

Body images on display at Harvard



Lorraine O'Grady's diptych "The First and the Last Modernists."

By Cate McQuaid Globe Correspondent December 22, 2015

"The Fir-Palm," a photomontage in "Lorraine O'Grady: Where Margins Become Centers" at Harvard University's Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, might be a self-portrait. O'Grady, the child of mixed-race Jamaican parents, grew up in Boston.

A fir's bristling branches top the sloping trunk of a palm. The tree rises from the dark, satiny ground of a black woman's back. It blends the tropics with chilly New England. The piece comes from a series titled "Body is the Ground of My Experience."

From the ground of O'Grady's body and her imagination spring quandaries about identity, race, and power dynamics. O'Grady, who is 81, has been using images to puncture social constructions for more than 30 years. Her show at the Carpenter Center proves a cogent antidote to hoary yet still dominant notions we fall into about self and other, white and black, man and woman.

O'Grady came to the art world's attention in the early 1980s, when she showed up at openings in a gown stitched from white gloves as "Mlle Bourgeoise Noire (Miss Black Middle-Class)," striking herself with a cat-o-nine-tails, calling it "the whip that made plantations move." Documents about this performance, on loan from O'Grady's alma mater, Wellesley College, are on view.

In character, O'Grady crashed the 1981 opening of the New Museum's "Persona" exhibition, spotlighting white artists who, like O'Grady, worked in character. Imagine the scene! Sly, yet explosive. Lucy Lippard wrote about it in the *Village Voice*; at least one other critic completely ignored the performance in his review.

In those early performances O'Grady brought the attention of a hermetic white art world to black art and the history of blacks in America. Work that followed grew more precise and searing.

A second photomontage from "Body is the Ground of My Experience" lays out the sometimes romanticized, always politicized, often violent history of sexual relationships between white men and women of color. "The

Clearing: or Cortez and La Malinche. Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, N. and Me," is a diptych. The scene on the left looks gauzy and romantic, with an embracing, nude couple floating in the air and a pair of mixed race kids kicking a ball.

O'Grady places Chekov's gun on a pile of shed clothes on the grass; it's bound to go off in the next act. The second panel depicts a man in a skull mask and a Spanish conquistador's uniform (a reference to Hernán Cortés, who partnered with an indigenous Mexican woman known as La Malinche) groping a stiff, naked black woman.

Working with diptychs, the artist presents pairs of images as unlikely kin. "Miscegenated Family Album: Sisters I," matches a photo of a sculpture of Egyptian Queen Nefertiti with a portrait of the O'Grady's sister, Devonia Evangeline. Both have narrow chins and high foreheads; this might be a family album. In her series "The First and the Last Modernists," she links Charles Baudelaire and Michael Jackson, cultural renegades who challenged notions of race — Baudelaire's common-law wife, Jeanne Duval, was a black woman.

The most recent piece here, "Landscape (Western Hemisphere)" poignantly echoes "The Fir-Palm," made 20 years earlier. The hypnotic video in lush sepia offers a close-up of O'Grady's hair. It kinks and it curls; it's discretely black and white, then mashed-up salt-and-pepper. It blows violently, then looks like something you could rest in.

In its extremes, "Landscape" recalls "The Clearing," but "The Clearing" traces history, and "Landscape" presents the product of that history — a body and mind at a juncture of opposites and power plays, complicated and captivating.