
Lorraine O'Grady's Landscape

by Andil Gosine

*Images Courtesy Alexander Gray
Associates, New York.*

Landscape (Western Hemisphere)

The most recent – and at the time of writing, still-in-progress – work created by Lorraine O'Grady is an 18-minute video of her hair in motion. Her first foray into video, *Landscape (Western Hemisphere)* is a breathtakingly beautiful piece that, while adept as a companion to and extension of O'Grady's 1991 diptych *The Clearing: or Cortez and La Malinche, Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, N and Me*, exceeds this originally conceived purpose. An 18-minute video of close-up images of hair blowing might not sound like an especially enticing project, but it is a truly remarkable exercise. I went into the viewing with some apprehension, but a few frames in I became hooked into its evocative sensations. At once ethereal and grounded, O'Grady's careful editing has resulted in a video that pulls the viewer into a journey that manages to build tension and curiosity, while at the same time provoking a wildly generative experience of imaginative self-reflection.

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As has been my experience with her other work – *Art Is* and *The Clearing* especially – I emerge from *Landscape (Western Hemisphere)* feeling personally connected to O'Grady. I think she isn't just echoing a philosophical outlook or claiming a similar point of view, but that she's speaking my journey. Through the honest, unafraid manner in which she has shared even the messier parts of her life and her critique of contemporary and historical processes through her art, O'Grady is speaking a lot of journeys of post-colonial subjects, perhaps none more than those of her Caribbean compatriots.



O'Grady herself has never stepped foot in the Caribbean. Born to Jamaican parents in Boston in 1934, she has spent most of her life in the United States. Trained as an economist, she did not turn to art production until she was almost 40, when she relocated to New York City. There, she began writing for *The Village Voice* and *Rolling Stone*, and later became a professor of Dadaist and Futurist literature before identifying herself as a visual artist. She has since produced consistently bold and beautiful, and often controversial, work. The 2007 inclusion of her groundbreaking performance piece, *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire*, in the MOMA PS1 *Wack! Feminist Art Revolution* show, revived interest in her catalogue, and she has since been engaged in a mix of 'recuperative' and new projects.

Landscape (Western Hemisphere) began life as a companion to her 1991 diptych, *The Clearing*, for its exhibition at Buffalo's *Beyond/In Western New York* biennial this fall. "I never had any luck in getting people to slow down and look at *The Clearing* and come to grips with their own understanding of it," O'Grady says. So to 'slow down' the viewing experience of

a still photograph with its layers of tensions about colonization, 'race', nature and sexuality, she made... a video. "I cannot tell you the thought process that arrived at my hair as a landscape," she says. "It was instantaneous."

O'Grady saw her hair as an 'objective correlative' to the truths of history expressed in *The Clearing*. "I felt that my hair was the result of the action that was taking place in the diptych," she says, "and this action, for all that may have happened elsewhere in the world, was something uniquely characteristic of the Western Hemisphere." The black-white sexual encounter depicted in the diptych, O'Grady insists, was a "foundational, ultimately synthesizing action." Her hair, the kind of hair that only an interracial union could produce, "was something that could only be symptomatic here." It was a symbol of "the cultural and physiological and mental hybridizations that went into creating the hemisphere's cultures."

O'Grady arrived at the video's title on consideration of this geography. "I realized that in *The Clearing*, I had used every section

of the Western Hemisphere," she recalls, "There's La Malinche [standing in for] Latin America, Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings [for] North America, and then me, for the Antilles. I realized I had put it together so that it was all of the Western Hemisphere – North, South and the Caribbean." Like all the other cultural forms that this exchange produced, her hair could only happen here. "Not that it couldn't happen in Europe," O'Grady says, "but it wouldn't resonate in the same way, it wouldn't be foundational, it wouldn't be definitive."

The Clearing insists on a complicated reading of cultural hybridity, one that is neither a claim of celebration or denunciation, but which rather calls for an appreciation of its always simultaneous and inseparable violences and pleasures. The images comprising the diptych are not an 'either/or' proposition, but a 'both/and' description of what is left in the aftermath of the colonial encounter. "My attitude toward hybridity," O'Grady says, is that it is "essential to understanding what's going on in this part of the world, and people's reluctance to embrace it is part of the

problem... The argument for embracing the other is a much more realistic approach than what is generally argued for, which is the maintenance of difference." Referencing the emergence of contemporary ethno-nationalist black and white movements, she says, "I feel that both of the Others, both black and white cultures are stuck in place."

Not surprising then that O'Grady is drawn to the *creolité* that is characteristic of Caribbean culture. Although she has had no physical contact with the birthplace of her parents, and despite her own misgivings about notions of 'community' and ethnic belonging, she's sure this heritage has informed her artistic practice and perspective.

In her younger years, O'Grady resisted her parents' and communities' attempted indoctrination of her into Caribbean-ness. "We used to say, 'I'm West Indian-American.' That was the primary identity that most people used." But, she says, "I'm a rebel and I've always been a rebel." Recalling her family's attempt to get her to visit Jamaica, O'Grady groans. "My mother was always worried about me," she says. "Everybody was always worried about me. My mother and my aunts – they were all going to make sure I went to Jamaica to get a husband. That was the plan. They had all cooked it up amongst themselves. Only when they proposed it to me, I was not interested. I was not interested in going along with the husband plan

so I never went. And that was the last all-expenses-paid trip that anyone was going to give me!

"It's not whether I was a Caribbean or I was not African-American," O'Grady says. "I was not anything; I was a bohemian. I wasn't even a black bohemian. I was just a bohemian."

Now 75 years old, she contends, "We are not as much the products of our own individual experience as we would like to think. We have maybe 10 percent mostly on the surface, that we are responsible for; the other 90 percent is all this other stuff. At that level, the level of what I involuntarily inherited, I am almost nothing but Caribbean." At this point in



our conversation, O'Grady and I fall into a flurry of resonances between the way she grew up with her Jamaican parents in Boston in the 1930s and 40s, and I in rural Trinidad almost a half-century later: our detachment from race-centred community; our willingness to engage in cultural play and easy adaptability across contexts ("I always felt at least as comfortable in white intellectual circles as black intellectual circles," she confesses); the similar ways in which our mothers would adopt certain forms of public etiquette that were far removed from their actual personalities ("That smile," O'Grady points out, "was a survival tool. I guess at some level we all have to smile.") And, certainly, the absolute absence of any notion that it might have occurred to either of us that becoming an artist was even a possibility – at least not before assuming some other serious profession first.

This 'Caribbean-ness' may not be immediately evident in O'Grady's

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art, but it's certainly there, and one of many reasons why I and other Caribbean people – and other Third World subjects, I believe – connect in very personal ways to her work. “There’s something I don’t have to translate,” she says of her connection to the region’s history and culture. “I’m Caribbean partially because I feel Caribbean, but I’m also Caribbean because others think that I am. Sometimes, I think that as an artist [that] I am arguing about blackness in a totally different way than African-Americans... How I identify is with all black people everywhere, especially with those outside Africa in the diaspora. I identify with black women in Paris as much as with black women in New York.” She adds, “It’s always an argumentative issue, isn’t it? You don’t call yourself anything, unless someone needs to be told.” No argument here.

