

Artist as Art Critic: An Interview with Conceptualist Lorraine O'Grady*

by Theo Davis

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Conducted in Cambridge during O'Grady's one-year residency at the Bunting Institute at Harvard, the interview may have been affected by what she'd felt as adverse treatment there of her diptych *The Clearing*.

Lorraine O'Grady is a conceptual artist whose works explore biculturality and assert her right to make critical art. O'Grady began work as a performance artist in 1980 with the performance *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire*. She appeared at art openings dressed as a debutante or beauty queen, passing out white chrysanthemums to patrons. She would suddenly begin lashing a cat-o'-nine tails while declaring, "No more boot-lickin'/ No more ass-kissin'. . . . BLACK ART MUST TAKE MORE RISKS." She has since moved on to work in the form of the photographic diptych. Her piece *Miscegenated Family Album* consists of sixteen diptychs, contrasting photographs of Egyptian art representing Nefertiti with family photographs of O'Grady's sister. The work resonates with formal beauty, emotional intensity, and a keen insistence on the presence of bicultural families throughout history. We spoke this past winter while O'Grady was an artist-in-residence at the Bunting Institute at Radcliffe College, where she was working on a new series of diptychs entitled *The Secret History*. In this new work, O'Grady has set out to "insert an African female subjectivity into the language of Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*."

Your involvement with art began as a writer. What was it like to begin performing as *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire*?

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I was a pretty extroverted, demonstrative type and I had a lot of experience defending my experience in public places. As a child, at the age of twelve, I was a star debater at Girls' Latin School. I was a little twelve-year-old freshman on the stage with the seniors, with the big school auditorium filled with my parents and all the other kids. Partially I was able to do it because I was not as afraid as a normal person would be. A normal person would not have done *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire*!

I think I did pretty well as a second-generation performance artist to say things in performance that had not been said before. The problem is that I'm always saying things that haven't been said before, so it takes a while before they can be heard. *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* had this punchline: "Black art must take more risks," and of course Black artists didn't like her, and with the line: "Now is the time for an invasion," of course white institutions didn't like her either—at the time. Now she's a role model, now she's in a museum, now the costume has been sold.

What was the difference in the experience of that piece and *Art Is. . .* (a float in the Afro-American Day parade in Harlem in 1985 with participants entering the audience and "framing" the onlookers with gold picture frames)?

That parade piece was a glorious moment, but I would say that kind of community outreach didn't interest me as a way of making art. I've been talking to some friends about the success of Faith Ringgold in going outside the art world to establish an audience [see *Sojourner*, February 1996]. She did it through the writing of children's books. That is not an option for all artists, just as all artists cannot be community-based artists. I am fighting for the right to be good at what I'm good at, and I'm fighting for the right to influence culture at its originating points. I've nothing against community outreach, but there are these other battles that have to be fought simultaneously, and I'm fighting them.

I've been calling my work "high cultural warfare." I'm not afraid of engaging with high culture. Others can engage with popular culture but it doesn't interest me, partially because I've

already been there. I was a pop culture critic during the '70s, a rock critic—I know what popular culture is about and I don't choose to spend the rest of my life there. The parade piece was a way of receiving from a community its image of itself, but I much prefer to tell that community how I see it.

Were your pieces *Gaze* and *Dream*, which are pairs of portraits of African-American men and women, examples of telling a community how you perceived it?

I've talked about this business of speaking for the community and to the community as something that people without power are saddled with. White people have a country, but people without power have communities. White people do not have to speak for their community.

There are two traditional roles of the artist. In European culture the artist traditionally functions as an individual, as a critic of the culture. And presumably in African culture the artist functions as part of the community, as a representative of the culture, as the articulator of the culture. . . . I am a little leery of making the distinction between the two cultures because I think that it's not true, it's too simplistic—in our imaginations we make all these functions more pure than they are. Still, I'm a product of the West more than anything else and I'm holding out for the right to critique [African-American] culture whether it wants to be critiqued or not—in essence, to create art as a Black art critic.

That individualism, that independence of voice is so refreshing when so much art now seems laborious in its political consciousness.

I'm lucky as a Black artist because even as I express my individualism, I'm making a political point. I think that the political and the personal in the work of a Black woman artist are inextricable. I think that in the case of white artists, the personal is not quite so political and so they have to be more self-consciously political if they want to be political. I think in that way, artists of color have more luck at the moment. I don't think that political art is under any less constraint to be art than any

other kinds of art. In fact, I would say that political art has to be more successful as art than other kinds of art.

Why did you present the people in *Gaze and Dream* so personally? The second image in each of the photographs¹ is like a vision of their inner selves.

It's the not-yet-born. There's the part of the person that the outside world sees, that the person has to present to the public, which is basically shallower than the not-yet-born self. Revealing the not-yet-born self, for me, is nudity. That's why the way in which white feminists use nudity doesn't interest me. I said recently that freedom for white feminist artists is taking their clothes off and for a Black feminist artist it's being able to keep your clothes on if you want to. For me, nudity is about removing cultural layers. It's about removing overgeneralizations of the self. It has nothing to do with sex.

Does this connect to the postmodern rejection of essentialism, of reclaiming female subjectivity, that you critiqued in your article "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity"?²

I think Gayatri Spivak, a critical theorist and anticolonialist feminist from India, is saying that you have to be selectively essentialist at this point [in time]. It's not *subjectivity* that has become decentralized, but *white* subjectivity that has become decentralized. There is a strain of feminism which, in order to compete in the male marketplace of ideas, has bought into ideas about subjectivity, about the "nonexistence" of the subjective, which I think is basically indefensible. I wouldn't want to say that I am talking about essentialist ideas, but I am talking about subjectivity. The rejection of essentialism and, at the same time, the rejection of subjectivity is the baby that has been thrown out with the bath water in postmodernism.

That whole crisis of Western subjectivity, of a mind/body split, is a localized crisis, one of Europeans, which has become generalized theoretically. And this is what I'm against. It's not that I'm for essentialism, it is that I'm against generalization and against the overuniversalization of white theory.

How did you become interested in the form of the diptych, which you have used in your recent works *Miscegenated Family Album* and *The Clearing*?

I didn't become interested in it. I was doing it and then had to figure out why I was doing it. The process went that way. I was doing it because it was always, for me, a "both/and," and that's because of my background as somebody born and raised in New England with parents who are West Indian; I have always been trying not just to negotiate different points of view, but to contain different points of view. I think that this complexity of the "both/and" is something that's lived as an everyday reality by Diaspora people, people born one place, then shipped to another who have to negotiate more than one world, and in many people's cases now, three worlds.

And so I found myself using the diptych, but I didn't realize when I began using it how typical a form it was for bicultural people. Feminist art theoretician Lucy Lippard did a book called *Mixed Blessings*, in which she included about 200 artists she knew who were outside the mainstream. Kay Walkingstick, a Native American painter who teaches at Cornell and does modernistic work that is mostly in the diptych form, was talking about her use of the diptych as a way of expressing her biculturality. At the end, Lucy made a comment about how frequently she found this form among Native American and other bicultural artists. I realized that my use of it, which I thought was basically a personal expression at the time, was actually more than a personal expression—it was a cultural situation, a cultural condition.

Were you very aware of that bicultural identity when you were growing up?

When you're able to see things multifacetedly and the person that you're talking to can only see one point of view—their European, white perspective—you certainly do tend to think that you're smarter than they are. As a kid growing up here in Boston, I went to Girls' Latin School at a time when it was still very hard. It was very competitive, and I was at the top of the

competition. So I had tremendous intellectual self-confidence, but that confidence came not just from my I.Q. or my ability to perform but from my ability to see what was happening in a more nuanced way than most of the other kids.

This smart-ass version of the negotiation of two worlds is very typical of West Indian kids because they are dealing with parents who have come from another culture, and yet they are participating in a very different way than their parents in the new culture. They just have so many more things to deal with. They have to deal with being Black here, which makes you pretty smart. They have to deal with being foreign here. It's a double issue. It's not necessarily the most positive or the most productive wavelength to be on, but it is interesting and complex. And when you can find ways of working it out artistically, I think it can be very rich.

It's hard for me to make a complete statement of my thoughts visually without making a doubled image, or a collapsed diptych in some cases, or sometimes diptychs multiply, which was the case with *Miscegenated Family Album*. *Miscegenated Family Album* was sixteen diptychs, just enough for me to make a complete statement. The original performance it was based on, that I did in 1980, had 65 sets of doubled images projected behind me.

How did that performance work?

The performance was called *Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline*, and it had voice-over narration in which I had recorded the soundtrack of myself speaking in about eleven different voices: myself at different ages, my sister at different ages, my mother and father—about eleven voices. There was a narrative story of the relationships between these two women, the ancient and the modern: their lives were very similar, and they had similar deaths. Two-thirds of the way through, the narrative on the soundtrack stops when the women die, and then I am reading a slightly adapted version of the Egyptian Opening of the Mouth ceremony when I come onstage as the priestess. The Opening of the Mouth ceremony is literally a priest impersonating the sculptor. Many great Egyptian sculptures were made as part of

funerary rituals, so the [sculptures] stood in for the dead person and they became the place where the dead person's spirit was able to reside and go back and forth in the spiritual dimension. So the ritual has the priest with an adze striking the sculpture's mouth while saying, "I open your mouth for you, I open your two eyes for you, and you shall not die." So I'm reading this ritual [on the soundtrack] and then I come out as the priestess, and everything that I do is wrong! There's this voice on the soundtrack, but nothing that the priestess does has anything to do with the soundtrack, or if it does it's all slightly skewed.

There were two points: first of all, you can't use these old rituals. There's no way I could strike my sister's mouth and have her come to life again. At the same time, in the late '70s/early '80s, there was a lot of bad Black art based on anthropological rituals.

And you were fed up with that?

Exactly, so there was a critique of that as well. One of the things about my work that is most difficult for people to warm to is that it always contains a critique of other work. It is art criticism as well as art. And since it is frequently critiquing not just white institutions but Black art, that means I have a hard time in my career.

Any examples?

The Bunting Institute had a show called *A Range of Views: Four Bunting Artists*. I put in a [diptych] from 1991 called *The Clearing* [showing a white male and a black female in two different aspects of their love-making. In one panel,] the male figure is wearing chain mail because I feel that this relationship is the death of courtly love. I used to call it just *The Clearing*, but [after the show I realized I had to clarify the title, make it even more in-your-face, so] now it's called *The Clearing: or Cortez and La Malinche, Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, N. and Me*.

What interested you in courtly love, which defines "desirable" women as "ladylike," weak, and defenseless?

It's not that I'm interested in courtly love! But the last vestige of courtly love was "the cult of true womanhood"—[which was] the reigning theory of femininity for the nineteenth century. [In other words, it] was the cult of sexuality—of equating "desirable" and "feminine" women to weakness—reigning during the time of slavery. And the Black woman, because she was strong and because she worked, could never be considered a "true woman." Black women also could not be considered true women because they survived their rapes; a "real woman" would have committed suicide. At any rate, I put that work in the show, and people at the opening basically shied away from me. Nobody would comment on it.

Were they disturbed and didn't know what to say?

That was certainly part of it. I did find that several people told me that they were disturbed by the images. The other people were able to place their disturbance with the content under the rubric of disturbance with the form, because it was employing a Surrealist vocabulary which for some people feels very dated. . . . but this piece is also a critique of Surrealism [which romanticized sexuality]. Also, this work names the white male, which is very difficult. Feminist work of the '70s didn't name the white male. I would say that the difficulty that Blacks and women have with this work is that it is naming the white male and it is exposing and making so vulnerable the Black female body.

The history of the success of *Miscegenated Family Album* is interesting because it doesn't deal with the physical act that created these people, it just deals with results, and it's very much easier to take. What I'm trying to say in that piece is that this American family genetically was formed in the same way that this ancient Egyptian family was formed and that this is something the world will need to think about.

The work also seems to be questioning the adoption of Egypt by African Americans as cultural heritage.

The piece's most primal purpose was to help me work out a difficult relationship with a sister who could no longer speak to me because she died before we could begin to solve our

problems. The relationship, which goes from sibling rivalry to hero worship, is an extremely primal relationship, and in some ways the people who most relate to this are women who have had sisters.

All the same, there is a critique of Egyptology and Western theories of race, and there is a critique of Western dualism, that the world is divided by opposites—for example, good/evil, black/white. But the original imagery was set in motion seven years before Martin Bernal's book, *Black Athena*,³ came out in 1987. At the point at which the piece came out, people were upset because they thought it was narcissistic of me to compare my family with Egyptian royalty and, besides which, those Egyptians weren't Black anyway—the usual. What's happened is that subsequently. . . a whole climate of interpretation arose. Someone who saw my work in my studio said that, in 1980, I was the only person who could vouch for making those images before Bernal's book and that now a whole discourse has arisen to insert them into dialogue arising from *Black Athena* and explain them. In essence, that's the point at which I find *The Clearing*; it is out there now before the discourse has arisen.

You have written in *Artforum* about the lack of resources and support available to Black artists. What institutional changes would you like to see, to help foster the kind of discourse that could support a work such as *The Clearing*?

I'm making an argument that the art world is a full and sufficient arena for my activity because it is the real world in microcosm. The art world is an extreme example of the unchangeability of high culture in the West. The art world . . . is a world built on taste and the taste that money can buy; the world of high visual culture is an extremely restricted world. And what I am doing is like Don Quixote riding on his horse. I am out there, I'm good enough, I'm smart enough, and I want you to understand how closed you are. Okay? I'm just out there making the argument. You can't change anything—unless the argument continues to be made, change will never happen.

It's because visual art for me is so wonderful and so important that I want the right to make it. I want the possibility

of having the work have a life in the world, and until institutions change, it will have only a marginalized life, which will have nothing whatsoever to do with its real potential as art. What do I want institutions to do ? I know that they can't do much, but I need them to be aware that they are under critique.

So what is the story that you're trying to tell in your current work?

It is that until you see the other side of the story, you don't know the story.

Editor's note: Lorraine O'Grady's work will be shown at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, through January 5, as part of the show New Histories.

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¹ The photographs depict a bust-like portrait of a face, accompanied by a smaller image of that face with a different expression, positioned below the neck, almost pendant-like, of the larger face.

² Lorraine O'Grady, "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity," *Afterimage*, Summer 1992, pp 14-15.

³ *Black Athena* challenged the notion of Greece's "pure" influence on Western civilization and refuted the idea of a glorified Greece as its own creation.