

Overlapping territories and intertwined histories*

© Judith Hoos-Fox

The curator of the Wellesley Davis Museum's 1994 exhibit *Body As Measure*, in which *Miscegenated Family Album* was first shown, looks back movingly on her encounter with the work in the artist's studio and on the complexities of purchasing work by an alumna.

In the mid-1990s the efforts and agenda of the Davis Museum were directed toward exploring contemporary cultural issues through exhibitions, developing a program that reached students, building the collections, grappling with how to collect performative work, enticing faculty from across disciplines to use the Museum, connecting with alumnae, and showing and supporting the work of minorities. Lorraine O'Grady's *Miscegenated Family Album*, acquired in 1994, embodies all these aspirations and activities.

Word had filtered down to me that in attendance at Wellesley's first reunion of African American alumnae was an artist whom I should meet. It was as surprising as it was exciting to talk at the event with this vibrant, articulate artist of national stature, whose work already had become canonical in the world of performance art. My next trip to New York included a visit to the fledgling Thomas Erben Gallery, wedged into his crowded living quarters, where I saw O'Grady's *Body Ground* work, startling in both its imagery and how it was made—this was years before Photoshop. And I'm pretty sure it's then that I also saw the first four pairs of the *Miscegenated Family Album*, standing alone as *Sisters*.

* In *A Generous Medium: Photography at Wellesley, 1972-2012*, eds. Lisa Fischman, Lucy Flint, and Hannah Townsend, Davis Museum at Wellesley College, 2012, pp 152-155.

I immediately made my way across town to the artist's studio, hers for a year as part of an award from the Marie Walsh Sharpe Foundation. There, within a makeshift room-within-a-room, O'Grady had installed the entire sequence of *Miscegenated Family Album*, sixteen pairs of found photographs. In each pair, an image of her sister or a niece, selected from family albums, was uncannily matched with a stock photograph of a noted Egyptian sculpture that recalled "University prints"—those shiny black-and-white photographic images of the great monuments of the world. Lorraine sent me in to view the photographs alone, and I spent a long time looking. I remember being deeply moved by this work, so personal yet addressing the core of the human condition. Who are we? Where do we fit?

The exhibition *The Body as Measure* (1994), was already taking form in my head and it was clear to me that this work had to become the centerpiece. The exhibition was the consequence of Susan Taylor, the Director of the Museum, putting out a plea that the exhibitions we mounted connect with students in a direct way. Body image, eating disorders, issues of identity: these were the touchstones of conversation, and there was a lot of great art being made about them, with examples that could coalesce to form a strong constellation for a show. In the center of the Chandler Gallery, we built a room-within-a-room to present the complete *Family Album* on its own.

Early in my museum training the idea of aligning collecting with the exhibition program took root in me thanks to Martin Friedman's practice at Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. In acquiring from exhibitions one has the opportunity to live with work over an extended period of time, to research, write about, and publish it. The work is presented to its public within a context that adds to its understanding and appreciation. There was no question that this work was the one to keep after the show closed.

A Wellesley alumna made it. All academic institutions face the conundrum of collecting alumni work. Alumnae artists often feel a debt to the institution where they began to form their ideas; conversely, they think that as alums, they should be

represented in the collections. Of course, the range of quality and interest of alumnae production is huge. The policy we developed was to accept or purchase work by alumnae if we would have made the same decision whether or not they had an association with the College; if there was an association, all the better. In the case of the O'Grady '55, this decision was easy. The work is powerful and enduring. It was shown and consistently used in teaching by faculty in the Art Department, and the interdisciplinary reach of its content also made it of interest to departments across campus. For *Body as Measure*, we invited Carol Dougherty, William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor of Classical Studies, to write about the show, and she focused on this work in her text "The Object of History and the History of Objects." This was one of the first times we had a non-Art Department faculty write on works of art on view, and it set the standard for this practice at Wellesley, and inspired colleagues at other college and university museums.

By the 1990s, we had become keenly aware of the gender and racial representation of artists whose work was being shown and collected, and O'Grady's West Indian heritage and the central concerns of her work—which she identifies as "issues of diaspora, hybridity, and black female subjectivity"—made it all the more timely.¹

The remarkable twinning in the artist's family snapshots and the photographs of Egyptian sculpture became truly startling when I learned that the relationships between the pairings mirrored those in O'Grady's family: Nefertiti was paired with Lorraine's sister, Devonia; Nefertiti's sister, Mutnedjment, was paired with Lorraine. And so it went into the next generation. History became the present. The present became timeless. Learning from the artist that her sister's death was the consequence of a botched illegal abortion that left two small children motherless brought political debates and human rights concerns, still contested, to the fore.

Curators, whose responsibility it is to make the decisions that contribute to building museum collections, make mistakes. We all do. And sometimes we hit a bull's-eye. I like to think we

achieved the latter in acquiring Lorraine O'Grady's *Miscegenated Family Album*.

Judith Hoos Fox, a partner in c² (curatorsquared), was Assistant Director (1977-82) and Curator (1988-2002) at the Davis Museum. She has also been Curator at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston; Museum of Art, RISD; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Harvard Art Museums; and Krannert Art Museum, University of Illinois.

Point of Interest

The title of this text is taken from Edward Said in *Imperialism and Culture* (1993), quoted by Lorraine O'Grady on her website, http://www.lorraineogrady.com/sites/default/files/wr205_thoughtsdiasporafull.pdf.

Note

1 <http://www.lorraineogrady.com/brief-bio>.