* and *The First and the Last of the Modernists* on view in this exhibition. Juxtaposing and collaging seemingly disparate dichotomies, the artist uses the extreme margins to explore the central undergirding and structures that support social oppositions. Her work challenges what is unwittingly or involuntarily agreed upon on a society-wide scale in a march toward dismantling accepted constructs. Her visual art and writing ultimately disturb consensus as an overall means of cultural criticism.



Miscegenated Family Album

This sixteen-part series of Cibachrome photographic diptychs combines snapshots from O'Grady's personal archive with images of ancient statues and reliefs of Queen Nefertiti (1371–31 BCE) and her Egyptian royal circle culled from art history books. Cropped and scaled to comparable proportions, eliminating hierarchies between widely disparate sources, *Miscegenated Family Album* is the result of the 1980 performance *Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline* undertaken in New York when O'Grady performed in front of projections of the same images. Alluding to the historical accounts of a rift between Nefertiti and her younger sister, Mutnedjmet, the performance was a means to come to terms with the untimely death of O'Grady's sister Devonian Evangeline, her only sibling, who passed away at age 38 before a strained relationship between the two sisters could be repaired.

O'Grady's meticulously calculated combinations invite attention to the uncanny resemblances of facial features and poses, to seemingly unrelated relations between disparate geographies and histories. Ancient Egyptian culture and contemporary African heritages are mixed together in one visual frame, indeed, reflecting O'Grady's own personal identity as a child of mixed-race Jamaican immigrant parents. The title draws on this personal identity but speaks even more directly to Black America's multiracial—or miscegenated—ancestry. While *Sisters I* juxtaposes a formal portrait of Devonian with the iconic bust of Nefertiti, other works, such as *A Mother's Kiss* and *Cross Generational*, are more personal, even somber, portrayals of the physical attachment and familial connection to Devonian that resonates in her surviving daughters, sisters Candace and Kimberly.



The First and the Last Modernists

This photographic series of four diptychs juxtaposes found images of nineteenth-century French poet and art critic Charles Baudelaire and American pop star Michael Jackson. Although born of different race and time periods, O'Grady negates the black and white and 137-year difference in their births by creating a visual field where each diptych has a colored tint—red, green, blue, and gray—that unites and equalizes the portraits of the men. The flattening of difference is further achieved by the relatively similar poses and figural gestures in the found images she intentionally selected and precisely cropped.

Miscegenation underlies part of O'Grady's fascination with Baudelaire. In 1842 at age 21 he met Jeanne Duval, a young black woman who had emigrated from Haiti to Paris and with whom he would share his life for nearly two decades. His progressive outlook toward social and cultural changes characterizing the rapidly industrializing nineteenth century was possibly influenced by the intimacy and connection he shared with Duval. Baudelaire and Jackson could, in fact, be seen as children of a modern era bracketed by the rise of industrialization in Baudelaire's century and its twilight during Jackson's childhood of the 1970s. Jackson would ultimately bear witness and contribute to the emergence and changes of a new kind of modernity, an entertainment industry of popular culture and tabloid spectacle that eventually cemented his formidable place as the King of Pop and rise of the postmodern era of the 1980s, while potentially contributing to his premature death in 2009.



Body is the Ground of My Experience (The Clearing: or Cortez and La Malinche, Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, N. and Me)

This photomontage diptych depicts (in the left panel) a white man and black woman, naked and embracing while floating in the air above trees, as two children play with a ball in the grassy clearing below. Using the art historical trope of bucolic picnic scenes, such as the all-Caucasian figural arrangement in Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1863), O'Grady's *The Clearing* unites the idyllic and fantastic with a foreboding sense of violence and malevolence. This is symbolized by the gun on the blanket in the left-side panel and in the right a skeleton-masked white male in conquistador outfit, who awkwardly gropes the breast of a black female figure lying passively, even resignedly, alongside him.

The Clearing charts an allegorical course of mixed-race relationships from a historical past to the present, visually communicated in a cloud of ecstatic love buoyed by the naked embrace of a white man and black woman, the mixed-race children playing innocently below, and a dark reality literally on the ground in the interaction of the two figures in the right panel. O'Grady's title, too, further reinforces an allegory of hybrid relationships between white men and women of color from the colonial past to the present with its references: the fifteenth-century woman La Malinche from the

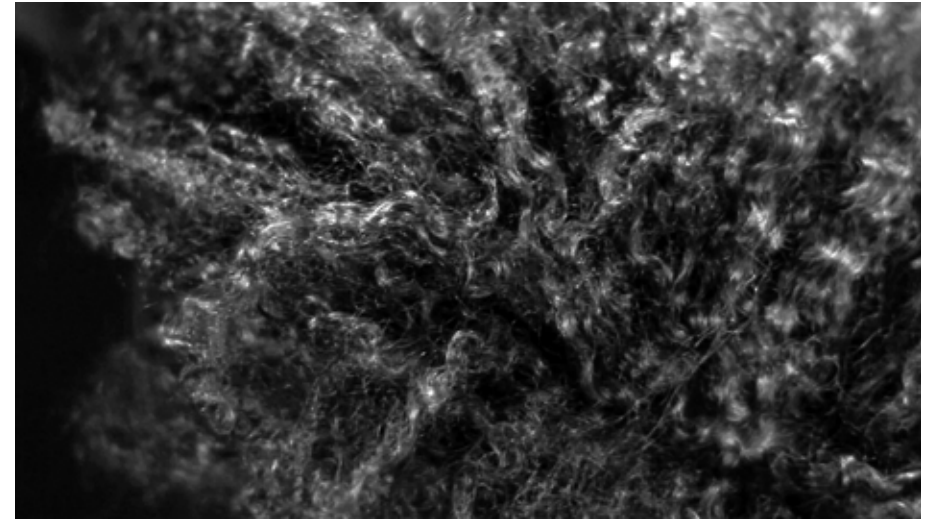


Mexican Gulf Coast who was mistress to the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés; the fabled eighteenth-century multi-decade love affair between enslaved female Sally Hemings and American founding father Thomas Jefferson; the contemporary present of mixed-race couples; and, again, drawing the personal into the historical continuum connoted by "N. and Me."



The Fir-Palm

This work is part of the series *Body is the Ground of My Experience*. As the title suggests, the black-and-white photomontage features a hybrid tree, a combination New England fir and Caribbean palm growing from the lower lumbar region of the back—the inward curve of the spine just above the buttocks underneath which lies the spinal cord that allows the body and the brain to communicate. Recalling the indigenous, signature vegetation connected to two disparate geographic locations, the mixed-botanic tree embodies O’Grady’s identity and experience as the child of West Indian immigrants who traded Jamaica for life in the Boston area. Here, in O’Grady’s imaginary, with a hybrid tree growing from a part of the body-ground under which courses a nerve network that fuels the desires of the mind and the actions of the body, this landscape figuratively and literally mirrors the complex forces of cultural hybridity that shape identity.



Landscape (Western Hemisphere)

In this black-and-white, single-channel video O’Grady’s hair serves as the primary visual subject. Comparable to *The Fir-Palm*, which connects the recognizable reality of the body to the imaginary of the mind, O’Grady’s hair, filmed at an extraordinary close-up, sways like a landscape of tree tops, stable and rooted but unpredictably guided by unseen factors.

Mirroring the unstable although firmly grounded landscape of cultural and psychological hybridization—possible only in the Western Hemisphere, perhaps, as O’Grady implies in her title—*Landscape* is the culmination of ideas connected to mixed race explored in her earlier works, such as *The Clearing* and *The Fir-Palm*. In the end, her critique is structural, and, while based in personal experience, it speaks to the complex history of colonization and its continued impact on our charged moment of race inequality and resistance to difference. As O’Grady has previously remarked, “I’m really advocating for the kind of miscegenated *thinking* that’s needed to deal with what we’ve already created here.”



New Museum for Contemporary Art, NYC. "Mlle Bourgeoise Noire Goes to the New Museum." (2011)
Guerrilla performance, [Sept. 18, 1981]

The Lorraine O'Grady Papers in the Wellesley College Archive comprise the personal and professional papers of the artist, a graduate of Wellesley College Class of 1955. The archive includes correspondence, photographs, books, journals, and audiovisual materials from 1952 to 2012 that richly record her artistic developments and achievements. In totality, the papers reveal the significance of visual art and writing to an astute practice of cultural criticism while pointing to a keen awareness of the importance of thoroughly documenting works of art, including the ephemeral actions and performances that define part of O'Grady's activity in the 1980s.

Archival documents from the 1981 intervention by O'Grady's renowned character *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* at the New Museum's exhibition *Persona* are in this exhibition. The documents range from a handwritten storyboard of photographic perspectives, to a list of materials and expenses needed to perform *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* (thread: \$4.30; cape backing: \$7.60), to a thank you note from the actor (Jeffrey Scott) who played her escort, to a follow-up *Village Voice* article by Lucy Lippard. O'Grady's intervention in the New Museum's *Persona*, which included nine artists—all Caucasian—who used alter egos as part of their practices, has become iconic. And the archival materials gathered together here expose O'Grady's strategic thinking and precise attention to ensuring the story is recorded—by her. This selection, on loan from Wellesley, provides an extraordinary opportunity to observe the working processes of Lorraine O'Grady in the early 1980s and connect them to the bodies of work and legacy that continue to resonate today.

Living Symbols of New Epochs

Lorraine O'Grady in conversation with Cecilia Alemani*

Who was the first “modernist”? And the last? What did these two figures bring into the cultural sphere of their respective historical periods? Curator Cecilia Alemani interviews Lorraine O'Grady about the work that offers an answer to these questions. The result is an extraordinary speculation involving Charles Baudelaire, his Haitian lover Jeanne, Michael Jackson, and the artist's mother. Inner lives that mark different eras and that intertwine with the artist's own tumultuous life story, like a mirror reflecting an image through time.

Cecilia Alemani: I would like to speak in this interview about your contribution to the 2010 Whitney Biennial, the work *The First and the Last of the Modernists* (2010). The piece is composed by four photographic diptychs depicting a seemingly unusual couple: Charles Baudelaire and Michael Jackson. The French poet has previously appeared in your work, in particular in *Flowers of Evil and Good*, a photo installation portraying Baudelaire and his black muse, common-law wife Jeanne Duval. Can you

tell me about your fascination for Baudelaire?

Lorraine O'Grady: I taught a course for nearly two decades here at [The School of Visual Arts in New York City] in which we read just two books, Baudelaire's *Flowers of Evil* and Rimbaud's *Illuminations*. It was crazy. Each year, I never knew which I would prefer, whose book I would teach better. It's a generalization, of course, but on balance Charles and Arthur seemed to divide two halves of the human mind, the impressionist and the expressionist, the dada and the surrealist if you will, and I never knew which half of my own mind would dominate when I encountered them. In the end, while I remain more excited, or perhaps I should say intellectually titillated by Arthur's poetry, Charles captured me on the human level. I couldn't explain all the reasons why. He was a less gifted but more complex poet than Rimbaud, but that wasn't it. When I tried to understand my love for him, the answers seemed pointed toward his bravery, the condition of mind needed to embrace the unprecedented cultural change in Europe, to leap from romanticism to modernism, to carry that

flag. And also toward the figure of Jeanne.

CA: What does Jeanne and her relationship with Baudelaire represent for you?

LOG: At first I was fixated on their having stayed together for twenty years without either wedding or children, on the diminution of self in maintaining even a dysfunctional relationship so long after sexual obsession has disappeared. But soon I began to see these two aspects of Charles, the relationship with Jeanne and the meeting of modernism's challenges, as somehow connected. So many forces were colliding in Europe when Jeanne and Charles came of age—the chaos of industrialization, sudden shifts of rural populations to the cities, colonies established to shove raw materials into the always open maw of factories, Europe's first real encounter with the “other.”

Modernism was the aesthetic attempt to understand and control and reflect all of this. In the period of romanticism, it had been so easy to see God in the daffodils, in babbling brooks that ran through the trees. It was still easy even for the artist in cities to view himself as a servant, making art in God's image. But now the city had changed. One had to see God and beauty in homelessness, in the oil slick on a mud puddle, in the noise and greed. And Charles was one of the first who could do this. I suppose you might say that the modernist moment was the first time art had to be made without God, without guideposts. We'd soon see even the alternative to God, rationalist intellect, being discarded as an incomplete tool.

When I tried to understand what qualities helped Charles make the leap from romanticism to modernism so fully, as a poet and art critic, even as a dandy and flâneur, I kept coming back to Jeanne. For sure, Charles's own qualities of intellect and psyche drew him to her in the first place. But as a black woman who has had white partners, I was convinced his alliance (not just “encounter”) with an “other” had given him views into his own culture he might not otherwise have had. Such relationships always prove more than one bargained for. Charles not only observed what Jeanne experienced day to day, he himself once lost a job because of her. It seemed to me that the insider-outsider position he occupied with her, while not a cause, enabled, perhaps made inevitable, the completeness of his transition to modernism.

I was fascinated by Jeanne. But the more I looked for her, the more elusive she became. No letters, not even the dozens she must have written in an age without telephones in that spelling Charles ridiculed. His mother seems to have burned them after he died. Her words exist only as paraphrase in his poems, her image remains mostly in his quick sketches on scrap paper. It was discouraging. I wanted to do a piece showing the two as the equals I felt they must have been. I knew her in my bones, but how would Jeanne speak?

CA: Besides your personal admiration for Charles and Jeanne, there seems to be resonances with your own life: you intertwine Jeanne's world with hints to your own mother, Lena.

LOG: It may seem odd, but for me as an artist, theory freed the imagination. In

* Originally published in *Mousse* (June 2010) 24: 100-08.

the early 90's, delving into the texts of the Birmingham school of cultural theory, Stuart Hall and others, proved a blessing. It gave me not just Jeanne but something I had not anticipated—it gave me Lena, my mother. We tend to forget how little the world has changed until recently, even with the cataclysm of industrialization. We've had more change since World War II than in all the time before. Lena was 80 years younger than Jeanne, but the world they experienced as fair-skinned black women moving from the Caribbean to the metropole, Jeanne to Paris, Lena to Boston, was substantially the same.

Cultural theory shed new light on that world and helped me to feel what it was like. When that happened, things were turned on their head. If most definitions of postmodernism, however contested, contain elements of globalization, diasporan movement of peoples, hybridity of cultures, and increasing gender equality, then while Charles was waging his valiant struggle with modernism, Jeanne was already living a postmodern life. She was closer to me and to current generations than she had been to Charles!

CA: What happened in the piece when you intertwined Jeanne and Lena's histories?

LOG: Imagining Jeanne in turn helped me imagine Lena. It's a sad admission to make, but even just secondhand through Charles's poetry, I knew Jeanne better than I knew my own mother. Through his hands, I could guess at her inner life while Lena remained opaque to me. But you know, like the tinted air you remember swirling between those glass beakers in chemistry class, Lena's Jamaican patois

let Jeanne speak. They brought each other to life in an odd reciprocity. And in the diptychs in *Flowers of Evil and Good*, I freely interchanged photographs of my mother and my aunts with Jeanne. It was a shock when I first saw Charles married to Lena that way. But it explained a lot about why Charles and Jeanne had been together so long. I could see that she had led him a merry chase!

CA: Going back to *The First and the Last of the Modernists*, here Baudelaire appears paired with another icon, Michael Jackson, who died in June 2009. According to the title, the work seems to depict the two fathers of our modern culture, the first one a key figure for Western modernism and the latter the king of American pop culture. Are you a fan of Michael?

LOG: When Michael died, I couldn't stop bawling like a child, as if a member of my own family were gone. But where had those tears come from? I had been a Prince fan! The piece about Charles and Michael was the culmination of the effort to learn why I'd sobbed so uncontrollably that day.

CA: How did you get involved with his music and his myth?

LOG: Before making my first public art work in 1980 at the age of 45 with the performance *Mille Bourgeoise Noire*, I'd had several careers. My undergraduate degree from Wellesley College was in economics and Spanish literature. I'd been among other things an intelligence analyst for the Department of State, a literary and commercial translator, a civil rights activist, a housewife. But nothing ever satisfied me. In the early 1970s, I left

Chicago where I'd lived with my second husband and came to New York to be with a lover who'd managed rock bands and was now head of publicity for Columbia Records.

I didn't want to be just a pretty rock chick, some guy's "old lady" going to parties and concerts. So I began writing about rock and pop music—the first above-ground review of Bruce Springsteen for the *Village Voice*, the first article on reggae published in *Rolling Stone*, a cover story on the Allman Brothers, reviews of the New York Dolls and Sly and the Family Stone. Pretty eclectic. The Jackson 5, fronted by little Michael, had been huge and were beginning to decline. I didn't write about them. They were simply part of the air we breathed.

By 1982 when Michael was dominating the world as a solo act with *Off the Wall* and *Thriller* and Prince had broken through with *Controversy*, I'd found a life and career as a visual artist that would never bore me and was just another pop culture consumer. What made us have to choose between them? Between the lineages of James Brown and Parliament Funkadelic? Perhaps it was like Baudelaire versus Rimbaud. Some spaces can only be occupied in alternation.

CA: What did Michael represent for you?

LOG: After he died, in an obsessive search for the source of my own tears, I plunged into the Internet for months and emerged stunned. We'd all known that Michael was a talent like no other. But the demonization of his character (and the rock establishment's need to keep the world safe for Bruce and Elvis?) had created a consensus that after *Thriller* he

had lost his way. We'd stopped listening and looking. It was the self-consciousness of his achievements that most surprised me, the control he exercised over everyone and everything around him. Quincy Jones responsible for *Thriller*? Think again. No album was ever more deliberately crafted or had a more ambitious agenda. Masterpieces tailored for every demographic, with the outcome firmly in mind—to break the ghettoization of black talent in Billboard's "R&B" chart forever. He'd been horrified by the treatment of *Off the Wall*, for which he'd won just one Grammy, as a "soul" singer.

It's hard not to lapse into hyperbole when thinking about Michael. Don Cornelius, the creator of Soul Train, said that when he first saw Michael in a variety show two years before the family signed with Motown, he felt like he was in one of those cartoons where the two-ton safe falls out of the sky and lands on your head. An eight-year-old who could already sing as well as Aretha, dance as well as James Brown, and control an audience with Jackie Wilson's aplomb! And all the evidence on YouTube showed that, in the annals of child prodigies, he was one of the rare ones who could keep developing until the end. I found myself returning to Baudelaire to make sense of him.

CA: What do they have in common, Charles and Michael, in spite of their very different origin? What happens when two different worlds and times clash?

LOG: They were so much alike, Charles and Michael. The similarities I felt in their lives—their indeterminate sexuality, their urgent need to be different from the norm, the drugs, the flamboyant clothes, the makeup, and the father and

step-father too young and sexually vital ever to be overcome. Somewhere beyond that lay their similarity as intellectual symbols.

I really saw them not as figures of two different modernisms but rather as two ends of a continuum. If modernism was the aesthetic attempt to deal with industrialism, urbanization, the de-naturalization of culture, and the shock of difference, then it was an effort in which all sides shared and were equally affected—from Charles trying to find his way in the stench of the torn-up streets of Baron Haussmann's Paris, to Michael with lungs permanently impaired from a childhood in Gary when the steel mills still belched fire. While the old dichotomies between white and black cultures, and between entertainment and fine art, are understandable—it's hard to live on both sides simultaneously—the hierarchies between these imagined oppositions seem not just passé but fundamentally untrue. When I drew a line from Charles's *Les Fleurs du mal*, written out of Jeanne's living body, to Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*, made with abstract African sculptures, and on to Michael's insertion of his own body into black-and-white film clips through the miracles of computer-generated imagery in *This Is It*, it seemed the triangulation of a circle in which all sides were contained. What's most striking about Charles and Michael as artists is the similarity of their attitudes. The modernist artist who could no longer be the servant of God would always be tempted by a perceived obligation to become God. And no one succumbed to the temptation more than these two. It was there in the relentless perfectionism that limited their output, in the fanatical domination of their craft and its history, in

the worship of their instrument. I find it so touching to think of Michael warming up for one to two hours with his vocal coach before going on stage or into the studio. And what could be more quixotic, imitate God more, than the desire to unify the whole world through music? The amazing thing is how close he came—the most famous person on the planet, a billion mourners crying at his eulogies.

I never found the source of my own tears. The search had exhausted me. I'd kept ricocheting between loving him unreasonably and thinking about him analytically. In the end, King of Pop seems such an inadequate term for him. I couldn't have done *The First and the Last* if that's all he was. He and Charles had lived out the modernist myth of the suffering artist to the point of cliché, but there was more to both of them than that.

The first of the new is always the last of something else. Charles was both the first of the modernists and the last of the romantics. He was bound to forever live in the forest of symbols. And Michael may have been the last of the modernists (no one can ever aspire to greatness that ironically again), but he was also the first of the postmodernists. Will anyone ever be as ideal a symbol of globalization, or so completely the product of commercial forces? In the end, the two, together and in themselves, were perfect conundra of difference and similarity. When I replaced Jeanne and Lena with Michael and put them on the wall, I couldn't decide whether they would be seen more as lovers or as brothers.

Nefertiti/ Devonia Evangeline

Lorraine O'Grady*

In 1980, when I first began performing, I was a purist—or perhaps I was simply naïve. My performance ideal at that time was “hit-and-run,” the guerilla-like disruption of an event-in-progress, an electric jolt that would bring a strong response, positive or negative. But whether I was doing *Mille Bourgeoise Noire* at a downtown opening or *Art Is . . .* before a million people in Harlem's Afro-American Day parade, as the initiator, I was free: I did not have an “audience” to please.

The first time I was asked to perform for an audience who would actually pay (at Just Above Midtown Gallery, New York, in the *Dialogues* series, 1980)—I was nonplussed. I was not an entertainer! The performance ethos of the time was equally naïve: entertaining the audience was not a primary concern. After all, wasn't it about contributing to the

dialogue of art and not about building a career? I prepared *Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline* in expectation of a one-night stand before about fifty cognoscenti and friends. It was a chance to experiment and explore. Performance's advantage over fiction was its ability to combine linear storytelling with nonlinear visuals. You could make narratives in space as well as in time, and that was a boon for the story I had to tell.

My older sister, Devonia, had died just weeks after we'd got back together, following years of anger and not speaking. Two years after her unanticipated death, I was in Egypt. It was an old habit of mine, hopping boats and planes. But this escape had turned out unexpectedly. In Cairo in my twenties, I found myself surrounded for the first time by people who looked like me. This is something most people may take for granted, but it hadn't happened to me earlier, in either Boston or Harlem.

* Originally published in *Art Journal* (Winter 1997) 56:4, 64-65.

Here on the streets of Cairo, the loss of my only sibling was being confounded with the image of a larger family gained. When I returned to the States, I began painstakingly researching Ancient Egypt, especially the Amarna period of Nefertiti and Akhenaton. I had always thought Devonia looked like Nefertiti, but as I read and looked, I found narrative and visual resemblances throughout both families.

Though the invitation to perform before a seated audience at Just Above Midtown was initially disconcerting, I soon converted it into a chance to objectify my relationship to Dee by comparing it to one I could imagine as equally troubled: that of Nefertiti and her younger sister, Mutnedjmet. No doubt this was a personal endeavor; I was seeking a catharsis. The piece interwove partly subjective spoken narrative with double slide-projections of the two families. To the degree that the audience entered my consideration, I hoped to say something about the persistent nature of sibling relations and the limits of art as a means of reconciliation. There would be subsidiary points as well: on hybridism, elegance in black art, and Egyptology's continued racism.

Some people found the performance beautiful. But to tell the truth, few were sure of what I was up to. Nineteen eighty was seven years before the publication of Martin Bernal's *Black Athena*, and a decade before "museumology" and "appropriation" reached their apex. As one critic later said to me, in 1980 I was the only one who could vouch for my images. I will always be grateful to performance for providing me the freedom and safety to work through my

ideas; I had the advantage of being able to look forward, instead of glancing over my shoulder at the audience, the critics, or even art history.

Performance would soon become institutionalized, with pressure on artists to have a repertoire of pieces that could be repeated and advertised. I would perform *Nefertiti* several more times before retiring it in 1989. And in 1994, now subject to the exigencies of a market that required objects, I took about one-fifth of the original 65 diptychs and created a wall installation of framed Cibachromes. Oddly, rather than traducing the original performance idea, *Miscegenated Family Album* seemed to carry it to a new and inevitable form, one that I call "spatial narrative." With the passage of time, the piece has found a broad and comprehending audience.

The translation to the wall did involve a sacrifice. Now *Miscegenated Family Album*, an installation in which each diptych must contribute to the whole, faces a new set of problems, those of the gallery exhibit career. The installation is a total experience. But whenever diptychs are shown or reproduced separately, as they often must be, it is difficult to maintain and convey the narrative, or performance, idea. As someone whom performance permitted to become a writer in space, that feels like a loss to me.

Lorraine O'Grady's New Worlds

Andil Gosine*

Gently trembling quivers of hair provide a perfectly pitched and suitably gorgeous meditation on a conversation Lorraine O'Grady started twenty years ago. The artist's conundrum then, as now, was herself and us. As she wrote on the wall of the 1991 New York exhibit in which the images first appeared: What should we do? What is there time for? What should we do with the mess of desires, identities, and culture that mixing, both forced and free, has unleashed in the Americas since colonial encounter?

Her reply in that first solo show at the INTAR Hispanic American Arts Center opened with two works from her series *Body is the Ground of My Experience*: the delicate *Fir-Palm*, a black-and-white photomontage featuring a hybrid New England fir and Caribbean palm growing from a black woman's torso, and *The*

Clearing, a photomontage diptych showing conflicting scenes of interracial sex played out in black-and-white against the backdrop of a forest clearing. Twenty years later, for her 2012 solo show *New Worlds* at Alexander Gray Associates, the two are paired with her newest work, *Landscape (Western Hemisphere)*, a mesmerizing eighteen-minute, black-and-white, wall-sized video projection that features those compelling soft and sharp movements of her hair.

The appropriately titled *New Worlds* is O'Grady's tome on five hundred years of history. It offers further evidence of the artist's prescience. A complex, subversive thinker, once overlooked, she has always made work that demands committed attention—no easy feat in any situation but especially difficult in an earlier, racially segregated art world that could not find a place for her. *The Fir-Palm* establishes a context for one strand of a lifelong interrogation that

* An unpublished article on Lorraine O'Grady's *New Worlds* exhibition at Alexander Gray Associates, New York. Apr 11-May 25, 2012.

has consumed her practice, revealing the tensions surrounding the artist's identity and her production of body and desire as foundational for the development of the Western Hemisphere. Its botanic concoction embodies O'Grady's heritage as the child of Caribbean immigrants who left Jamaica for Boston at the dawn of the twentieth century. The image is at once an assertive claim about her own hybridity and, through the clouds hovering in its background, an acknowledgment of its precarious condition. *The Fir-Palm* puts to picture Homi Bhabha's "Third Space"; through O'Grady, Gayatri Spivak's subaltern speaks.

If *The Fir-Palm* signposts hybridity, *The Clearing* is its visceral elaboration. In it, O'Grady's arguments are teased out, beginning with the diptych's subtitle: *or Cortez and La Malinche, Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, N. and Me.* The imbrications of identity and culture with nature and sexuality are demonstrated in the scenes' activities. In the left panel, a black woman and white man appear elevated in clouds, their expressions matching the ecstasy of their sexual engagement. Below, children are playing in the clearing, as a pile of the couple's discarded clothes topped by a gun lies, carelessly, on the ground. There are no children in the image on the right. The black woman's stiff corpse stretches out on the ground, while the white man, now wearing a skull as his head and robed in a chainmail vest, hangs over her.

When she first offered *The Clearing* to curators, many read its images as an "either/or" proposition, or a "before/

after." O'Grady was often asked to show only the first panel. Recalling an invitation by a feminist curator to participate in the 1993 show *Coming to Power: 25 Years of Sexually X-plicit Art by Women* at the David Zwirner Gallery (Soho), O'Grady recalls, "The only piece I had that was remotely sexually explicit was this piece, so I gave her the diptych" (*Interview*, June 21, 2010). But at the opening, only the left panel was exhibited. "The show was about sexuality as an uncomplicated, positive blessing," O'Grady discovered, "not sexuality as a complicated life issue or even sexuality as an issue far more complicated for women of color than for white women. I said 'What have you done? You've put my piece up and it's not my piece.'" Another curator—"a very nice white guy from the South," O'Grady remembers—said, "'That's not what sexuality is, or at least that's not what it's supposed to be.' But well," O'Grady replied, "that is what it is."

O'Grady's reply—*But well, that is what it is*—characterizes *The Clearing's* main contention: that desire is complicated and irresolvable. Rather than "either/or" or "before/after," *The Clearing* must be two images together, simultaneously and inseparable—"both/and," as O'Grady has put it—because they articulate the simultaneous horror and pleasure of interracial and/or East-West engagement, its ambivalences and indeterminacy. "The couple making love in the trees is a literalized metaphor—'I'm so happy that I'm floating on air'—but one that is brought to ground almost immediately, or simultaneously. No matter how happy you are," she says, "there's always this moment when you are brought to earth."

The black-white union represented in the image is both dream and nightmare, neither a choice between them nor one ending with death, but a site of continuous tension. The sexual desires underpinning this engagement are fueled through and through by colonial fantasies of "race." Yet they also potentially facilitate the destabilization of the structuring essentialism that underpins colonial acts of violence. The personal experiences that drive O'Grady's imagination and the production of *The Clearing* serve as testimony to the complicated experience of the colonial subject—to its simultaneous experience of violence with desire, of pain and punishment with dreaming and longing—and of the impossibility of resolution. *The Clearing* insists on a complicated reading of cultural hybridity, one that claims neither celebration nor denunciation but, rather, appreciates its simultaneous and inseparable brutalities and pleasures. The images comprising the diptych are not an "either/or" proposal but a "both/and" description of what is left in the aftermath of colonial encounter.

The Clearing is especially concerned with the interracial pairing it puts to picture, of the black woman and white man. In her essay "Olympia's Maid," O'Grady theorized that the relationship between the white male and black female broke "faith" between the white male and white female. It marked, she says, "the end of courtly love," Represented in *The Clearing* by the man's chainmail shirt. The three relationships named in the subtitle situate this sexual pairing as central to the development of the Western Hemisphere. None are simply innocent

representations of romantic love, nor are they simply condemnable in the terms of political morality.

Significantly, after the charged imagery of *The Clearing*, O'Grady returned to the poignant, more tender aesthetics of *Fir-Palm* for her first single-channel video *Landscape (Western Hemisphere)*. The idea of her hair as a landscape came about instantaneously. "I cannot tell you the thought process that arrived at my hair as a landscape," she says. But once it did, her hair worked as an objective correlative to the trees in *The Clearing*. "I began to see that I identified with all parts of *The Clearing*," she says. "I identified with the couple, I identified with the children, I felt that my hair was the result of the action that took place in *The Clearing*. This action," she concluded, "which, for all that it may have happened elsewhere in the world, has to be identified determinatively with the Western Hemisphere."

While interracial sex happened elsewhere, "only in the Western Hemisphere was it this foundational, ultimately synthesizing action," O'Grady says. "It couldn't resonate in the same way elsewhere. It wouldn't be foundational, it wouldn't be symbolic, definitive. My hair," she adds, "as a metaphoric system, could really only have existed here. It was symbolic of all the physiological, mental, and cultural hybridizations that were going on." The title of the piece followed. "You know, I didn't realize until I began to think about what to call the video that in *The Clearing's* subtitle, Cortez and La Malinche were Latin America, Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings were North America, and N. and Me, that was the

Antilles. So I had unconsciously put all of it together, *The Clearing* was North, South and in-between.”

With *Landscape (Western Hemisphere)* O’Grady brings us into a necessary but permanently unstable resolution. “My attitude about hybridity,” she says, “is that it is essential to understanding what is happening here. People’s reluctance to acknowledge it is part of the problem... The argument for embracing the other is more realistic than what is usually argued for, which is an idealistic and almost romantic maintenance of difference. But I don’t mean interracial sex literally. I’m really advocating for the kind of miscegenated thinking that’s needed to deal with what we’ve already created here.”

What should we do? O’Grady’s is not an easy response. That it foregrounds the messy details and contradictions in negotiating colonial inheritances is in fact part of her answer. The artist’s imperative to defy and disrupt hegemonic practices is essential to her work, but this is no anarchistic enterprise, oppositional for the sake of it. Rather, O’Grady’s work underlines the complex history of colonization, its contemporary persistence, and the genuine difficulties for securing justice in the face of it. In her groundbreaking study of black female representation, “Olympia’s Maid,” O’Grady wrote: “But, I tell myself, this cannot be the end. First we must acknowledge the complexity, and then we must surrender to it.”

Exhibition Checklist

- 1 *Miscegenated Family Album (A Mother’s Kiss)*, T: Candace and Devonia; B: Nefertiti and daughter, 1980/1994. Cibachrome prints. 37 x 26 in. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York.
- 2 *Miscegenated Family Album (Sisters I)*, L: Nefernefruat Nefertiti; R: Devonia Evangeline O’Grady, 1980/1994. Cibachrome prints. 26 x 37 in. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York.
- 3 *Miscegenated Family Album (Cross Generational)*, L: Nefertiti, the last image; R: Devonia’s youngest daughter, Kimberly, 1980/1994. Cibachrome prints. 26 x 37 in. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York.
- 4 *The First and the Last of the Modernists, Diptych 1 Red (Charles and Michael)*, 2010. Fujiflex print. 46.8 x 37.4 in. Collection of Philip Aarons & Shelley Fox Aarons, New York.
- 5 *The First and the Last of the Modernists, Diptych 2 Green (Charles and Michael)*, 2010. Fujiflex print. 46.8 x 37.4 in. Collection of Philip Aarons & Shelley Fox Aarons, New York.
- 6 *The First and the Last of the Modernists, Diptych 3 Blue (Charles and Michael)*, 2010. Fujiflex print. 46.8 x 37.4 in. Collection of Philip Aarons & Shelley Fox Aarons, New York.
- 7 *The First and the Last of the Modernists, Diptych 4 Gray (Michael and Charles)*, 2010. Fujiflex print. 46.8 x 37.4 in. Collection of Philip Aarons & Shelley Fox Aarons, New York.
- 8 *Body is the Ground of My Experience (The Clearing: or Cortez and La Malinche, Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, N. and Me)*, 1991/2012. Silver gelatin print (photomontage). 40 x 50 in. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York.
- 9 *The Fir-Palm*, 1991/2012. Silver gelatin print (photomontage). 50 x 40 in. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York.
- 10 *Landscape (Western Hemisphere)*, 2010/2011. Single-channel video for projection. 18 min. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York.

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Mission

Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts at Harvard University is dedicated to the synthesis of art, design, and education through the exhibition of existing works and production of new commissions. In addition to a site for exhibition and public events, CCVA is home to the Department of Visual and Environmental Studies and Harvard Film Archive. At CCVA, visual literacy, knowledge production, contemporary art, and critical inquiry seamlessly meet, ultimately enriching the creative and intellectual lives of our audiences. The Carpenter Center is the only building in North America designed by Swiss-born architect Le Corbusier.

Lorraine O'Grady Where Margins Become Centers

Oct 29, 2015–Jan 10, 2016

Curated by James Voorhies

Gallery Hours 12–7 pm, Wed–Sun
Free and open to the public

Program

The Carpenter Center fosters meaningful engagement among artists, art, and our audiences. Choreographing exhibitions, lectures, residencies, publications, performances, screenings, and informal gatherings, CCVA brings people, ideas, and objects together in generative ways that provide unparalleled experiences with contemporary art.



