

Studies for *Flowers of Evil and Good* Thomas Erben Gallery

by **DOMINIQUE NAHAS. 1998**

Reviews O'Grady's first NYC show of digital cibachrome studies for this work, in *Review*, vol 4, no 3, October 15, 1998, pp 6-7.

IN CHARLES BAUDELAIRE'S essays *The Painter of Modern Life*, the French nineteenth-century critic defines the principal qualities of "the modern" as contingent and transitory — an elemental aspect of atomized daily contemporary experience. Sociologist Kenneth Gergen refers to the condition of "multiphrenia" in his study *The Saturated Self*, when describing the different valences of relationships developed by the individual through the media. Symptomatic of this condition in everyday life, continues Gergen, is an aspect which mimics multiple personality disorder, that is, having layered selves within the self, each with its individual voice, a cast of personae deployed to meet the various demands of the outside world.

History is seen as a slivered self in Lorraine O'Grady's moving exhibition of cibachromes using language and color. They are generated by computer, manipulated from historical texts and images. There are three digital cibachrome diptychs in the exhibition collectively entitled *Studies for "Flowers of Evil and Good."*

In her recent work, O'Grady examines and intertwines various voices of history — those of the recognized and those who have been deliberately excised and sublated from the stream of legitimacy. The characters in *Studies for "Flowers of Evil and Good"* are Charles Baudelaire and his black common-law wife of twenty years Jeanne Duval, who emigrated to Paris from Haiti in the 1830s. This story intersects with that of Pablo Picasso's meeting of the primitivistic in his painting, *LES DEMOISELLES D'AVIGNON*, 1907.

While no documents of Duval's life (her letters to Charles may have been destroyed by his mother) are extant, it seems likely the two met in 1842 when they were both 21. O'Grady, the product herself of mixed ethnic heritage, is particularly sensitive to the interpretation of mainstream history and how it steamrolls through inconvenient and problematizing facts which tend to diminish the luster of historic and literary figures by introducing messy facts about their personal lives. Baudelaire is one such example of someone who, while described by some biographers to [be] a meticulous and courtly bourgeois *flaneur* in his personal habits and style, had another perhaps equally interesting, and obvious shadow side that added a vibrancy to his thinking about the contrariness of beauty.

Here is one of the great geniuses of the nineteenth century whose critical theories of beauty and culture, and whose poetry is marked in some way or is a response to his stormy relationship with a black woman he clearly was fascinated with and to whom he was devoted on many levels.

Just as Picasso's *LES DEMOISELLES D'AVIGNON* is historically important because it shows a visual genius using third world motifs in his work, that is appropriating elements of the "other" to rejuvenate exhausted European pictorial codes in the beginning of the twentieth century, Baudelaire's own writings are in response to a meeting with what Lorraine O'Grady calls "the psychologically complex ways modernism constructed itself out of Europe's encounter with the worlds it colonized."

Duval is usually disregarded by mainstream historians as a nuisance, an uneducated alcoholic harpy upon whom Baudelaire inexplicably allowed himself to waste his valuable time as he struggled to define the modern age. Using the photographer Nadar's photographic image of the eloquent poet and the pen sketch of his wife as the consistent starting-off point in each diptych Lorraine O'Grady, in her work at Erben weaves together a narrative of textural and visual difference in the same way that antiphonal voices play off one another in a moving way. The artist allows us to mentally reconfigure the workings of history,

its influences, affinities, associations and unexplored and undelineated possibilities.

Each of the figures in each of the diptychs are given a voice and presented in dialogue between themselves and between competing visual and literary histories. Baudelaire of course has a public voice, those of *LES FLEURS DU MAL*, used as the deep background behind his visual image. Floating also in the background, as spiritual heirs, are the Demoiselles.

In one of the diptychs, for example, O'Grady attempts to delineate a private Baudelaire communicating through a purported love letter or fictional conversation with Duval using a technique of outsized letters in the foreground (one set of words are "for me the door to an Infinite") contrasted to the background text: "Come from heaven or hell, what does it matter, O Beauty. . . if your eye, your smile, your foot open for me the door to an infinite I love and have never known." The primary image of Jeanne Duval, on the opposite panel, is a portrait sketch in ink by Baudelaire. Compared to the visual weight of Nadar's photograph of her lover, she seems transparent and vaporized, a hallucination set against a backdrop of the Demoiselles imagery (a Greek chorus of subjugated history?). Duval's speech is made up by O'Grady (who is aware that her appropriation of Duval has echoes in Baudelaire's using of Duval for his own ends) and her voice, though fragmented, halting and fictional, has purpose and dignity: "I am homesick what is home?" are the foregrounded words in one of the panels, the repeated backdrop words are the following: "Their sun is not my sun. Their heat is not my heat. Am I sad because I am homesick? What is home?"

The work at Erben is a preliminary one, which offers a taste (or rather an appetite) for the artists soon-to-be completed series. It is, however, extremely satisfying in its present form. Lorraine O'Grady's conceptually complex study of personal, literary and visual codes intermixing through time is smartly succinct and touches on a number of troubling political and social issues stemming from displacement and dispersal of personal and social histories. The work is also a visually persuasive palimpsest. It offers an example of art as Benedetto Croce

affirmed [as] “. . . a visible sign of indwelling state of grace and harmony, of exquisite perception and heightened feeling.” The artist’s intention is to present in the future an entire completed work of sixteen diptychs on this particular Duval/Baudelaire theme which seems so rich in its cross-cultural inferences. The full result of her efforts will be worth seeing and pondering.