Studies for Flowers of Evil and Good (1998–)
by Lorraine O'Grady

Summary

Flowers of Evil and Good continues O'Grady's attempt to engage and comprehend the self through the study of cultural history, and vice versa. Her historic approach to postmodernist concerns (O'Grady won the Sons of the American Revolution history prize for Massachusetts when she graduated from high school) was confirmed by an encounter with 1980-90s Black British cultural studies. Writings by Stuart Hall, Hazel Carby, Paul Gilroy, and Kobena Mercer helped crystallize ideas she'd had about cultural colonialism since beginning to teach European modernism from Baudelaire to Breton at SVA in the mid-70s.

O'Grady's love of Baudelaire was inseparable from her fascination and identification with his black muse Jeanne Duval — the poet's common-law wife of 20 years who had been the inspiration for his best and most complex work both in poetry and, O'Grady believed, in the art critical writings with which he had founded modernism. She began work on a project to examine their relationship while she was a Bunting Fellow at Harvard in 1995-96. At last there were time and resources to teach herself Photoshop, to research images of the couple and pay for high-quality scans of them, and to gather the extant information on their lives. . . she found a lot on Baudelaire, almost nothing on Duval. The project would require more invention than she'd anticipated.

O'Grady first showed two studies for the work in New Histories at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, in Fall 1996. But these still felt unresolved. The breakthrough came in 1998 while preparing for her one-person show at Thomas Erben Gallery, NYC. O'Grady's mother Lena, who died in 1991, was 80 years younger than Jeanne but the two had similar trajectories, having left their islands to live in the metropole as young adults. They'd had postmodern lives before the word was invented. When Haitian-born Jeanne began to speak in Lena's Jamaican patois, the shape of *Flowers of Evil and Good* became more clear.