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Lorraine O'Grady
ALEXANDER GRAY ASSOCIATES

by JOHANNA BURTON. 2008

Artforum's first review of a solo exhibit by O'Grady. Discusses the first New York showing of the full *Miscegenated Family Album* installation, at Alexander Gray Associates, NYC, September 10 – October 11, 2008.

In 1980, at Just Above Midtown Gallery in New York, Lorraine O'Grady presented her first official (which is to say first *invited*) public performance piece, *Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline*. The work followed closely on the heels of the artist's more (in her words) "hit-and-run" foray into performance, *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* — in which she showed up at New York art openings as the title character, unannounced and uninvited, calling attention to those deeply raced, gendered, and classed environments — and likewise concerned itself with issues of representation.

But *Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline* made unapologetic strides into more overtly autobiographical terrain. Indeed, it was, in part, a working through of a painful event: Two decades prior, when the artist was in her late twenties, her older sister, Devonia, with whom she'd had a strained relationship, had suddenly and unexpectedly died. Although the two women, after years of estrangement, had briefly reunited, the deep ambivalence that had defined their relationship lingered. During a trip to Cairo shortly after Devonia's death, O'Grady — who was born to mixed-race Jamaican immigrant parents — recalled, in an article the artist wrote in 1997 for *Art Journal*, that "the loss of my only sibling was being confounded with the image of a larger family gained."

That O'Grady had identified so strongly with Egypt (where, she claimed, she had found herself "surrounded for the first time by people who looked like me") — and, more precisely, with ancient Egypt — was of course complicated in its own right. For while she found there "the image of a larger family" at a moment when her own was experiencing loss, she was necessarily constructing a kind of fantastical, irrational, intentionally off-kilter legacy for herself. Going through her own old family albums and art history books devoted to Nefertiti and her clan, she picked images of women from both, creating side-by-side comparisons that literally placed the two genealogical lines on par.

Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline, then, comprised O'Grady performing live in front of slide projections of these paired images. Not many people saw that performance — the usual small crowd of fifty people or so probably have memories of its enactment in time and space. But the photographic pairs did not disappear. In 1994, the artist constructed a sixteen-part series of Cibachrome diptychs from those images she had used previously as projections, and the resulting images have been shown in various configurations over the past decade and a half. At Alexander Gray Associates, the series, titled "Miscegenated Family Album," its elements now nearly three decades old, was shown in its entirety for the first time in New York.

Here a striking image of Devonia ("Dee") glancing over her left shoulder is placed alongside an eerily similar bust of Nefertiti; there an image depicting a sculpture of Nefertiti's daughter, Merytaten, alongside a photograph of Devonia's daughter, Candace; and elsewhere, Dee as matron of honor at a wedding alongside a relief sculpture of Nefertiti performing a lustration. In every case, there is no question that undeniable, even uncanny, likenesses float between the pairs O'Grady has assembled. But this is more than morphology and not, actually, any insistence by the artist that her family carries royal blood. Instead, it posits an uneasy symmetry — one based in both desire and despair — between singular histories and the stories told about entire cultures, while also nodding to the complicated relationships found in every family.

Not an artifact of the performance but still related to it, "Miscegenated Family Album" operates to recall the urgent questions regarding ideologies of identity at the time O'Grady was first working, but also makes clear that such urgency has hardly subsided today. Indeed, though the through-line to O'Grady's "album" is the conflicted relationship between two sisters (if Devonia is likened to Nefertiti, Lorraine herself is aligned with Nefertiti's sister, Mutnedjmet), the overall logic suggests that we continually ask ourselves just where we stand in relationship to *every* picture.