

5 lessons and 9 questions about Chinatown

a film and blog by Shelly Silver

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the moment of encounter

Posted: April 12th, 2010 | **Author:** admin | **Filed under:** Art | **Tags:** Alexander Gray Associates, Art, Art Is..., Lorraine

O'Grady, MoMA, performance art, The Friends of Education | 2 Comments »



Lorraine O'Grady, *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire*, 1980-83

Lorraine O'Grady spoke with **Sanford Biggers** and **RoseLee Goldberg** at MoMA. This event, both fascinating and way too short considering the territory it could have covered, was co-sponsored by an organization I never knew existed – The Friends of Education of the Museum of Modern Art. It was founded in 1993 – the same year that buttons by Daniel Joseph Martinez were handed out at the Whitney Biennial reading “I Can’t Imagine Ever Wanting to Be White.” The mission of the Friends of Education is to foster a greater appreciation of art created by African American artists...’ (hmmmm, how’re we doing?)

I’m embarrassed (frustrated?) to say that I knew nothing about Lorraine O’Grady till this fall, when I saw a series of her photographs in the Alexander Grey booth at Art Basel Miami, documenting her 1983 piece “**Art Is...**” O’Grady’s answer to a comment by a non-artist acquaintance: “avant-garde art doesn’t have anything to do with black people.” The performance was done during the African-American Day Parade on 125th Street, and the photographs had more life and vitality than most of the other art on display at Art Basel.

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Lorraine O'Grady referring to her non-traditional career trajectory stated that she was post black before she was black – attending Wellesley and then working in a hyper-elite state department job. It wasn't until she situated herself within the cultural arena of the art world, deciding at 45 to become an artist, that she became black/excluded. Then came a sentence that reverberated: “culture tends to be the ultimate barrier to equality.”


Looking at the history of O'Grady's art over the past several decades, it's surprising that she is just now getting wider recognition. Or it should be surprising; unfortunately most women of her generation have come up against difficulty (how're we doing?) Most people of color of her generation have come up against difficulty (how're we doing?) And then I think to the exquisitely pleasurable and painful problem of making work that is both confrontational and ahead of its time; exquisitely painful because it will, by definition, run into all sorts of resistance.

“My work is a function of living life at the extreme of misunderstanding – when who you are isn't taken into account let alone misunderstood.”

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2 Comments on “the moment of encounter”

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 **jean-ulrick Désert** said at 12:42 am on April 17th, 2010:

I've always adored Lorraine O'Grady's work. I discovered her work around the same time as Carrie Mae Weems and I thought these 2 artists were making knock out work on subjects close

to my heart. They both took on different corners of an experience shared by so many millions...

and took no prisoners.

Keep an eye on them both- they still have much to say in their uniquely individual ways.

😊 JnUD

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2.

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