

**Lorraine O'Grady**  
***Mlle Bourgeoise Noire 1955***

Just Above Midtown/Downtown  
New York City, New York  
June 5, 1980\*

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Her first submission to a performance art journal was a description of *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire's* earliest appearance, a guerrilla action at Just Above Midtown, the country's only black avant-garde art gallery.

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*Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the international beauty pageant held in Cayenne, French Guiana, June 5, 1955. The crown of "Mlle Bourgeoise Noire 1955" awarded to Miss Black Bourgeoise of Boston, MA.*

Cast:

LORRAINE O'GRADY — playing Mlle Bourgeoise Noire 1955 on the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of her coronation. Ms. O'Grady is wearing her crown, her coronation gown and cape (together made of 180 pairs of white gloves), and a white cat-o-nine-tails studded with white chrysanthemums as her bouquet.

DR. EDWARD B. ALLEN — playing the Master of Ceremonies. Dr. Allen, a dentist from Stamford, CT, and Ms. O'Grady's brother-in-law, plays tennis with Bert Parks ("He can't play worth shit.") Dr. Allen has borrowed a tuxedo jacket from Bert Parks especially for this occasion.\*

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PHOTOGRAPHERS, VIDEO CAMERAMEN, DISCO BAND, and GUESTS at the opening of the Just Above Midtown/Downtown gallery — playing the court and subjects attending Mlle Bourgeoise Noire's Silver Jubilee.

Mlle Bourgeoise Noire and her Master of Ceremonies arrive for her 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebration at precisely 9:00 p.m. They have difficulty entering (their names having been omitted from the guest list at the door). After a few peremptory commands by Mlle Bourgeoise Noire, they are let in, passing through the tight pink maze especially designed by artist David Hammons and featuring three salt fish hanging from hooks.

At last they can greet the crowds awaiting them. Oohs and aahs on all sides for Mlle Bourgeoise Noire's gown. After all these years, it still fits.

She smiles, she smiles, she smiles. Mlle Bourgeoise Noire has lost none of the charm that originally won her her crown.

Each of her nine tails has three white chrysanthemums, which she gives to her subjects one at a time as she says, while smiling brightly, "Won't you help me lighten my heavy bouquet?" She moves gradually around the room.

Photographers and videomen are having a field day. Mlle Bourgeoise Noire, in her 180 pairs of white gloves, white cat-o-nine-tails, and rhinestone and seedpearl crown, is very photogenic. Unreluctantly, she obliges them.

But Mlle Bourgeoise Noire has had a change of heart between 1955 and 1980. She has come to a conclusion. As the band goes on its break, she discreetly retires. All her flowers have been given away, and now she removes her cape, handing it to her Master of Ceremonies. She is wearing a backless, white-glove gown. Her MC, by prearranged signal, hands her a pair of above-the-elbow gloves, which she proceeds to put on.

Back and forth she paces, like a caged lion and trainer all in one. She beats *herself* with the whip.

All these years she has been waiting for this 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary to give her subjects her final conclusion. And stalking back and forth in front of the art in this 50%-black gallery, beating herself with greater and greater frenzy, suddenly she stops.

Cayenne, where she was crowned so many years ago, is not just the others side of nowhere. It is the birthplace of the great mulatto poet Leon Damas, who knew so many things before she did. Tonight she will speak through him. Of course, she will make her own additions.

“THAT’S ENOUGH!” she shouts as she lays down her whip.

“No more boot-licking. . .

“No more ass-kissing. . .

“No more buttering-up. . .

“No more pos. . . turing

“of super-ass. . . imilates. . .

“BLACK ART MUST TAKE MORE RISKS!!!”

Then she quickly exits, leaving the court to think what it will.

— © *Lorraine O’Grady*

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\* Bert Parks was best known as the legendary host (1955–1979) of the annual Miss America Pageant telecast.