

Lorraine O'Grady. Interview by Laura Cottingham. Nov 5, 1995*

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In-depth interview done for the excellent *Artist and Influence* series produced by Camille Billops and James Hatch for their archive of African American visual and theatre arts.

This is my good friend Laura Cottingham. We've been having conversations like this for some time now.

I want to start by asking you how you came to understand yourself as an artist, how did you adopt that identity, what in your own life led you to this understanding of yourself?

I understood that I was an artist almost by accident. I was pushed into it at about age twenty-five. You have to understand, I came from the kind of family where the arts would never have been encouraged. They were West Indian immigrants, and immigrants of color are de-classed when they come here. They may have been middle class and upper class in Jamaica, but here they were de-classed into the working class. They didn't have time or energy to devote to what we might think of as life-affirming activities. They really had to focus on survival. They understood a lot about taste, like what kind of silverware and china to put on the table, but in terms of what books to read—I don't think that was what they were able to give me. They were not really culture-oriented. And I don't think they were unique in that way. The black middle class has not been involved with wealth accumulation long enough nor is it financially and socially secure enough that bohemianism and encouraging children to be artists is an option for them. I had that driven home to me when

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I did a residency at Wellesley College on the occasion of the premiere of "Miscegenated Family Album." Here I was, going back to my old school having fantasized that the work I was doing was for them, for the new generation of girls of color who would be an audience like me, but it was sad and disappointing. When I got there I found myself addressing audiences with the same Euro demographics of the New York art world, in spite of the fact that one out of three Wellesley students is now of color. Not only could young African American women, young Latino American women, young Asian American women not conceive of themselves as being artists, they couldn't even conceive of art appreciation as something to which they could devote much of their time. When I asked the professors at Wellesley why this was the case, they told me students of color seemed focused on preparing for the professions. It was the same dynamic I had experienced in my own family so many years ago, when nobody could imagine anything but that I would prepare for a profession.

My mother's idea was that I should major in history, go to Harvard Law School, and become the first black congresswoman. But I was always a rebel, and I rebelled against my background. I got pregnant and married in that order. I was still at Wellesley, so of course I couldn't go to law school. I did manage to finish, but with a child to support, I had to get practical. I changed my major to economics—not exactly a straight line to the arts, but in an odd way I was heading in that direction. I was the first girl from Wellesley to pass the Management Intern exam, an elite entrance exam for the federal government. I went to work for the Bureau of Labor Statistics and then the Department of State. And then one day in the early 60s, I suddenly realized that nobody in that entire elite government world knew who I was. It was a world where people did not have any comprehension of what it meant to be a black intellectual, let alone what it meant to be a black female intellectual. It was still a time when there was no context to understand my social experience: the people around me had no idea what the problems of dating and marriage would be like for me. To tell you the truth, I didn't have any idea myself.[†] I just know that I felt this tremendous alienation from the world I was surrounded by. Wherever I went during those years of my intellectual formation and my early

professional life, I was always "the only black woman." That was my identity.

At a certain point I felt a real drive to change my status in the sense of making a statement about who I was. My first idea was that I would write a novel. You have to understand, I was not a great novel reader. I don't know why I thought that I could say something about myself in a novel that I couldn't say in an essay, but something told me I needed to do that. I quit my job at age twenty-five, took out my retirement fund, and went to Denmark. Somebody had told me I could live there and get some work done, but when I got there I was soon having too good a time to settle down to work. One day I was in a bar and asked a man (his name was Jorgen Peter Schjerbaek, and he turned out to be very wealthy) where I could go that I would have no choice but to work. He said "Norway." Then he offered me the use of his ski lodge in a place called Espedalen. So I went off to Norway to spend the winter by myself in the high mountains, seven hours north of Oslo, and I actually pulled together fifty pages of a manuscript. That's what I went to the Iowa Writer's Workshop with. Still, it was not about art for me—not about writing an artistic novel; it was about making a statement. So when I got to Iowa I was still not functioning as an artist. I think that's why I got so easily sidetracked into translating my writing instructor, Jose Donoso's, second novel. I wasn't focused on my own creative production. I was still too involved in trying to explain myself to the world.

So how did you end up deciding that you wanted something artistic—either literary or visual?

It's strange. Although I was always getting sidetracked, I think that, deep down, being an artist was something that was lying in wait for me. I have to tell you a funny story. I had actually written a novel when I was in the fourth grade. It starred all my girlfriends in the homeroom, and I made the mistake of showing it to them. My parents had just moved into a mostly white area, and in this area the majority of kids went to one elementary school. The white kids living in the houses on either side of ours were assigned to the William Lloyd Garrison School, which was all white. But I was gerrymandered out to the Henry L. Higginson

School where the population was 50 percent black. I didn't notice this at the time, of course. I made friends with mostly little black girls, and then the novel starred these little black girls. But when I let them read it, one of them didn't like the way she was portrayed. After school she accosted me, and soon we ended up in a huge fist fight and accidentally one of my long nails gashed her face. She went home, and her mother, who was a really tough woman from the south, took her directly to the police station without even dressing the wound. Before we knew it, I was in juvenile court. My mother took off from work, my sister took off from college, and there we were sitting on a bench in the juvenile courtroom. The judge sided with my antagonist: he reprimanded me and paid no attention to the fact that here was the little black girl who had written a novel. All he saw was a little savage who had torn another girl's face. As far as my mother was concerned we had gotten out of this by the skin of our teeth. On the way home, she said, "If I ever catch you writing another word...." And it was fifteen years before I tried to write another novel.

Anyway, after the translation detour, I went through an odd sequence of things that convinced me I could be a visual artist.

How did that happen?

Clearly, my continuing ability to "know who I was" had familial as well as cultural causes. I don't think my parents became "black: until they came here, and they didn't take to it too well. It exaggerated their personalities along their fault lines, all the distortions and paranoias they already had in them. Without going into the details of my particular dysfunctional family, it's fair to say that like many immigrant parents, they began to live through their children, and in a not very pretty way. At some level I realized I could never please them and so I started trying to please men; I began to seek salvation in sexual relationships. I went from being a wild child at home to being the ventriloquist dummy of various men. The extreme of this was when I became a rock critic in order to fit into the world of a boyfriend who was managing rock bands. But you know, strangely enough I was quite successful as a rock critic. My opening salvo in rock criticism was a 3,000-word article on the cover of the *Village*

Voice plus an additional review. I went on to write for *Rolling Stone*, as well as other trendy magazines.

But this began to feel ridiculous. At some point I woke up in the midst of this bizarre dream where I was living in a fifth-floor walk-up in Chelsea and every day a chauffeured limo would come to take me to some party or concert—this was in the early '70s. I woke up and said, "This is still not me. I am still not making my statement. If I am ever going to make my statement—and I am hitting forty—I better start doing it." A friend of mine who had been with me at Iowa offered me a job teaching at the School of Visual Arts, and that's when I came into the visual art world. It was just after that critical moment in the visual arts when writing and visual art had come together in the conceptual art movement, and I realized this was something I could do. I had ideas like that all the time but I didn't know where to put them. I have always had a good visual sense, which I got from my mother, whose art form was interior decorating and dress designing.

I remember a story you once told me about when you saw Eleanor Antin's "Black Ballerina." Could you talk about that?

I had read Lucy Lippard's book *Six Years, or the De-Materialization of the Object*, and I had been very struck by Sol Lewitt's "Thirty Sentences" and by Adrian Piper's "Catalyses" performances,[‡] and I thought, "I can do this."

I didn't pull myself together to do anything until I was in San Francisco and went to a performance of Eleanor Antin's in which she was giving a lecture as Antinova the Black Ballerina. I watched this performance in which Antin takes on the persona of a black ballerina in the early '20s who has somehow ended up in a Diaghilev-type company. It was good, but it was completely out of sync with what I imagined a black woman in the early '20s thinking and feeling. Watching it, the problem I had was that, as I was looking at Eleanor Antin in blackface with a tutu, I kept thinking of my mother: what was she like as a young woman in the early '20s and what would have happened to her had she gone to audition for Diaghilev. Antin didn't have the answers, and

neither did I, but the show I was seeing in my head was more interesting than the one Antin was presenting. I thought, "I can speak for this black ballerina better than she can. It's time to speak for my own black self."

I think Antin had done other ballerinas. She used the same material but did it as a black ballerina. I think it was in 1976.

I think I saw this in 1979. My first piece was in 1980, when I came out as "Mademoiselle Bourgeoise Noire." The piece, in which I was wearing a gown and a cape made of 180 pairs of white gloves, came to me as I was walking across a still-scurry Union Square, on the way home from teaching. It was a writerly statement in visual form, a critical statement, which is what most of my work became—or art as art criticism. The piece was a critique of the 1979 "Afro-American Abstraction" show at P.S. 1. The work in the show was by black artists, but thought it was quite tastefully done, it all had white gloves on. I did the performance at Just Above Midtown, where most of the artists showed, and the punch line of the poem I shouted was BLACK ART MUST TAKE MORE RISKS!!! I did it again in 1981 at the New Museum, for the "Persona" show. I actually appeared in the costume a couple of other times, but I soon realized that MBN was not a character who could appear in costume at just any event. She had to come out for a reason, and so I stopped performing that.

Could you explain the cat o' nine tails?

The cat o' nine tails was the whip that made plantations move. It was a sign of external oppression, and the gloves were a symbol of internal repression, internalization of those oppressive values.

What did you mean by bringing the whip out in public as you are dressed in these all-white gloves?

I was combining the external oppression and the internal repression, in the same way they reinforce each other and keep each other locked in place. For me, the most significant moment in the performance was when, after beating myself with the

whip, I threw it down on the floor and then shouted out the poem.[§]

Do you remember the punch line of the poem at the New Museum?

NOW IS THE TIME FOR AN INVASION!!!

Then you did the parade piece with the frames.

First I did "Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline." These were all critical pieces. But not just that, of course. In the case of "Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline," I was using the similarity in the faces of the two families to work out the relationship with my sister, which had been very troubled and couldn't be worked out in person because she had by this point died. I was using the piece to get to a different place in my relationship with her and with my parents.

There was another component to the piece, which was that in the early '80s, as a kind of tail end of the "Black Is Beautiful" movement, there was an elaboration of the so-called Black Aesthetic in the visual arts that produced a lot of false anthropologizing, a lot of pseudo-African religious ceremonies with nostalgic fake altars. I really couldn't connect to the stuff you used to see in some of the black art venues. I thought it was bad-conscience work. So in "Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline," I used an ancient Egyptian ceremony called the "opening of the mouth" on the voice-over narration, but everything I performed live was totally out of sync with what was being read on the voice-over. The point was that I couldn't use this ancient Egyptian ceremony to bring my sister and Nefertiti back to life. No way. It would be a false hope to try to do that. I was bringing them alive through art, not through this fake ceremony.

At this time, given that you escaped office jobs and rock reviewing, how did you come into a sense of an artistic community? Were you in contact with the black community of artists that was organized and very vital in Los Angeles at the time in the late 70s? How did you find

other people with whom to be an artist, talk art, and think art?

Some of the people from Los Angeles were showing on the east coast, like David Hammons and Senga Nengudi and Maren Hassenger. But I can't say that I really knew very much about the west coast community. Basically, I discovered my community through the show "Afro-American Abstraction," which I went to when I saw it advertised in the *Village Voice*. It was as a result of that that I discovered Just Above Midtown. Most of the artists in the show came from there. A few months later, I learned that Linda Bryant, who was the proprietor and director of JAM, had lost her lease on 57th Street and was creating a new space on Franklin Street in Tribeca. This was in 1980. It triggered something in me. I had seen the work at P.S.1, I had been to the opening where, for the first time, I had seen great numbers of black people who looked like people I could talk to, and I knew I wanted to be within this environment. But I didn't know what I could do there, how I could present myself. Then something out of my social background just appeared: I volunteered. I said I could do anything, like lick envelopes, and literally that's what she had me doing. I think they thought I was this strange bourgie black person who wanted to help out. I don't think they had a clue that I had any artistic ideas on my mind, just that I wanted to do something for art.

Does that mean you were still hiding out?

No, not from myself. I knew that I wanted to become part of the environment, but I didn't really know how I was going to do it. It wasn't until three months later that Mademoiselle Bourgeoise Noire came out. When she appeared at the grand opening on Franklin Street, people were shocked out of their minds. The strange lady licking envelopes was an artist!

David Hammons had been there the day I had first come to volunteer. After that, whenever I saw him, I would question him about what he thought about this or that, and David would give me his opinions on art. Later, about a year after "Mademoiselle Bourgeoise Noire," I developed the proposal for the parade float. One day, David came over to me: he had read the proposal,

because I had used JAM as the sponsor. He said to everybody in the room, "She is always asking me things, and in the meantime her work is going like this!" and he made this motion like an airplane going off into the horizon. It was almost like he was annoyed that I had actually been growing as a result of what he had been saying to me.

I was a JAM as a performance artist. I don't know how many people there besides David and Linda understood performance art. No, that's not what I mean. People may have understood it, but I don't know how much they valued it. In the black art world, at that time, people were very object-oriented. They had to be. People didn't have money just to play without any hope of a financial return.

Why did you move out of performance art in the mid '80s toward objects, photographs, and installations and away from the literary?

I don't think I answered your earlier question, about the parade piece. All of my performance was still in the mode of art criticism, and putting that float in the parade was a way of saying that art could be made relevant to "the community."

Did people see it that way? Did anyone notice your parade piece?

Besides the people on the parade route? No. I did it very puristically and didn't advertise it to the art world. As you can see, I've changed that stance rather dramatically (laughs). Just before the parade piece, I curated my show at Kenkeleba Gallery, the "Black and White Show," because I wanted to say something about the position of black people in the art world. Nobody was ready to hear that they were equal. I thought that if you put fourteen black artists and fourteen white artists in the same place, all with work in black and white, you would get the point that they were equal.

What was the response?

There was no response. The comment that I remember the most was from Leon Golub (whose wife, Nancy Spero, was in the

show), that it was better than the Whitney Biennial that year. That was the only critical response that it got outside the family, except for a three-line notice in the *East Village Eye*.

What year was this?

1983. It was too soon. It was like a lot of other things that I did; it was too soon. That was my biggest problem in the art world. I got pretty discouraged after the "Black and White Show," wondering about the lack of reception to my ideas. Coincidentally, my mother got Alzheimer's, so I had to spend a lot of time running back and forth between New York and Boston, and I just withdrew.

When I came back to art, the question was how to do performance. In that five-year period, performance had moved into a much more theater-based mode. I was not theater trained not did I have any theatrical ambitions. And I didn't have any desire to critique theater through performance. What I wanted to do was to stay in the visual art world. It seemed to me that it was time now to take ideas which had been both too complex and too soon for people to get and slow them down a bit. One way to slow them down would be to put them on the wall so people could get hold of them. And there were many other reasons for stopping performance. One reason was I felt I was getting too old for it physically. "Mademoiselle Bourgeoise Noire" was the last moment when I could pull off the "pretty girl" number, and it is very hard with an aging female body to not have that be part of the subject matter of the work. But aging didn't interest me as a subject. Unfortunately, any woman who continues in performance while she's aging has got to deal with aging per se, and I had other arguments I preferred to make. Dealing with aging would interfere with the clarity with which I could present other things. Besides, I thought people like Rachel Rosenthal were doing it quite well enough, thank you.

So my body was aging, and I thought that the work was too complex to continue in that time-based format, and also performance costs a lot of money, at least the way I was doing it. In the early '80s there was a big gathering at Franklin Furnace of Los Angeles women and London women in performance art,

and I went to every one of the sessions and was usually the only black. They asked me why there weren't more black women in performance. In those years, even though Faith Ringgold did a performance occasionally, she wasn't identified as a performance artist. The only other person who was sort of identified as a performance artist was Adrian Piper. Kaylyn Sullivan was really primarily a theater person, but in the visual art world it was primarily Adrian and myself. I answered them frankly. I told them performance has no prestige, makes no money, and it costs a small fortune. Really, how many black women artists could do it? I put out a lot of money in the beginning, but I couldn't afford to keep spending money that I wasn't going to get back sales from. That was part of the motivation for going to the wall.

Once you went to the wall you really went to photography.

I can't draw, I can't paint. The alliance between photography and conceptual art has always been there from the beginning. First in documentation, and then in the exploitation of found photography, etc.

What was the first photographic piece that you put together?

The first piece was actually my performance "Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline," because there had been sixty-five sets of double images projected behind the live action. After that, there was the photodocumentation of Mademoiselle Bourgeoise Noire that I used in several sets of distortions behind the live action in a piece called "Fly By Night," which I did at Franklin Furnace but which I prefer to forget because it wasn't very good.

Did you ever print the slides from the Nefertiti performance?

The first time I printed them was when four sets of double images became the "Sisters" quadriptych in 1988. I mounted them in the show that Leslie King Hammond and Lowery Sims curated at the Maryland Institute in Baltimore, called "Art As a Verb." It was in that show that I did the last performance of "Nefertiti/Devonia

Evangeline," and at the same time that I announced myself as a wall artist, so I did both: I was in the performance section as well as in the installation part of the exhibition.

How do you understand your work from the last few years compared to your first entrance into the visual community with performance? Are there thematic influences other than this formal transition? Do you feel that you are still dealing with the same material in a different way?

I think that I'm still making statements and that I'm still formally making art. The media may have changed, but the statements are similar. When I look at my portfolios I see a line of development that is getting more and more clear. Now I can see the role the diptych has played in the work, the way in which it makes a statement about the dualism of western thought. The anti-dualism of the diptych has always been at the heart of the work in some way. What has been happening is that the work has been focusing down, purifying itself into what is the most important argument I think I can make in art, which is against the dualism of Western culture.

For me your recent work, like the "Miscegenated Family Album" as well as "The Clearing," deals directly with heterosexual relationships, which means black and white, especially between the black woman and the white man. Could you talk about that and how that subject and content comes to you and how you feel it's perceived?

I don't know if it's been because of my own personal experience, because of the times in which I grew up, always finding myself the only black woman surrounded by a sea of white people and thus almost of necessity dating white men, but I have always understood racism not in economic terms, but in sexual terms. I don't think racism could have the kind of intensity it has if it were simply, as the Marxists say, "an economic problem." It is certainly an economic problem, precisely because it is a psychological problem, but the psychological precedes and makes the economic exploitation possible. Interracial sex, and the fear surrounding it, seems to me to be at the nexus of the country's social forces. Within the various permutations, of course, the

black male/white female is the most symbolically potent. It represents the fear of the loss of power; it is a negative symbol, if you will, embodying the very structure of white fear. The white male/black female (or the female of color all over the world) on the other hand, is a positive symbol, an expression of what the power is FOR, rather than a reaction to the potential loss of power. And since it is the expression of power, I feel that is nearer the crux of the situation. If you can examine that, bring it to light and make it objectively viewable, then you can perhaps create an interesting discussion. I'm not sure that you can change the world, but at some level I believe in the psychoanalytic theory which states that problems can be made manageable through the handling of images and words. The more familiar an image becomes, the more it can be discussed, and perhaps then the more it can be psychologically manipulated in a social context.

You have said before that you consider that particular context to be the most controversial in the images that you have produced so far. Do you still feel that?

I read an interview in *Artforum* with John Waters, who said, "Black and white is the last taboo, although nobody talks about it." I think that in fact it is. And although the white male/black female is more underground as a taboo than the black male/white female, its very hidden quality makes it the most difficult to come to grips with. All I know is that I have been having some real difficulty in getting people to focus on the imagery. A few months ago when I showed "The Clearing" at the Bunting Institute at Harvard, it made people uncomfortable. One white male professor of history confessed that he found it very difficult to look at. When I asked him why, he said because it talked about how erotic domination is.

For those not familiar with your work, could you please give a description of the content of that work?

"The Clearing" is a diptych that I did for my INTAR show in 1991. On the left side, a white male and a black female nude are making love in the trees. The couple is very obviously happy. Below them on the ground you see a pile of discarded clothing

and two mixed-race children running after a ball. On the pile of clothing is a gun silently threatening the scene. On the right side it's the same background, the same clearing of trees, only now the black woman is lying on the ground looking off into the distance with a very bored expression; the white male is now dressed in tattered chain mail, and his head has been replaced by a skull. His attitude is clearly proprietary, as he absentmindedly grasps her breast. I put him in chain mail because I felt that this relationship, and the duplicities it implied for white women, was the death of courtly love.

Something that seemed to bother people was that I changed the title in order to make it more explicit. In 1991 it was called simply "The Clearing," but now it is "The Clearing, *or* Cortez and La Malinche, Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, N. and Me." So the piece has been historicized in that way. And it isn't a "before/after" piece; it's a "both/and" piece. This couple is on the wall in the simultaneous extremes of ecstasy and exploitation. I think the piece is saying something interesting and complex about relationships. Not just about this particular relationship, but about all sexual relationships.

What do I think about the subject matter? The subject matter of miscegenation and interracial sex? I certainly don't think it is an evil in itself or at all. But to the degree it is still a symbol of the "other's" exploitation culturally, sexually, and in every way, I think it's what we've got to come to grips with worldwide before we can move on. Every time I think that the subject matter is old-fashioned, I get brought up short by how contemporary it is.

It is a fascinating admission of black angst in Marlon Rigg's film "Black Is, Black Ain't," which is concerned specifically with boundaries and how they are constituted in terms of blackness in the U.S., that the relationship of black and white is not directly dealt with at all.

I think it was omitted because it's still a taboo, believe it or not. It's a taboo for even black people to deal with directly. The problem for me is that I am dealing with it directly, that I have the actual bodies there. There is so much denial that goes around

this subject. The very first conversation I had at Harvard with an undergraduate student after starting my Bunting Fellowship was at dinner in the Quad, where I've taken a faculty suite at Cabot House, an undergraduate dormitory. The Quad used to be the old Radcliffe dorms; it has no real Harvard history, and it's located very far from Harvard Square. Almost by default it seems to have become the "Third World" residence. White students are in the minority. There is a preponderance of Asian students, a large number of black students, and some Latinos. First I have to set the scene: it's my first evening in the dining room, and I begin looking for a place to sit. I see the black table and it is all filled up. I don't want to force myself on them, so I keep looking around. Dormitory drama: you know, it's like high diplomacy. And if you try as a person of color to approach certain tables, you can sense people's faces becoming still and their backs becoming stiffened. You don't just go and sit down with them. It's a fallacy to think black people are always self-segregating. I was looking for a place where I would feel comfortable sitting, and I saw a young black woman sitting by herself. I took the seat across from her and we introduced ourselves. She was from New Orleans. She had gone first to an integrated junior high school, then to an all-black high school and now she was a junior at Harvard majoring in English. For some reason, I talked about my experience teaching Catullus at S.V.A.,** and she listened without saying anything. When I finished my story, she rejoined with comments very much more sophisticated than I had made; she knew her Augustinian literature. Soon I started asking her questions about herself. She told me she had not come to Cambridge to live the same kind of life that she had lived in her all-black high school; she wanted to branch out. She had spent the last two years reaching out to Asians, Latinos, Middle-Easterners, and she found that these relationships would invariably end in the same way: after six months the Asian or the Latino would find some need to explain that their parents were racist, but they were not. She said they didn't even realize that this was the same thing that she had been hearing all her life. Then there would come another point where they would confess that they could marry anyone *except* a black person. Then she glanced around the room, finally focusing on the black table, and said, "You know, it's as if we are a pariah race and no one is talking about it."

When I left the dining hall, I was shaking. This was my first twenty-minute conversation at Harvard, and it had dovetailed with these things I'd been thinking, feeling, and dealing with. Nobody talks about it, but very little has changed since I was growing up. And I don't know how it can change unless you start talking about it.

Do you think one reason what you are talking about in terms of your investigation, specifically of black female/white male, has such a difficult reception is actually because of the double hegemony?

Yes, exactly. It's not just white, it's white male, and it's not just black, it's black female.

What other effect does this difficulty have?

It seems that this subject matter is so powerful, so electric that it tends to eliminate aesthetic considerations. If I talk about the aesthetics of my work for an hour but spend five minutes on this topic, it's the only thing most people will hear. One of the biggest difficulties I have as an artist is how to present this explosive subject matter and still have the art paid attention to. I think "Miscegenated Family Album" succeeded in doing this because it was so coded.

"Miscegenated Family Album" is about the people who are the product of heterosexual sex, whereas what you are getting to seems to be more like Piper's work. Not about the sexual act, but about black and white, and about racialization through genealogies in three generations. But I think the explosive element is the inceptual act itself, because of the issues that it raises about sex and race from all sides. I was really struck by the fact that it wasn't at all in *Black Is, Black Ain't*. Especially because Riggs had a white boyfriend, and this would have been an issue for him. I think that how that would have to have been introduced into the film would be in the aspect that deals with the biological/heterosexual aftermath in terms of the discussion about skin color changes, skin color value, hair

texture changes. That whole discussion could not exist were there not such a thing as miscegenation. The fact that the sexual act itself, that these are actual white people and black people, that this isn't something that you are just born with, but that you do, that is the immediacy you are confronting that is otherwise generally absent. The immediacy and the responsibility of your individual actions as opposed to being born with skin color a certain color.

That may be why one of the most disturbing things about *The Clearing* for most people is in the left panel, where the mixed-blooded children are playing on the ground beneath the black-and-white couple in the air: the cause and the effect were shown simultaneously.

Judith Wilson did a study of nineteenth-century images of miscegenation, and many of the paintings were of white slave owners who had a certain relationship with their children, images of white slave owners with their black sons. One is selling the son, another is working with the son in different situations, but in these paintings of widely varied relationships, between one father who is selling his son and another who is adopting his son, the one figure in all of these images who is missing is the black mother. It is the sexual and personal relationship that cannot be represented, that is denied.

Can you elaborate on your statement that your work is against western dualism?

I think that the biggest problem that those of us have who are bi- or even tri-cultural and are trying to interpolate our positions with those of the west (a group that includes nearly all non-Afrocentric artists) is the way in which, both philosophically and practically, the west divides its ability to comprehend good/evil and black/white, the way it makes oppositions of everything. Not just simple oppositions, but hierarchical, superior/inferior oppositions, so that male/female, black/white, good/evil, body/mind, nature/culture are not just different, one is always better than. I feel this is a disease peculiar to Judeo-Christianity. It is certainly not the only way in which the world can be

philosophically conceived. Many eastern religions have structured it differently. African religions structure it differently. And as part of their survival process, blacks in this country have both been able to and been forced to maintain a position of "neutral monism," which has permitted them to keep their image of themselves as valuable, as equal. They have benefited from the "dual consciousness" of their situation, as DuBois put it, and from holding onto a conceptualization that is more African, and more eastern, than it is western—a conceptualization of both/and rather than either/or. It's clear that blacks have had to be more philosophically sophisticated than whites. If there is anything I really want to put forward in my work, it's that degree of sophistication.

Can you describe Mademoiselle Bourgeoise Noire's gown and how you made it?

The first thing I did was I shopped. I shopped New York out in 1980 of just about every pair of previously worn white gloves south of 125th Street. I used 180 pairs, but I actually had close to 350 pairs of them.^{††} Then I found a white gown. It was a backless polyester gown made in Miami: perfect! The front tied around the breasts, and I sewed the gloves onto that structure, and then the cape was made up by sewing the gloves together. This sewing took three weeks. The gloves in the cape were all leather, and I didn't have the right needles for leather. By the end of this my hands were so swollen I couldn't hold a pen.

You mentioned Afrocentrism and African Americans' relation to Africa. Can you talk more about that?

First of all, about African Americans' relationship to Africa, I think it's been changing over time, becoming more and more nuanced and complex. Like everything in life, it doesn't stay the same. In some ways, it was at its least sophisticated in the early '60s when Africa was becoming independent at the same time that we were having our civil rights movement here, so there was this desire to look at Africa and say, "How wonderful it is. This is our role model." I think that now Africa has become much less of a myth; it is much more realistically perceived. By the late '70s, I think we were having the tail end of the mythologizing of Africa.

There seems to be a greater understanding, now that Africa is Africa and African America is African America, that we have unique problems and unique destinies. I'm not sure where the Caribbean situation intersects here, and the differences between African Americans and African Caribbeans. Since the Caribbean islands were plantation islands, they were overwhelmingly black. Those islands were held by mere handfuls of white people, so slavery on them was a different kind of slavery than it was here. Black religion was able to be maintained more fully. As a result, I think the African Caribbean's relationship to Africa is much closer, much more natural and real. During the "Black Aesthetic" period in the United States, Africa was fetishized in a very unrealistic and unsatisfying way.

Where would you place yourself in this?

Well, I am a Caribbean African American, so already I am in this strange halfway point between. Part of what one always has to deal with psychically is one's parents, and even though I was born and raised here, my parents were from the Caribbean and had lots of problems revolving around British colonialism. The difficulty was, my parents were no longer there, their situation was no longer there. In a sense, everything about them was anomalous. They came from the mulatto class that was employed by the British to help rule those islands: the British couldn't rule those islands themselves; they had to have help, and they had this ready-made caste of mixed-bloods who could be used to control the blacks of the island. To use this class effectively they had to make allies of them, let them feel they were superior to the blacks.⁺⁺ My parents brought that feeling of social superiority inherent in light skin coloring with them to this country. That is what I have been rebelling against all of my life. But in the meanwhile, with the passage of time on the islands, the mulatto caste itself has changed. Michael Manley, who is the off-again, on-again prime minister of Jamaica, is the son of Norman Manley, who was the prime minister in my parent's day. Norman had a white wife, but his son Michael could not be prime minister if he did not have a "black" black wife. Clearly, the world of Michael Manley, who is a socialist with an obviously black wife, is no longer that of Norman Manley, but in my life, I am still stuck dealing with the attitudes of that previous world. In this

and countless other ways, some of which I may not even be aware of, I find the people with whom I have the most in common are not necessarily African Americans, whose formation is basically southern, but diaspora Caribbeans, people who have moved to London or are living in Brooklyn.

I know for myself that every time I go to Europe, which is quite frequently, there is barely one trip, no matter to which country, where someone doesn't somehow find a way to remind me that all of the Europeans in the U.S. were Europe's garbage. It's not necessarily related to any sense that they are talking directly about me. And in different countries, they will do it differently. So in France they don't think I am French, but someone will have to introduce this recurring theme that all of us who are European American are Europe's garbage. One of the things that I saw for the first time, when you spoke at Cooper Union, was one of the students from Kenya making an issue out of East Africa versus West Africa, where most of the slaves came from. It's not stated directly, but for me, I see for the first time this parallel situation of "those in Africa are better than those from Africa now in the U.S."

Could you speak about the relation between your work as a writer and as a visual artist?

My writing and my visual art have a very symbiotic connection. Because I always seem to be working at the edge of acceptability and/or comprehensibility, I often feel that I have to defend my work. Since 1992 I've been employing the writing as a way of creating the theoretical context for the work. Right now, for my new series "The Secret History," whose program is to insert black female subjectivity into certain founding documents of contemporary western culture, I am extending the issues I raised in "The Clearing" by starting with Baudelaire and focusing on his relationship to his black mistress, Jeanne Duval. I still don't feel that I will have the luxury to just put work up on the wall. I will have to explain the work, and having taught Baudelaire for fifteen years now, there are things I know I will be able to use. But at the same time, I feel I need to know much more than is inside my head, so one of the first things that I've done this year at the Bunting Institute with my research assistant is put

together a casebook of three to four hundred pages of journal articles. So as I am doing the visual work, I'm also looking at this casebook and thinking about arguments I can make to explain this work which I suspect might have a difficult reception. It will need to be buttressed by other work currently being done in the field, and in the past five to ten years there has been a new interest in the phenomenon of nineteenth-century literature and its intimate connection to the exploitation of the other. There is some really good argumentation. What I have been telling my assistant is that I will probably be writing an article sometime after the work is done, in the same way that "Olympia's Maid" was done a year after "The Clearing." That was an article I did to explain the absence of the black nude in black fine art, and to theorize the situation in which I found myself as one of the very few black artists employing the black nude. I had not realized how small a minority it was until I went in search of the black nude. Obviously, there is always an occasional black nude by an artist, but bodies of work on the black nude are hard to come by.

In general, the black nude was not addressed during the first two hundred years of black art production in this country. I tried to understand why that was the case and what my own use of the black nude meant. How did my use of the black nude intersect with the whole of black fine arts history? And just as interesting, how was it different from the nude employed by white feminists? For black women, freedom may be the ability to keep our clothes on if we want; historically, we've been forced to take our clothes off. But for white feminists, the situation is opposite. For them, the freedom to take their clothes off is critical, and that fact is reflected in the difference in the art that they produce. "The Clearing" had to be placed with respect to both black art history and white feminist art history; I used "Olympia's Maid" as a way of doing that. I'm afraid I may have to make that kind of effort again for the new work. I would like to be able not to have to write for a while, but I may not be able to get out of it.

What was "Olympia's Maid"?

The title "Olympia's Maid" was not so much about Manet's painting as referring to it. In the article I wrote, first for the

College Art Association, then for *Afterimage*, and then later expanded for the anthology *New Feminist Criticism: Art/Identity/Action* edited by Joanna Frueh, et al., I concentrated on the reasons why the maid accompanying the white nude had been blended into the background drapery with all of her clothes on.

Who do you see as the audience you are making the work for?

There are two different answers: the first audience for the work is the work itself. The work has to proceed on its own terms and has to be satisfied in itself. Afterwards, when it is done, who is it for? Well, even before you do the work there is an audience that you may have in mind to send it to after it's finished. For most black artists the question of "Who is the audience?" is a tremendous problem, one that's not getting any easier, even though some black artists are becoming successful. I did a studio visit in the early '80s with the black abstract William T. Williams, and he said to me that until the black community valued its culture enough to put its resources into collecting black art in the same way that the Jewish community did, we were not going to be able to have a viable art world. When I premiered "Miscegenated Family Album" at Wellesley, I thought the work was for the girls who had followed me there. But to find that these girls could not even free themselves enough to look at art, let alone make it, was very frightening. I've had to pull back to a position of "wait and see." Still, I'm surprised at how, for "Miscegenated Family Album," the audience was very much more general than I would have anticipated, going across race, gender, and age lines as it has been more widely shown. The most unalloyed response it has received has been from women of all kinds who have had intense relationships with their sisters. The work is the primary audience and, secondarily, the mainstream art world. At least that's the fantasy. Why not? It will be an adventure to see what will happen when and if it finally gets there.

[†] My teen-aged marriage ended in divorce, and the child I'd had at 18 was being raised by his paternal grandparents.

[‡] I did not know how old Piper was, or that she was black, as the book had no biographical information.

[§] In 1980-81, videotaped documentation was prohibitively expensive. Of the still-photograph documents I received of the performance, none showed the precise moment of the "throw-down," because I forgot to alert the photographers to it.

³ It was one of those "the more things change, the more they stay the same," and how shocked the students had been that they could relate more to a 2000-year-old poet talking honestly about his experience than they could to a contemporary writer who had been dishonest.

⁴ It was important that the gloves had been worn, that they'd belonged to women who'd in some sense actually believed in them.

⁵ The feeling of black fair-skinned superiority took on a different valence in the Caribbean than in the States because it was often accompanied by a greater degree of real economic power.