

Lorraine O'Grady's *NEW WORLDS*

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The unpublished article by Gosine, a York University (Toronto) professor who'd written earlier on hybridity in O'Grady's work, is a perceptive and detailed analysis of the subject's treatment in her *New Worlds* show at Alexander Gray, NY.

Gently trembling quivers of hair provide a perfectly pitched and suitably gorgeous meditation on a conversation Lorraine O'Grady started twenty years ago. The artist's conundrum then, as now, was herself and us. As she wrote on the wall of the 1991 New York exhibit in which the images first appeared: *What should we do? What is there time for?* What should we do with the mess of desires, identities and culture that mixing, both forced and free, has unleashed in the Americas since colonial encounter?

Her reply in that first solo show at the INTAR Hispanic American Arts Centre opened with two works from her series *Body Is The Ground of My Experience (BodyGround)*: the delicate *Fir-Palm*, a black-and-white photomontage featuring a hybrid New England fir and Caribbean palm growing from a black woman's torso, and *The Clearing*, a photomontage diptych showing conflicting scenes of interracial sex played out in black-and-white against the backdrop of a forest clearing. Twenty years later, for her 2012 solo show *New Worlds* at Alexander Gray Associates, the two are paired with her newest work, *Landscape, Western Hemisphere*, a mesmerizing eighteen-minute black and white wall-sized video projection that features those compelling soft and sharp movements of her hair.

The appropriately titled *New Worlds* is O'Grady's tome on five hundred years of history. It offers further evidence of the artist's prescience. A complex, subversive thinker, once overlooked, she has always made work that demands committed attention--no easy feat in any situation but especially difficult in an earlier, racially segregated art world that could not find place for her. *The Fir-Palm* establishes a context for one strand of a lifelong interrogation that has consumed her practice, revealing the tensions surrounding the artist's identity and her production of body and desire as foundational for the development of the Western Hemisphere. Its botanic concoction embodies O'Grady's heritage as the child of Caribbean immigrants who left Jamaica for Boston at the dawn of the twentieth century. The image is at once an assertive claim about her own hybridity and, through the clouds hovering in its background, an acknowledgment of its precarious condition. *The Fir-Palm* puts to picture Homi Bhabha's "Third Space"; through O'Grady, Gayatri Spivak's subaltern speaks.

If *The Fir-Palm* signposts hybridity, *The Clearing* is its visceral elaboration. In it, O'Grady's arguments are teased out, beginning with the diptych's subtitle: "*or Cortez and La Malinche, Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, N. and Me.*" The imbrications of identity and culture with nature and sexuality are demonstrated in the scenes' activities. In the left panel, a black woman and white man appear elevated in clouds, their expressions matching the ecstasy of their sexual engagement. Below, children are playing in the clearing, as a pile of the couple's discarded clothes topped by a gun lies, carelessly, on the ground. There are no children in the image on the right. The black woman's stiff corpse stretches out on the ground, while the white man, now wearing a skull as his head and robed in a chainmail vest, hangs over her.

When she first offered *The Clearing* to curators, many read its images as an "either/or" proposition, or a "before/after." O'Grady was often asked to show the only the first panel. Recalling an invitation by a feminist curator to participate in the 1993 show "*Coming to Power: 25 Years of Sexually X-plicit Art by Women*" at the David Zwirner Gallery (Soho), O'Grady recalls, "the only piece I had that was remotely sexually explicit was this

piece, so I gave her the diptych" (Interview, June 21, 2010). But at the opening, only the left panel was exhibited. "The show was about sexuality as an uncomplicated, positive blessing," O'Grady discovered, "not sexuality as a complicated life issue or even sexuality as an issue far more complicated for women of color than for white women. I said 'what have you done? You've put my piece up and it's not my piece.'" Another curator—"a very nice white guy from the South," O'Grady remembers—said, "That's not what sexuality is, or at least that's not what it's supposed to be.' But well," O'Grady replied, "that is what it is."

O'Grady's reply—*But well, that is what it is*—characterizes *The Clearing's* main contention: that desire is complicated and irresolvable. Rather than "either/or" or "before/after," *The Clearing* must be two images together, simultaneously and inseparable – "both/and," as O'Grady has put it – because they articulate the simultaneous horror and pleasure of interracial and/or East-West engagement, its ambivalences and indeterminacy. "The couple making love in the trees is a literalized metaphor—'*I'm so happy that I'm floating on air*'-- but one that is brought to ground almost immediately, or simultaneously." "No matter how happy you are," she says, "there's always this moment when you are brought to earth."

The black-white union represented in the image is both dream and nightmare, neither a choice between them nor one ending with death, but a site of continuous tension. The sexual desires underpinning this engagement are fuelled through and through by colonial fantasies of "race." Yet they also potentially facilitate the destabilization of the structuring essentialism that underpins colonial acts of violence. The personal experiences that drive O'Grady's imagination and the production of *The Clearing* serve as testimony to the complicated experience of the colonial subject—to its simultaneous experience of violence with desire, of pain and punishment with dreaming and longing—and of the impossibility of resolution. *The Clearing* insists on a complicated reading of cultural hybridity, one that claims neither celebration or denunciation, but rather appreciates its simultaneous and inseparable brutalities and pleasures. The images comprising the diptych are not an 'either/or' proposal but

a 'both/and' description of what is left in the aftermath of colonial encounter.

The Clearing is especially concerned with the interracial pairing it puts to picture, of the black woman and white man. In "Olympia's Maid," O'Grady theorized that the relationship between the white male and black female broke the "faith" between the white male and white female. It marked, she says, "the end of courtly love," represented in *The Clearing* by the man's chainmail shirt. The three relationships named in the subtitle situate this sexual pairing as central to the development of the Western Hemisphere. None are simply innocent representations of romantic love, nor are they simply condemnable in the terms of political morality.

Significantly, after the charged imagery of *The Clearing*, O'Grady returned to the poignant, more tender aesthetics of *Fir-Palm* for her first single-channel video *Landscape, Western Hemisphere* (2010). The idea of her hair as a landscape came about instantaneously. "I cannot tell you the thought process that arrived at my hair as a landscape," she says. But once it did, her hair worked as an objective correlative to the trees in *The Clearing*. "I began to see that I identified with all parts of *The Clearing*," she says. "I identified with the couple, I identified with the children, I felt that my hair was the result of the action that took place in *The Clearing*. This action," she concluded, "which, for all that it may have happened elsewhere in the world, has to be identified determinatively with the Western hemisphere." While interracial sex happened elsewhere, "only in the Western hemisphere was it this foundational, ultimately synthesizing action," O'Grady says. "It couldn't resonate in the same way elsewhere. It wouldn't be foundational, it wouldn't be symbolic, definitive. My hair," she adds, "as a metaphoric system, could really only have existed here. It was symbolic of all the physiological, mental, and cultural hybridizations that were going on." The title of the piece followed. "You know, I didn't realize until I began to think about what to call the video that in *The Clearing's* subtitle, Cortes and La Malinche were Latin America, Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings were North America, and N. and Me, that was the Antilles. So I had

unconsciously put all of it together, *The Clearing* was North, South and in-between."

With *Landscape, Western Hemisphere*, O'Grady brings us into a necessary but permanently unstable resolution. "My attitude about hybridity," she says, "is that it is essential to understanding what is happening here. People's reluctance to acknowledge it is part of the problem... The argument for embracing the other is more realistic than what is usually argued for, which is an idealistic and almost romantic maintenance of difference. But I don't mean interracial sex literally. I'm really advocating for the kind of miscegenated *thinking* that's needed to deal with what we've already created here."

What should we do? O'Grady's is not an easy response. That it foregrounds the messy details and contradictions in negotiating colonial inheritances, is in fact part of her answer. The artist's imperative to defy and disrupt hegemonic practices is essential to her work, but this is no anarchistic enterprise, oppositional for the sake of it. Rather, O'Grady's work underlines the complex history of colonization, its contemporary persistence and the genuine difficulties for securing justice in the face of it. In her groundbreaking study of black female representation "Olympia's Maid," O'Grady wrote: "But, I tell myself, this cannot be the end. First we must acknowledge the complexity, and then we must surrender to it."