

The First and the Last of the Modernists (2010)

by Lorraine O'Grady

Summary

In *The First and the Last of the Modernists*, an installation for the 2010 Whitney Biennial, two of O'Grady's careers—rock music critic and avant-garde artist—met unexpectedly.

She'd taught the work of Charles Baudelaire for two decades at SVA. The 19th-century French poet and art critic known as the father of modernism had appealed to her for his harshly intimate poetry and for the fierce bravery of his leap from romanticism to modernism. To an unusual degree, he'd embraced the new conditions posed to European art by industrial revolution and the subsequent process of empire which had led to a disorienting encounter with "others." In 1842, the year he turned 21, the emerging poet faced a new world, one where the artist could no longer safely make art in God's image but would now have to make it in his own and society's. Without the support of old certainties, the transition from being a servant of God to being a kind of god in one's self was dangerous, and it was impossible not to admire the way Charles, though not always successful, met it headlong.

Baudelaire's capacity for the unique distance from his own culture needed to fully accept and reflect it had been increased, O'Grady felt, by the life he shared with Jeanne Duval, the young black woman he met that year, who was his same age and with whom—without benefit of clergy and, more surprisingly, without pressure of offspring—he would live for more than 20 years. Seeing Europe through Jeanne's eyes and experiencing her life as part of his own must have expanded him, she thought. Where Baudelaire scholars and critics often derided Duval in frankly racist terms, she saw Jeanne as the quintessentially postmodern woman, grappling inter-racially with life in diaspora and a proto-global economy. The sheer length of their relationship spoke for itself. And Jeanne, the 19th-century emigrant from Haiti to Paris, also provided her a window through which to view her own mother Lena, who'd emigrated from Jamaica to Boston just 80 years later at the close of World War I. She gradually interchanged Lena's image and voice with Jeanne's in the work she was doing to understand Jeanne and Charles's relationship.

A decade later, when Michael Jackson died, like many O'Grady had cried as though a member of her own family had gone but couldn't say why. A former Prince fan, she'd stopped following Michael after the *Thriller* album. Now she plunged into the world of fan sites and YouTube videos to locate the source of her tears and was shocked that his genius had continued to develop while she had moved on. The extent of his brilliance and his humanity overwhelmed her. Comparisons to Charles inevitably suggested themselves. . . the divine self-belief, the ambiguous sexuality, the fanatic devotion to craft, the drugs, the unironic aspiration to greatness, the flamboyant clothing and makeup.

She was struck most by the price they had each paid for taking the role of the artist so seriously. What could be more godlike or quixotic than Michael's belief that he could unite the entire world through his music—or more amazing than how close he came?

They seemed to embody industrialization in its purest forms. Charles forever walking Parisian streets that were being torn up and re-routed to accommodate the massive influx from the countryside. . . Michael with lungs permanently damaged from a childhood spent in Gary when the steel mills still belched fire. And they'd experienced, in opposite directions, the fantastical fluid movement of money and class, from above to below and vice versa, that the modern world made possible.

At the extremes of talent and devotion represented by Baudelaire and Jackson, distinctions of European and non-European, of high and low culture seemed superseded by the view of artists responding to shared conditions. In her work on Charles and Jeanne, she'd come to see Europe's two modernist turning points—Baudelaire's own 1857 *Flowers of Evil*, in which even lesser poems not about her felt shaped from Jeanne's living body, and Picasso's 1907 *Demiselles d'Avignon*, in which carved African sculptures transmogrified into the bodies of European prostitutes—as evidence that, at an important level, modernism was an encounter between the self and the other. But since everyone is a self, and everyone is an other, modernism had to contain everyone's responses to the encounter. It couldn't be just a statement or a monaural discussion, it must be more a cacophony.

When O'Grady was selected for the Whitney Biennial three months after Michael's death, she created *The First and the Last of the Modernists* as a modest installation substituting Michael's image for those of Lena and Jeanne. There were few enough images of Charles, and only a handful were the right age and quality for a project with Michael. Finding possible matches from among the more than 30,000 Michael images circulating online was arduous, and there'd be endless cropping and adjusting and color. But seeing it on the wall, she was surprised. She felt it would keep teaching her. She'd already learned so much about the work on Charles and Jeanne/Lena that now she would have to go back and restart it afresh.