

Lorraine O'Grady's Natures*

This half-hour show, extracted from a longer video interview and produced in Canada for NCRA, is focused on O'Grady's diptych "The Clearing" and explores issues of sex, nature and love in her work via a mix of the intellectual and the intimate.

RADIO TRANSCRIPT

Title: Lorraine O'Grady's Natures: A Conversation About "The Clearing"

Length: 0:26:32

Narrator: Andil Gosine

Producer: Omme-Salma Rahemtullah

Music credit: "Uncomfortable Truth," performed by Nneka

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Description: Lorraine O'Grady is an artist and critic whose installations, performances, and texts address issues of diaspora, hybridity, and black female subjectivity. Her recent conversation with Andil Gosine focuses on her photographic diptych entitled "The Clearing". The conversation explores issues of sex, nature and love in her work.

* Full transcript of the radio show, a conversation between Andil Gosine and O'Grady about her 1990 photomontage diptych "The Clearing." The conversation was edited for radio by Gosine from a longer video exchange.

(Opening music, "Uncomfortable Truth," by Nneka")

Gosine: Lorraine O'Grady has a beautiful way of speaking the unspoken. When she switched careers from Economist to Artist thirty years ago, one of her first creations was the reinvention of herself as Mademoiselle Bourgeoise Noire. Decked out in a gorgeous white dress made of 180 pairs of gloves and carrying a cat o' nine tails whip studded with chrysanthemums, Mademoiselle Bourgeoise Noire interrupted art openings in New York. Looking part beauty queen, part diva - and completely stunning - she railed against the "racial apartheid" of New York's art establishment, and called on black and white artists to break the walls down. Another of O'Grady's beautiful works will re-emerge this fall at Beyond/In Western New York, an international exhibit taking place at various galleries across Buffalo from September 24 to the end of 2010. The now 75 year-old artist's featured contribution will be "The Clearing," a large black and white photographic diptych that she completed in 1990. The left panel presented a naked couple—a black woman and a white man in passionate embrace, floating in the sky, hovering above the trees. On the ground below, a young boy and girl are pictured running after a ball as it rolls towards a pile of the adults' discarded clothing. A handgun is flung amongst the assortment of clothes. In the right panel, set in the same landscape, the male figure is clothed in chain mail, and a skull replaces his face. He is leaning over the black woman's naked, numb body and fondles her breast. Her face is turned away, her arms stiff at her sides, her eyes fixed on the sky above. When O'Grady made the piece, she was simply striving to make - as she always has sought to make - beautiful art. I recently had the opportunity to ask Ms. O'Grady about her beautiful art.

O'Grady: The Clearing has had a very interesting history, and. . . When I first showed it, at the INTAR show, which was the show that I made it for, that was a space that I controlled totally, this was MY show and this was all my work on the walls, and it occupied its place within that show which I have since come to call BodyGround, but it had many more elements than just BodyGround, so I didn't really think of it as that controversial, you know, I just thought, it's a wonderful piece and I like it, and it looks good on the wall, and it works well with these other pieces.

But the images created quite a stir. At some gallery spaces, curators often refused to show both panels of the piece.

I was invited to be in a show, a group show that was at, actually at David Zwirner, when he was still in Soho, and it was still an up-and-coming gallery, not the big blue-chip powerhouse that it is now, and a young woman from WAC was curating a show there. And it was about sex. . . I can't remember quite the name of the show now. . . whatever. . . but the show was about sexuality, and she invited, I don't know, it was mainly, only women that were the artists in the show. And I didn't realize it, but the hidden agenda of the show was to express in visual art this moment of sexual exuberance on the part particularly of white women. OK, this was the moment when white women were like really exploring and dynamically reinventing themselves sexually. So this piece. . . the curator asked me to give her a piece, and the only piece that I had that was remotely sexually explicit was this piece. So I gave her the diptych. And when I went to the show only the LEFT side of the diptych was present. Because this show was about, you know, sexuality as an uncomplicated, positive blessing. Not sexuality as a complicated life issue or even sexuality as an issue far more complicated for women of color than for white women, none of the modulations of sexuality were to be present in the show. And I said [laughs] what have you done, you've put my piece up and it's not my piece. That was when I first began to realize that the two parts of *The Clearing* were a bit much for a certain audience.

The Clearing proved to be "too much" for a whole lot of people.

The Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art was doing a show, not about sexuality, but about black women, and I offered *The Clearing*. The Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art is in Winston Salem, North Carolina, and the curator was a very nice guy but he was from the South, and when he saw the piece, he was like, it just threw him. And he said, "That's not what sexuality is, or at least that's not what it's supposed to be." But well, that's what it is.

Even after O'Grady was invited to take up a prestigious Fellowship to Harvard, she still encountered censorship of the work there, including discussion of it.

I put this piece in the show with three other artists who were Fellows, and I looked anxiously for the Radcliffe Quarterly's review and discussion of the show. . . and everybody else's piece was discussed, and everybody else's piece was shown -- except mine! Hmmm, well something's wrong here, right. I got so upset and people sort of were surprised that I got so upset and so some. . . it went to the Harvard

Magazine and an editor there said, Oh, what's going on? and came over and talked to me, and I showed him and talked about the piece. He became very interested in it and wanted to write about it. And then when he proposed writing about it to his editor. . . he was the Managing Editor, I think, or the Assistant Editor, and he proposed writing about it to the Editor-in-Chief. . . and the Editor-in-Chief just said, "No." And the only answer was, "We only have so much capital (goodwill), and I don't intend to use any of it for this piece." So it never got shown, I mean it was shown, but it never got discussed at Harvard, in any way.

O'Grady, it seemed, was airing thoughts that were not supposed to be spoken.

I don't think most people want to think about the compromising, difficult parts of sexuality even among normally married couples, you know. But they certainly don't want to hear about that difficulty in interracial relationships, or certainly they don't want to have the historical nature of this relationship exposed *en plein air*.

The Clearing, O'Grady says, draws upon very common practices—but one that many people still feel very uncomfortable about acknowledging.

It's very very very difficult for people to be living in the kind of intimacy that obtained on the Southern plantation without desire going in totally unexpected or unpredictable ways. I mean, how could you live day after day, year after year with a certain person and not eventually see him as a person, or not eventually at least see them as a sexual object. I'm not speaking, you know, about going down to relieve your tubes in the slave quarters, but I'm talking about just what the white woman was exposed to, which would be men. . . serving men, coachmen, men as whatever. . . Obviously there had to be some parallel relationship and in fact there was. But I didn't realize this until I was teaching in Washington and there was a man who was teaching in the same high school [Eastern High School]. . . I taught there for about six months and I befriended a man, a wonderful man, [Colston] Stewart, and he came from Lynchburg, Virginia. One day he said something to me about the three different school systems in Virginia. . . this was the 50s (actually 1966-67) [in fact, 1964-65] and I said, What are you talking about? And he said, Yeah, there are three different school systems where. . . where I was growing up in Lynchburg, there were three different school systems. There was a school system for the whites. There was a school system for the

blacks. And there was a school system for the free issues. And I said, "free issues? What are the free issues?" And he said, "They're the children of the white women. Because," he said, "the law in Virginia said that all children issuing. . . all children of white women issue free from the womb." So if you had a child issuing free from the womb which was not white, then something had to be done with them. I don't think anybody just murdered them, you know, they were free and they were being raised by white mothers, but they were segregated. And so there were whole towns in Virginia that became populated by free issues. . . . That was like a visible sign that was going on for decades, even centuries, that this desire not only existed but was acted on and ultimately couldn't be policed totally.

After their debut presentation, O'Grady retitled the works in subsequent shows, in an effort to draw attention to the specific historical events she was drawing upon.

There is so much unacknowledged history in the history of the colonization of the western hemisphere. The reason that I later specified the title [of *The Clearing*] as Cortez and La Malinche, and Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, as well as N. (you know, "N period," meaning "any name") and Me, is because actually the Western Hemisphere was founded in this relationship. I guess La Malinche was a princess, an Aztec princess, but not really a very. . . a minor princess and somehow she learned Spanish, and so Cortez was able to basically conquer Mexico and the southern part of the peninsula with her help. And her name La Malinche kind of embodies the word traitor because she has been considered the traitor of the Western Hemisphere, although now she is being recuperated by Mexican feminists as you can imagine. But this relationship, which in their case ultimately led to several children and so on, was there before the slaves came to the United States, before ENGLAND came to the United States, so it was foundational.

You know we think of this relationship as unique but it was emblematic really of the relationships that were occurring throughout the South and were unacknowledged as part of what was actually making America "America." So 500 years of history, yes, going all the way back to Cortez, but coming up through, 200 years later, Sally Hemings, and 200 years after that, Me, this is an absolute, continuous relationship that's never discussed, when do you ever hear it discussed. So that's why I made the piece. The piece is all about starting a discussion.

O'Grady especially hoped that "The Clearing" would trigger a discussion of the social aspects of sexual relationships.

Of course, of course the sexual relationship is always already. . . (laughs) I hate that phrase, you know "always already". . . imbricated in the social and so, the amazing thing is that when we're actually involved in the sexual act, we're not thinking socially, or we're not feeling socially. We're feeling totally individually. But then we're called to account. Once the orgasm is finished, then we're called to account and, then, things, life get very much more complicated.

O'Grady has herself often felt the burdens of social pressures on her sexual choices.

I would occasionally feel that I was being a traitor to my race. When would I feel that? I would feel that occasionally in the presence of black men, because I was a desirable object and why had I removed myself from their, I don't know what you would call it, from their sphere by having chosen this white man?

O'Grady's whole imagination of The Clearing in fact emerges from a very personal place.

A lot of the work in *BodyGround* was based in dream imagery. . . I was at a point where my dream life was as real to me as my day life. . . . But a lot of things. When I think about it, *The Clearing* comes from my intellectualization, but also from events in my life, and. . . it really wasn't until we were talking about this that I began to realize, [Oh My God. . . my son] was conceived in a clearing. His father and I had just started going out together, I guess in late summer, it was between my Freshman and my Sophomore years at Wellesley, and so I'd gone back to school and it was always. . . [because he] was at Tufts and was the proctor of his dorm at Tufts, it was [always] easier to arrange things in HIS space, but here we were, we were at Wellesley, and there was no-WHERE in the dormitory that you could rest your head because the women's colleges were still functioning *in loco parentis*, in place of your parents, and the space was very heavily policed. So we had ended up, in late October, early November making love in a clearing on campus. . . and it was at night and the moon was shining full. And I remember, it was like . . . it was a pine clearing, and the entire floor of the clearing was filled with these pine needles, and I hadn't realized how soft pine needles were. I thought they would be hard and stick you. But they weren't, they were very soft. That was a moment when I was actually, sexually in a clearing, and I remember every bit of it [A:

and an important moment] (laughs) and an important moment, 'cause my son came along nine months later.

Not just in Bodyground but also in other works, natural spaces like forests and rivers are omnipresent. But nature is not something O'Grady has given a great deal of thought to.

I haven't thought about it at all. I've always thought of myself as a totally urban person, with no nostalgia whatsoever for nature

Soon, however, insights unfold. For one thing, the sexual engagement represented in The Clearing takes place outside, and serves as a kind of revelation about how much sexuality has not been fully contained in contemporary western society, no matter how much we try to contain it.

The difficulties of looking at the sexuality in this image, so rampantly alive with Nature itself, may be anxiety. . . I think the images are beautiful, I don't have any anxiety myself, but if I try to imagine other people's anxieties. . . it may have to do with. . . certainly in the West, and maybe everywhere, I don't know. . . feeling that sexuality has been more curbed by culture than it in fact has, and so if you place sexuality in nature, it almost is an affront to the ways in which culture has tried to circumscribe it. I don't know. It may be a rupture of some kind, actually. It places you closer to the animals, and that's a PROBLEM.

Every culture feels that they've created these hard-won distances between themselves and the animals, and anything that reminds you that you haven't come quite so far is problematic. . . puts the culture in jeopardy.

I've always had a big problem with the way in which Western culture bifurcates culture and nature, and, you know, the ultimate is the zoo (laughs), when you bring the animals from nature into culture and then you barricade them for the entertainment of culture. I, um, I, I basically feel that the division between culture and nature is so extremely codified in the West, that it's unreal. And the real problem I think we have, as a culture, is that we've ELIMINATED nature to such a degree that any time we're reminded of it, we have to suppress the knowledge of it.

O'Grady wonders if the recurring presence of natural spaces in her work is in part an unconscious expression of her own longing.

Nature is a very important part of my dream life, a very important part of my work. Where does that come from? I don't know. Maybe there was, without my realizing it, some either anxiety or some understanding at some level that I wasn't conscious of that this was an unnatural way of living, an unnatural form of existence. I, uh, this seems funny because you had mentioned your first sexual experience, right? MINE [laughs] when I think about where's all this started. I lived on a street and it was a dead-end street, there were not very many houses, but at one end of the street, the corner house was a HUGE wooden mansion, I'm sure it was a hundred or more years old at that time, and it probably had had a very glorious life with people and parties and so forth, but it had become a factory of some kind. Nothing had changed about it, it was still set back in its lawn, and it was still wood, and it was, . . . but there was, over the top. . . a big sign in the front, above the porch, it said "Egyptian Chemical Company." And what the Egyptian Chemical Company manufactured was embalming fluid. And they would put the trash cans with the embalming fluid stuff. . . whatever it was. . . out in the back in a shed. And that was the shed we all used to go to. It was the only place in the neighborhood that was Imore or less public but closed in and that you could actually get it on. (laughs) Isn't that amazing? Can you imagine? [laughs loudly] And so the smell of embalming fluid (words lost in laughter) is like an intricate part of my sexual memories. Oh my god (laughs) It's so funny (laughs again). I mean it's the opposite [of yours]. . . It's manufacturing, it's sex, it's the city with no place to go, no place to be alone, and, yeah, maybe the presence of nature is really a corrective at some level in my work.

I ask O'Grady, doesn't nature's presence also mediate love and desire in her work?

I had this theory, and I've written about it in Olympia's Maid, etc., etc., so it's an intellectual theory that this relationship between the white male and the black female was the start of the disruption of faith between the white male and the white female, that in fact it was the end of "courtly love." Every. . . the white male on the plantation was having to lie, a lot, and the white female was having to believe what she knew were lies. I mean, here were. . . you know, the story about Thomas Jefferson's plantation is that the slave quarters were so white that you couldn't. . . that visitors would come and . . . not just his plantation but all throughout the South. . . so many of the slaves were so white that you couldn't possibly understand why they were slaves if you were coming visiting from the North or whatever. Um, so there

were these children who obviously looked like their husbands, but they would have to believe the lies that their husbands were telling them, "No, you're not seeing this," right? And so I think that this relationship. . . I put him in chainmail because that was the moment of the great. . . the French *roman* of courtly love. . . this was the end of [that] idea. So nature yes. . . the relationship was in nature. But it was also the ultimate expression of CULTURE.

The couple making love in the trees, that's a very literal, it's a literalized metaphor, "floating on air". . . I'm so happy that I'm floating on air. . . this couple that is floating on air but then is brought down to the ground almost immediately, or simultaneously. You know. . . you can't just float on air, ever, no matter how happy you are, there's always this moment when you are brought to earth. So, yes, I could never have done just one part of *The Clearing*, it had to be a diptych with both parts present..

And what, then, is love?

What is love? (laughs) I don't know. What is love. . . (pause) well, it all depends on whether you're talking about love or sex, right? I mean, for me, I think love is everything. Love is everything at the extreme. It's every emotion. . . the problem with love is that it's every emotion, love, and hate, and distrust, and giving over, it's everything, at the extreme. And you know, this phrase that nothing is worse than. . . Hell hath no fury. . . hell hath no more fury than a woman scorned. I'm sure that Hell hath no more fury than a MAN scorned either, I mean you only really see how complex love is when it's unrequited. Then you're really up against it. Like, even as you're living out the average love relationship, you're going this way and that way and every way and the other way and the other way. I think that there's a huge difference between loving and being in love. And I think that my failure as a person was always that I wanted to be in love. [Being in love is] like the extreme of that [extreme]. . . and so basically sexuality and being in love, are not really loving, they're not as complex as loving and they're not really a substitute for loving and perhaps I haven't really loved in this way, but I've been in love a LOT. And it's so exhausting that (laughs). . . Just now, just now I was in Basel and there was a young man who was soooo much like the type that I always used to go for that I said, Oh that's my type. And "THANK GOD, I don't have to deal with that any more." (laughs) I was just soooo relieved to not have to be bothered, to not have to go through that crap!

*That was iconic feminist artist Lorraine O'Grady. Lorraine and I chatted about her work this past Summer at her studio in New York City. O'Grady's *The Clearing* will be presented alongside a new, as-yet-untitled work – adapted from this conversation - at the UB Anderson Gallery Sept 25-Dec 19, in the exhibit **Beyond In/Western New York**, in Buffalo. For more information about the artist, visit lorraineogrady.com, or pick up the October edition of *Alternatives* journal. The music you heard is by the artist Nneka and this show was produced by Omme-Salma Rahemtullah. I am Andil Gosine. Thank you for listening.*

(Closing music: "Uncomfortable Truth," by Nneka)