

## On being the presence that signals an absence

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Written for the unpublished, photocopied catalogue of *Coming to Power: 25 Years of Sexually X-plicit Art by Women*, curated by Ellen Cantor and presented by David Zwirner Gallery and Simon Watson/The Contemporary, NYC, the essay examines O'Grady's inclusion in the show and responses to her diptych *The Clearing*.

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"I don't like it," he says. "That's not the way sex is supposed to be."

He points at "Love in Black and White," the right panel of a photo-diptych I call *The Clearing*.

But it is, I think. And it has been, often, for 500 years. I follow his finger and look at the white chevalier in tattered chainmail with a skull instead of a head. The knight's hand proprietarily grasps the breast of an almost jet-black nude woman whose eyes look out beyond the frame and reflect centuries of knowing blankness and boredom.

"It doesn't feel like that to *me*," he says. This southern white curator is not going to take my diptych for his show. But his presence in my studio is proof of how far he and we have come.

Then he asks, "Are the two panels Before and After?"

He catches me off-guard, and my response is oddly diffident. Now I look at "Green Love," the left panel, the one he's said he likes. A nude white male and black female are floating on air, coupling ecstatically above the trees. Below them, on the grass, two mixed-raced children are playing tag while a gun,

camouflaged on the lover's discarded clothes, silently threatens the scene.

"No," I say. "They're Both/And."

The curator gazes at me with an uncomprehending expression. Uncertainty is making me feel stupid. I know that when he leaves I will be able to construct an explanation. This is what I get for wanting images to take me someplace I cannot arrive with words. And yet the wordsmith in me wants to be defeated.

Later, when the curator leaves the studio, I look again at *The Clearing*. It has collapsed many of my love affairs, which I have only recently begun to view in historic and cultural terms, and has combined them into a single event in which beginning and end, ecstasy and exploitation are simultaneous. As I examine this couple, this death of "courtly love," I see a historical palimpsest that goes beyond \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_, and me. Perhaps it is Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings. Or even Cortez and La Malinche.

*The Clearing* was to have been a triptych whose third panel, "Blue Love," would have contained a middle-aged black couple. But when I couldn't find a middle-aged black man willing to pose nude, I had to discard the idea. That's when I should have begun to suspect something. Perhaps I had confused nudity and nakedness. For me, nudity is less about sex than about removing layers of culture; the bare head-and-shoulder portraits I have made feel as nude to me as do these lovers. Perhaps I made these montages too innocently.

When I am asked to be on a College Art Association panel on the nude, I accept. It scarcely bothers me that it will be another of those "fly in the buttermilk" situations. I am hoping that, in some way I can't yet foresee, my presence, my divergence from the panel's premises, will not just add to, but alter the debate's basic nature.

Another sign. I ask other artists and critics if they know of black women with bodies of work on the nude (I need more

slides for my talk) and am taken aback. The only name I come up with is that of my friend Sandra Payne. Now I have to research in earnest.

As I work on "Olympia's Maid," my paper for the panel, I learn that during the two centuries of black fine art dating back to before 1960, the nude, Western art's favored category, was avoided even by male black artists, with Eldzier Cortor's Sea Island series of the 1940s a rule-proving exception. Since then, there have been individual pieces and a few series, but no *oeuvres*; and female black artists are vastly underrepresented. I try to account for this absence by referring to the stereotypes of Mammy and Jezebel, to the synchronous debasement and excision of black female sexuality through slavery and the cult of "true womanhood." When even the black woman's ability to survive being raped "proved" she was less than human (a *true* woman would have committed suicide rather than submit), was it any wonder that black artists wanted, not to take her clothes off, but to keep them on?<sup>1</sup> But all of my answers to this absence seem to be questions.

In the '90s, I think, surely things have changed. When I learn that a young white woman artist named Ellen Cantor is curating a show called *Coming to Power: 25 Years of Sexually Explicit Art by Women*, I want to know if her research will have results different from mine.

"There isn't much fine art, but there is video and film, most of it by younger black lesbians," she says and adds more issues to my list of answer-questions.

I begin to look forward to her show. Perhaps the cross-gendered, cross-generational dialogues Cantor plans will begin the process of unpacking a more elaborate and more interesting set of differences than we have been used to. The shifting glance of art may yet uncover new answer-questions and pierce through outdated binaries: not just black/white, young/old, and heterosexual/lesbian, but even sex/sexuality, consequences/pleasures, self-expression/seduction, and identification/desire may eventually stop seeming to cancel each other out. But those are tasks for the long haul.

As I write I have not learned anything to make me stop being concerned and curious about the status of the black female body. It seems as beleaguered today as it has ever been. After a recent remark in *Women's Wear Daily* that haute couture shows had begun to look like 125th Street, the black woman has almost disappeared from the fashion runway. And on rap videos, the few girl rappers are still heavily outnumbered by the girls shaking their booties, who are abused equally by the gangsta lyrics and the camera.

I have been writing this article before *Coming to Power* opens. My diptych *The Clearing* is down at the gallery, the only piece by a black fine artist, and I am nervous. How will it work, I wonder? It is hardly a "representative" piece: its oblique historic references are simply to one way sex *can* be. But I am hoping the show's context will stretch the definitions of nudity and sex in more than one direction, nudge them past the way sex is *supposed* to be.

At the opening, only "Green Love," the left panel with the nude white male and black female coupling above the trees, is on the wall. The right panel, "Love in Black and White," the one with the white male in tatty chainmail and the black female looking bored as her breast is grabbed, is returned to me. There just wasn't room for it with so many pieces in the show, Cantor explains. At least she doesn't say, "*That's* not the way sex is supposed to be."

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<sup>1</sup> See Lorraine O'Grady, "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity," *Afterimage*, vol. 20, no. 1, Summer 1992, pp. 14-15. Forthcoming, with an extended postscript, in Arlene Raven, Cassandra Langer, Joanna Frueh, eds., *New Feminist Criticisms: Art/Identity/Action*, Harper Collins (scheduled 1993).