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Les Fleurs Duval

by FRANKLIN SIRMANS. 1998

Lorraine O'Grady, "Studies: For a Work-in-Progress on Charles Baudelaire, the first Modernist Poet, and his Haitian-born wife Jeanne Duval," Sep 12 - Oct 31, 1998, at Thomas Erben Gallery, NYC. Review published on the internet.

Rescuing and reconstructing lost histories are symptomatic of many artists' projects today, a tendency that is due in part to larger curatorial currents of a more internationalist (or less essentialist) approach. Increasingly, curators are revealing a tendency heretofore minimized by the powers that be to look beyond the traditional centers of production. One recent example is the new book *Cream*, published by Phaidon Press in London. Another is a new interest in the work of Lorraine O'Grady, who has been working and producing art since the late 1970s, minus a five-year break.

O'Grady's brand of Conceptualist art tackles big themes, namely the canon of Western art history. Her most recent project, a 16-part installation of digital cibachrome diptychs titled "Flowers of Evil and Good," goes literally to the "heart of the matter." The immediate subject is the work and love relationship between Charles Baudelaire ("the West's first modern art critic") and his black common-law wife of 20 years, Jeanne Duval.

Duval, like so many others, has been largely erased from history. O'Grady has retrieved her image by creating pictorial equals. Each diptych, three of which were presented at Thomas Erben, features one image of Duval and one of Baudelaire, each on separate panels, with details from Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* in the background and text imposed on the foreground. The images of Baudelaire are taken from

photographs by Etienne Carjat and Nadar, and coupled with Baudelaire's own words. The images of Duval are mostly drawings by Baudelaire and texts invented by O'Grady, in a fusion of research and novelistic license. Duval's words also tell the story of O'Grady's mother, Lena, who emigrated from Jamaica to Boston in the 1920s, almost 100 years after Duval emigrated from Haiti to Paris in the 1830s.

This juxtaposition fits squarely into O'Grady's practice, which has often linked narratives taken from public accounts of history with those of a more personal and familial history. By splicing a modernist monument like *Les Demoiselles* with its African influences, and inserting Duval's point of view, O'Grady constructs an interwoven pattern of narratives that unravels the canon of modernism.

While O'Grady's project speaks volumes conceptually, it remains esthetically tight. Her use of the computer to construct images emphasizes the harmonious flow of technology into art production at the end of the millennium. At the same time, it demonstrates the way technological advances can construct, and reconstruct, accepted reality.

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