

Lorraine O'Grady
Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline

Allen Memorial Art Museum
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After a delay to see if the first chronicle on *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* would be accepted by *High Performance*, a second on *Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline* was submitted the following year — though it had in fact premiered at Just Above Midtown just 3 months later.

Throughout the first half, the effect of the piece is flat and two-dimensional, like the pages of a book. Two screens slowly project slides of Nefertiti and Devonia and their families, side by side beneath a sparsely written soundtrack on which the artist uses eleven different narrative and dramatic voices to tell the stories of their lives.

As the piece opens, a woman's voice is intoning Nefertiti's names and titles: "Beautiful Are the Beauties of the Aton! The Beautiful One Is Come! Mistress of Loveliness, the King's Great Wife, Lady of the Two Lands!" The left screen lights up with an image of Nefertiti at 25, the famous Berlin limestone head, face turned slightly right.

The soundtrack continues, the voice sounding like a very young girl: "My big sister's getting married. You should see the wedding ring. It's like this circle of leaves, twelve leaves going all around. And on each leaf it's got three diamonds. Thirty-six diamonds in all!" Onto the right screen comes a wedding portrait of Devonia, wearing a veil. She is 24, her head turned slightly left.

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Soon it becomes clear that the two who face each other are even more alike emotionally than physically: they are beautiful women who still do not question their roles.

The images on screen and the words of the soundtrack interact and change, becoming more and more layered. They approximate but do not quite form a straight narrative line. Nefertiti and Devonia Evangeline marry, have daughters, and perform ceremonial functions, the one as a priestess, the other as a member of a wedding. In a rising climax, when they are attacked by bitter younger sisters (Mutnedjmet and Lorraine), Nefertiti and Devonia choose each other instead.

This act of mutual and self-recognition enables the two to say goodbye to their youthful beauty and to assert their individuality as women: Nefertiti in a refusal to be sexually discarded, and Devonia in a decision to go back to work. But they pay a price for independence. They die at the ages of 37 and 38 respectively — Nefertiti in 1344 B.C. after a banishment of six years, and Devonia in 1962 from the complications of an illegal abortion. The screens contain sarcophagi with lifted lids.

Suddenly the piece becomes three-dimensional. Stage lights come up over two metal tubs filled with sand, one in front of each screen. The artist, in a surplice-like khaftan, enters the space physically. Behind her, the slides slowly change. They are now images of Nefertiti's and Devonia's daughters, who look even more strikingly alike than the two women did — Old and New World products of the same black and white mix.

On the soundtrack, the voiced dryly and expressionlessly reads an adaptation of the Ancient Egyptian "Opening of the Mouth" ceremony, instructing the artist on how to perform it. The woman on stage is Lorraine, the angry younger sister whose picture the audience has already seen. She is now 20 years older and a sophisticated woman. But her actions are strangely "alienated" from the script being read on the tape. Instead of the raw beef heart which the artist/priestess is [told] to chew and swallow visibly, the woman on stage has a heart-shaped metal

mold with which she is trying to make shapes from dry sand. She continuously fails.

Images of Nefertiti and Devonia again come on screen. With an adze in her hand, the artist goes up to the screens and strikes each woman's mouth in turn. "Hail, Osiris!" the tape says. "I have opened your mouth for you. I have opened your two eyes for you."

The tape[d voice] continues its instructions: "Two assistants push the tubs of sand together, so they can be straddled." Alone on stage and grunting with her effort, the artist cannot budge them.

"Walk to tubs of sand, which are now touching," says the tape. "Mount and straddle them. Face audience."

The artist mounts the tub on the right while facing the screens. With arms out for balance, she stretches and lunges to reach the other tub six feet away. Thud. She fails. And again. After five more attempts, the screens go black and the stage lights go out. In the darkness, she continues trying to straddle the tubs.

Thud. Thud. Thud. Thud. Thud. Thud. Thud. Thud.

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