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ART & DESIGN

Review: Lorraine O'Grady's Gift for Language and Images

By HOLLAND COTTER JUNE 25, 2015

Born in 1934, Lorraine O'Grady came to art late, in her 40s, but she brought to it a writer's ear for language and a painter's eye for images, both evident in this show of her early work. In 1977, in response to a personal crisis, she composed a series of collages using cutout headlines from 26 consecutive issues of the Sunday New York Times. The subjects of some of the headlines reflect a specific cultural moment, with any sense of consistency disrupted by Ms. O'Grady's scrambling of phrases.

She took similar freedoms with her own history in a performance piece from 1982, by which time she was affiliated with the Just Above Midtown Gallery, founded by Linda Goode Bryant as one of the few commercial spaces in New York to showcase experimental works by black artists. Titled "Rivers, First Draft," Ms. O'Grady's performance was conceived as a symbolic, "Pilgrim's Progress"-style version of her life as a child of Jamaican immigrants growing up in the United States. It was staged just once, outdoors, in the northern part of Central Park, and documented with color slides, which have been turned into prints for this exhibition.

That 1982 piece had more than a dozen performers in color-coded costumes. There was a Woman in White representing Ms. O'Grady's mother; three personifications of the artist (as a child in white and pink, as a teenager in magenta,

and as an adult in red); and several male characters, including a love interest (the Man in Green, played a young Fred Wilson). The story took Ms. O'Grady from her native New England to a New York City of Art Snobs and Debauchees, and ended with her three very different selves joining hands.

Seen by a small audience, which included the event's curators — Horace Brockington, Gylbert Coker and Jennifer Manfredi — the piece must have been a sweet experience. The costumes are bright, the tableaus striking, the setting superb. If the narrative was confusing, Ms. O'Grady finessed the matter by calling the performance itself a collage, which allowed her to shape a personal story with the same disruptive, anarchic logic she has brought to other, larger histories through a distinguished career.

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