

2010 Whitney Biennial, 18 Selected Mentions

by various critics and bloggers

A compilation of 18 selected and conflicting mentions of Lorraine O'Grady's piece in the 2010 Whitney Biennial provides an opportunity to compare responses to *The First and the Last of the Modernists* and parse their differences.

[A link to the source article from which each quote is taken is included in its citation. Should the link no longer work, an archived version of the article may be requested via "Contact" on O'Grady's website at: <http://lorraineogrady.com>]

1.

<<Lorraine O'Grady's stunning photo diptychs of Charles Baudelaire with Michael Jackson restore MJ to majesty and the Bruce High Quality Foundation's 1960s style motion picture about the ambiguity of trying to love America, projected on the windshield of a white ambulance, has a depth of mournful feeling that wil make you weep.>>

Charlie Finch, "A Room of One's Own." Review of the Whitney Biennial, *Artnet.com*, February 24, 2010. At: <http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/finch/whitney-biennial2-22-10.asp>

2.

<<You think, "What's going on here?" And that's a question art should raise.

At a certain point the curators seem to pose it, critically, about new art in general. In a fourth-floor gallery next to the one filled with abstract paintings they've placed a photographic piece by the conceptual artist Lorraine O'Grady. Titled "The First and Last

of the Modernists," it pairs portraits of Charles Baudelaire (he looks like [Charles Manson](#) in one) and Michael Jackson, raising issues of race, class and the highly ambivalent nature of beauty that the new abstraction ignores.

Ms. O'Grady's work, with roots in the black art and feminist movements of the 1960s and '70s, was overlooked until fairly recently, probably because it's hard to pin down as far as meaning and attitude. And it makes sense that she shares space in the show with some category-dodging younger contemporaries, the five artists who make up the collective called the Bruce High Quality Foundation.>>

Holland Cotter, "At a Biennial on a Budget, Tweaking and Provoking." *New York Times*, February 25, 2010, p C21. At: http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/26/arts/design/26biennial.html?_r=1&ref=arts

3.

<< While neither Lorraine O'Grady nor Ania Soliman might usually be considered a "photographer", both are using the recontextualization of appropriated photographic imagery as the basis for the art included in this show. O'Grady's works juxtapose found images of Charles Baudelaire and Michael Jackson in varying color tones, wryly commenting on the ups and downs of celebrity. Soliman layers a wide range of found images of pineapples into a photomontage alphabet stuck directly to the wall, merging text and photographs into a hybrid historical survey reminiscent of Dada collages. With these examples, it is clear that we have moved beyond the irony of simple appropriation/mashup and on to more complicated and conceptual combinations of images with social/political overtones.>>

DLK Collection, "Whitney Biennial 2010," April 20, 2010. At: <http://dlkcollection.blogspot.com/2010/04/whitney-biennial-2010.html>

4.

<<People—art's favorite subject—are not beautiful in this exhibit. They are distorted and injured here.

Stephanie Sinclair's gruesome photos show Afghani women who survived self-immolation. Lorraine O'Grady's portrait of Dorian Grey-like photos pair Charles Baudelaire and Michael Jackson as they age. Michael Jackson's transformation from beautiful young African-American man to the whitened melting flesh of a white-woman-wanna-be is devastating. Baudelaire, for all his own issues, holds up a lot better over time. The themes of grotesque humanity come out in Storm Tharp's drawings, Nina Berman's family-album-like photos and Jessica Jackson Hutchins' ceramic body parts on a sofa.>>

Roberta Fallon and Libby Rosof, *The Artblog*. By Libby, "Shiny penny no more—Whitney Biennial takes on the new America." At: <http://theartblog.org/2010/02/shiny-penny-no-more-whitney-biennial-takes-on-the-new-america/>

5.

<<What am I getting myself into?" I wondered as I approached the Whitney's inverted facade. Having read a mixture of reviews of the show, some scathing and some packed with praise, I felt nervous. This was my first Biennial. Usually the shows I frequent center on a certain theme, context, time period, or artist. Here, though, I would only be seeing the "now" of the art world. . . .

I had kept Baudelaire's [*The Painter of Modern Life*](#) in mind as a sort of lens by which to read what would be assembled to represent these last two years. I know that might seem like an irrelevant source, being published in 1863 and all, but I was soon to find out that one of the works shown was making similar use of Baudelaire's modernity. Lorraine O'Grady's *The First and the Last of the Modernists* is a series of diptychs consisting of paired photographs of Michael Jackson and Charles Baudelaire at similar ages and points in their careers. O'Grady's series of paired portraits aims to guide us through each cultural figure's journey, the height of their innovations in relation to modern culture, and the cost of these things on their personal lives. The champion of

modernity was side by side with the king of pop and the feeling this gave me was quite an unsettling one.>>

Amanda McCleod, "National Treasure: In Which It Only Happens Once Every Two Years." *ThisRecording.com*, March 7, 2010. At: <http://thisrecording.com/today/2010/3/7/in-which-it-only-happens-once-every-two-years.html>

6.

<<Lorraine O'Grady

"The First and Last of the Modernists" encapsulates culture with four simple pictures of Baudelaire juxtaposed with Michael Jackson. The work makes a sweeping assumption about wealth, fame, and artistic ambition. I really like this kind of ballsy sweep, which according to the label copy, took sorting through thousands of Jackson images to match the scarce Baudelaire images O'Grady had on hand.>>

Dan Boehl, "Armory, Volta, Biennial: The Best Things." . . . *might be good*, issue 143, March 12, 2010. Online at: <http://www.fluentcollab.org/mbg/index.php/reviews/review/143/231>

7.

<<A second group of artists called up to consider the "huge atmospheric shift" that has befallen America predictably turn out to be the same postminimal gang whose "institutional critiques" and "dematerialized objects" helped hamstring contemporary art in the first place. There are, for example, Post-Studio gurus Michael Asher and Martin Kersels from CalArts (the first contributes the trite idea that the museum should be open 24/7 for a week; the second, a ratty, mutable soundstage—both about as cool as a backstage pass to Vampire Weekend). Others include Babette Mangolte's record keeping of 1970s dance performances; Sharon Hayes's video installation as a dissertation on Ferdinand de Saussure; Jesse Aron Green's 80-minute loop of psychoanalysis-as-dance; and the work of Reagan-era multiculturalist Lorraine O'Grady, which consists of a wall of diptychs pairing photos of Michael Jackson and Baudelaire

absurdly titled *The First and the Last of the Modernists*. Now there's a lady who *loves* her a Facebook page.

Yawn. Why do folks not see the irony of teaching institutional critique within the confines of art schools or the Whitney's own Independent Studio Program? This is art as Tylenol PM, including the wake-up migraine.>>

Christian Viveros-Fauné, "Welcome to the Mixed-Up, Dialed Down 2010 Whitney Biennial." *The Village Voice*, March 2, 2010. Online at: <http://www.villagevoice.com/2010-03-02/art/welcome-to-the-mixed-up-dialed-down-2010-whitney-biennial/>

8.

<< For the record, "Fans of Lorraine O'Grady at the 2010 Whitney Biennial" on Facebook is a pet project I alone created and manage. Lorraine does not have a Facebook account and does not interface with it in any way. She has no idea how the project is developing albeit she's been curious and intrigued by my interest and engagement with setting it up. As I write this, has not even seen what the Fan Club page looks like.

As a long time friend of O'Grady's and admirer of her work for almost 3 decades I've been fortunate to have observed the development of her Whitney Biennial project, which I find to be not only outstanding visually and intellectually but also remarkable, having observed the process and work that went into building *The First and the Last of the Modernists*. O'Grady does not come to Baudelaire lightly, and is very clear on the implications of title usage. O'Grady not only taught Baudelaire for several decades at SVA, but has translated many passages of Baudelaire's *Fleur du Mal* for her own art work and received a fellowship from Harvard's Bunting Institute to further her research on Baudelaire and modernism, which resulted in the earliest studies (1996) for her ongoing project *Flowers of Evil and Good*. This project interchanges the images and language of O'Grady's mother with that of Baudelaire's black common-law wife, Jeanne Duval.

All that being said, I am always interested in learning how people

are responding to and reading the work, and encourage all to post on the Fan Club page I set up. That you responded to the work at all I find fascinating and informative. And, has me consider how others are reading the artwork and its title. Hopefully this will be revealed as more people visit the museum and weigh in with comments and posts to the Facebook page. Having members do so was a large part of what instigated my interest in setting up the page in the first place. I would welcome anyone's participation on this topic, including yours.>>

Sur Rodney Sur, "Sur Responds to 3/2/2010 *Village Voice* remark in Biennial review." Online in Comments section of the review, March 3, 2010. And at:

<http://www.facebook.com/notes/fans-of-lorraine-ogrady-at-the-2010-whitney-biennial/sur-responds-to-322010-village-voice-remark-in-biennial-review/384322234477>

9.

<<There was, in our provincial opinion, precisely one good piece in the whole show: a series of four diptychs by Lorraine O'Grady, each of them showing Baudelaire on the left side and Michael Jackson on the right. They looked lovely together, the Prince of Pop and the Parisian flâneur, the sequined moonwalker and the old composer of glittering, poisonous verse—both of them dignified and full up with Weltschmerz, poseurs but aching visibly with elemental, near-regal despair. (The work's title, *The First and the Last of the Modernists*, is clever enough, but we liked the piece better before we learned the pretext. We preferred to focus on the contrast—unexpected, riotous, sublime.)>>

The Santos-Paglinawan Collective, "High Society: Impressions from the Whitney Biennial." *The College Hill Independent*, March 18, 2010. (student publication of Brown and RISD, Providence, RI). Archived at:

<http://www.scribd.com/doc/28637687/The-College-Hill-Independent-March-18>

10.

<<Lorraine O'Grady's, *The First and the Last of the Modernists* (2010) occupies the same gallery as the hearse. In a series of

three side by side diptychs taken at different times during their short lives, O'Grady compares the meteoric rise and fall of Michael Jackson to that of Baudelaire. Sharing similar traits: they were both perfectionists, flamboyant in their dress, sexually ambiguous, addicted to drugs, died young, and were skewered by the media for openly expressing lifestyles and beliefs. As social commentary, the artist examines the roles of art and popular culture, as well as how modern figures are presented, flattened, and distributed through the news media. Though simply presented—as is O'Grady's style—her ideas are both subtle and in-your-face, complex but not complicated.>>

Edward Rubin, "Review of the 2010 Whitney Biennial Exhibition." *Artes Magazine*, April 29, 2010. Online at: <http://www.artesmagazine.com/2010/04/review-of-the-2010-whitney-biennial-exhibition-5/>

11.

<<Finally, at the Whitney, Danny Meyer has expanded his art-house holdings with SANDWICHED, Whitney Museum of American Art, 945 Madison Avenue (75th Street), (212) 570-3600, whitney.org/visit/cafe, a pop-up cafe in the museum's lower level. With a menu created by chefs from Mr. Meyer's Union Square Hospitality Group, Sandwiched is meant to serve visitors while the museum's permanent dining space undergoes renovation. (It should last through fall.)

And so there is an excellent Bombay pita panino created by Floyd Cardoz at Tabla, with roasted eggplant, tomato and mozzarella, dressed in a kind of coconut-cilantro chutney (\$9.25); and a chewy applewood-smoked turkey sandwich on ciabatta from Kenny Callaghan at Blue Smoke, with pickled onion and jalapeño mayonnaise (\$9.75). There is a smoked-salmon number (\$11.95), another of ham and cheese (\$9.75). There is tuna (\$9.50), even a peanut butter and jelly (\$5.50) for children and the childlike. Eat that and go visit the Lorraine O'Grady diptychs upstairs at the biennial show. Beats a schlep to the coffee shop for floppy grilled cheese.>>

Sam Sifton, "Robert, the Wright and Sandwiched." In "Dining Briefs," *The New York Times*, March 30, 2010. A shout-out in a review of new museum restaurants. At: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/31/dining/reviews/31diningbriefs.html>

12.

<< One artist, Jessica Jackson Hutchins, incorporated Obama's image in her work, plastering her childhood couch in Obama newspaper clippings to create a monument to public and personal histories.

Two artists invoke the likeness of another African American icon, whose cultural significance similarly is both pivotal to and transcendent of race: the recently departed Michael Jackson. Lorraine O'Grady's four diptychs pairing Jackson with Charles Baudelaire, *The First and Last of the Modernists*, depict both poets at defining moments in their lives, from their halcyon days through to their epic declines. The very first work encountered in the museum's lobby is Daniel McDonald's *The Crossing: Passengers Must Pay Toll in Order to Disembark (Michael Jackson, Charon and Uncle Sam)*, in which the eponymous scene is staged with carefully arranged action figures, the Jackson figure struggling to hoist a colossal, shiny penny before Charon; Uncle Sam meanwhile is broke and passed out. A number of variations on the American economy and economic crisis can be read into this allegorical tableaux, which also alludes, obliquely, to an economy (and crisis?) of contemporary art materials and meanings, with these plastic figurines accentuated by kitschy smoke and resting upon a mirrored, white plinth.>>

Kevin McGarry, "2010: A Small Odyssey." *Rhizome*, March 10, 2010. Online at: <http://rhizome.org/editorial/3362>

13.

<< Not that "2010" doesn't make missteps. I wanted to like the Bruce High Quality Foundation's installation: a hearse, headlights ablaze, playing on its windshield clips from various TV shows and movies to a soundtrack ranging from "A Whiter Shade of Pale" to the "Star-Spangled Banner" and including a voice-over

recounting an aborted love affair with the U.S. ("We fucked America to make America disappear"). But the work comes off as juvenile, bathetic, too tongue-in-cheeky by half. One marvels that light fare can be so heavy-handed; Josephine Meckseper displays a far more nuanced take on capitalism's ills in her brooding video meditation on Minnesota's sprawling Mall of America. And although Lorraine O'Grady's sepia-tinged photographs of Michael Jackson and Charles Baudelaire convey something ineffable about the romantic nature of celebrity and America's worship of it, their pairing with the Bruces' piece feels ponderous. Still, O'Grady's photos beat out by miles Daniel McDonald's kitschy sculpture in the museum's lobby of Jackson with Uncle Sam being rowed across the river Styx by Charon, which has all the subtlety of Beetlejuice-era Tim Burton.>>

Sarah Douglas, "'2010' at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York." *Modern Painters*, ARTINFO.com, April 29, 2010. Online at:

<http://www.artinfo.com/news/story/34350/whitney-biennial/?page=1>

14.

<<In the gallery to the right, a curious series of photo-diptychs by Lorraine O'Grady, pairing images of Baudelaire and Michael Jackson, are offset by the Bruce High Quality Foundation's video-cum-ambulance installation. Titled *We Like America and America Likes Us*, the latter is a takeoff on Joseph Beuys's 1974 performance, *I Like America and America Likes Me*, in which the artist-shaman celebrated his very first visit to the United States. He didn't get to see much: His trip was limited to an ambulance ride to and from JFK Airport and the René Block Gallery, where he spent three days communing with a live coyote. That vehicle was the same make and model as the one here, a Cadillac Miller-Meteor—also made famous in the film *Ghostbusters*. BHQF's video, projected onto the inside of the windshield, thus features a montage of documentary footage of Beuys's piece, glimpses from Ivan Reitman's comedy classic, and more or less generic scenes of our great nation accompanied by a female narrator lugubriously intoning phrases like "We drunk-dial our memories of America."

Again, nothing earth-shattering; to paraphrase Bob Dylan, you don't need a voiceover to know which way the wind blows. But the piece works in this context, especially as you move from its mental cacophony into the next gallery, which is dominated by serene abstractions, courtesy of painters Sarah Crowner, Suzan Frecon and Tauba Auerbach.>>

Howard Halle, "2010 Whitney Biennial: The Whitney finally figures out how to put on a Biennial," *Time Out New York*, March 1, 2010. At: <http://newyork.timeout.com/arts-culture/art/64927/2010-whitney-biennial>.

15.

<<You will have spotted a third theme, politics—but politics as seen through the eyes of individuals. It can be moving, self-effacing, or evasive, sometimes all at once. I felt the urgency of personal experience, but never the urgency of events in the real world. The problem begins with the flip title of that white ambulance, *We Like America and America Likes Us*. (I am sure.) It reaches to the actual erasures of Curtis Mann, who reduces photos of downtown Beirut to abstraction.

It extends even to Josephine Meckseper's ominous video tour of a shopping mall. It extends, too, to the Biennial's only real concern for blackness. Lorraine O'Grady, born in 1934, probes identity through paired images of Michael Jackson and Charles Baudelaire—who called his Haitian mistress his "black Venus." Questions of race, femininity, life, and death motivate her. But as downstairs with McDonald, is Michael Jackson all there is to America? When O'Grady calls the series *The First and Last of the Modernists*, is she anywhere close to right?

More personal and disorienting are Stephanie Sinclair's burn victims in Afghanistan. Nina Berman, too, gives a personal account of politics, in an American soldier disfigured by combat, his face eerily like Mr. Potato Head. I shall remember both photo series a long time. Even so, it is as if war and genuine controversy are off-limits at the Whitney. The women's wounds arose from another horror, self-immolation. The man's marriage

acts out the rural male reticence in contemporary American fiction—or *People* magazine, which commissioned the work.>>

John Haber, "The Not So Great Recession: The 2010 Whitney Biennial." *Haber's Art Reviews*, online at:
<http://www.haberarts.com/whitny10.htm>

16.

<<From the cartoonish forms in George Condo's otherwise abstract expressionistic painting, to Daniel McDonald's depiction of a penniless Uncle Sam, the Biennial brims with cultural icons. "The First and the Last of the Modernists" (2010) by Lorraine O'Grady defines our era through corresponding portraits of Charles Baudelaire and Michael Jackson. Comparing their physical beauty as well as their cultural contributions, O'Grady's approach to celebrity is intimate, romantic, and egalitarian.>>

Sophie Landres, "Whitney Biennial 2010." *The Brooklyn Rail*, April 2010. Online at:
<http://www.brooklynrail.org/2010/04/artseen/whitney-biennial-2010>

17.

<<The "art world" theorizes like a secret that visitors stumble upon, yet this secret is revealed because it conceals a problematic within the art world: the art definition. . . . there is a severe disconnect between what you read and what you see. For instance, part of the description for "Michael and Charles," by Lorraine O'Grady, claims that the pairing of the pop singer and poet is "raising issues of class, race and the highly ambivalent nature of beauty that the new abstraction ignores." So Michael is black/Negro/African American, and Charles is *French*. Am I supposed to validate the ongoing struggle to demote white superiority? Are Jackson's standardized pop songs superior to Baudelaire's poems? Are they compatible? Hindering this line of thought I'm supposed to follow is a white ambulance/hearse in the middle of the room, spewing a female voice. Am I supposed to appreciate the photographs by being distracted? As for the "highly ambivalent nature of beauty," I guess those ads for Gap,

Mabelline, and Calvin Klein make ambiguous statements. Why do women wear make-up, and why do men unbutton their buttoned shirts?

The plague of catchwords. . . infects visitors with the 'oh" response, so that they can proceed to the next artwork and nod along. Thus, the plaque narrows discourse by imposing an ideological wall, where on the other side "they" know what's going on with art these days.>>

Raul Garcia, "The Whitney Pla(q/g)ue." *Imminent Terrain*, a blog, May 22, 2010. Online at:

<http://immanentterrain.blogspot.com/2010/05/whitney-plaqque.html>

18.

<<The artist Michael Asher says he goes to bed rather early these days, but his latest work is best viewed in the wee hours of the morning. Asher's contribution to the current Whitney Biennial is to keep the museum open for 24 hours a day over the course of three days, ending tonight at 11:59 p.m. . . .

"It's not meant to change the way the biennial looks," he noted of his project. "It's more of a suggestion, a little different way of thinking about time, or the institution, about who uses the museum, and how it's used, and maybe even what goes into it."

So it was that, my favorite insomniac being unavailable that evening, I arrived alone at the Whitney after midnight on Tuesday. There was something of a party atmosphere about, mixed with a vague air of apprehension. Like little kids staying up way past their bedtimes, everyone, from the staff behind the ticket counter to the security guards on duty, to the museum goers straggling in, seemed both giddy with excitement, but also wary of having broached an essential temporal barrier, and wondering about the long night ahead.

I found myself, uncharacteristically, tagging along on a docent-led tour, with a motley crew of attractive young people and older bohemians. (The loneliness of the hour made me anxious for

company.) And as our tiny group forged ahead, past Piotr Uklanski's monstrous wall hangings and Charles Ray's flower paintings, on toward R.H. Quaytman's allegories of abstraction in American art, and Aki Sasimoto's crazy installation cum performance stage (referencing her obsessions with donuts, hemorrhoids, and obscure mathematics), I found myself thinking, what is art but a torch held up against the darkness?

Some works, like Lorraine O'Grady's separated-at-birth, twin portraits of Michael Jackson and Charles Baudelaire, or Roland Flexner's sumi ink drawings made with his own breath and gravity, seemed more at home in the night than others. (Confession: Flexner is a notoriously nocturnal friend.) Other pieces, viewed in relative isolation and in an atmosphere removed from daily life, surged forth with an almost hallucinatory intensity as the evening wore on, and the museum became something like an extension of my bedroom.>>

Leslie Camhi, "Just Looking: Michael Asher's All-Nighter." *T Magazine* culture section, *New York Times*, posted May 29, 2010. Online at:
<http://tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/05/28/just-looking-michael-ashers-all-nighter/>