

ART

How Lorraine O'Grady Has Challenged a Segregated Art World

O'Grady has persistently raised questions about the lack of black representation in art and in the art world. But her latest exhibition represents a shift.

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Installation view, *Lorraine O'Grady: From Me to Them to Me Again*, SCAD Museum of Art (image courtesy of SCAD Museum of Art)

SAVANNAH, Georgia — From the moment I first saw Lorraine O'Grady's art, at an exhibition of her photography *Art Is ...* at the Studio Museum in Harlem, I felt she was interested not simply in realizing her own artistic vision, but in confronting the art world.

Art Is ... stemmed from a performance the artist staged at the African American Day Parade in September 1983. O'Grady captured jubilant black children, men, and women, dancing and bearing broad smiles, along Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard. Amid the revelers, O'Grady's float, fitted with a 9-by-15-foot antique-style gold frame, transformed everything it passed into a work of art. A troupe of dancers O'Grady hired for the piece also carried gold frames, placing them over parade-goers, who

themselves instantly became art. O’Grady has said that the piece was a response to an acquaintance’s remark that “avant-garde art doesn’t have anything to do with black people”; it successfully argues the contrary. Along the parade route the artist recalled hearing countless black people shout: “That’s right, that’s what art is, we’re the art!”



Installation view, Lorraine O’Grady: *From Me to Them to Me Again*, SCAD Museum of Art (image courtesy of SCAD Museum of Art)

Over her three-decade-plus career, O’Grady has persistently raised questions about the lack of black representation in art and in the art world, and who gets to define what art is, which we continue to struggle with today. Just this year, the Brooklyn Museum’s appointment of a white woman to oversee its African Art Collection caused a furor, and *T Magazine*’s article, “Why Have There

Been No Great Black Art Dealers,” from earlier in the year, caused an even bigger backlash. But O’Grady’s latest exhibition, *From Me to Them to Me Again*, currently on view at the SCAD Museum of Art, represents a shift for the artist. In a recent talk commemorating the opening she said that, as the title suggests, the show represents a return to herself.



Installation view, Lorraine O’Grady: *From Me to Them to Me Again*, SCAD Museum of Art (image courtesy of SCAD Museum of Art)

The main space features fragments from O’Grady’s series *Cutting Out the New York Times* (26 “cut-out” or “found” newspaper poems the artist made on successive Sundays, from June 5 to November 20, 1977) and blows them up into over 20 enlarged diptychs. Framed in glass and divided down the center, in the manner of a book spine, they seem almost like pages drawn from an oversized archive. The collection is aptly titled *Cutting Out CONYT* (1977/2017).

In a gallery adjoining this forest of words, O’Grady’s single-channel video “Landscape (Western Hemisphere)” (2010–2012), plays on a loop. Like the diptych — which, she has said, as an art form, offers no beginning or end, but rather a ceaseless exchange of ideas — the video of O’Grady’s hair rustling in the wind, typifies this exchange. Her wind-blown, loosely textured curls tell the story of the artist’s dual identity, as a woman of Afro-Caribbean and Irish heritage. Her curl pattern the byproduct of miscegeny, her scalp becomes ground zero for a host of politically charged and conflicting ideologies.

During her address at SCAD, O’Grady explained entering the art world: “I discovered a world so horrific. It was the most segregated world I have ever encountered.” In fact, the artist, who was born in 1934 in Boston, grew up in a well-to-do household, raised among Boston’s black elite: a segment of society of which many Americans remain ignorant, composed of black professionals, doctors, and lawyers, who went to private schools and attended debutante balls.

After high school, she attended Wellesley College where she was at the top of her class in her freshman year, ranked 15th out of 495 students. From there, she went on to the prestigious Iowa’s Writers Workshop and, later, the highest level entrance exam for federal service, the Management Intern Exam. Of the 20,000 people who sat for the written exam, she was one of 500 to pass, and then one of only 200 to pass the oral exam.



Lorraine O'Grady, "Miscegenated Family Album (Sisters I)." L: Nefernefruten Nefertiti; R: Devonia Evangeline O'Grady (1980/1994), cibachrome prints, 26h x 37w in (courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York, © Lorraine O'Grady/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York)

Is it any wonder, then, that — as O'Grady has joked — she saw herself as post-black before she was black? And that, until she entered the art world, she had felt insulated from the insult of her color? Of these earlier experiences she said in her SCAD talk, "Every world I had ever been in, there had been a way of objectively measuring my talent."

It wasn't until she had a breast cancer scare in the 1970s and decided to compose a poem for her doctor out of

New York Times headlines that she discovered her voice as an artist. She would go on to compose a total of 26 poems this way, in an attempt to divine personal meaning out of public media (as opposed to making the personal public, as in the confessional poetry of Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath).

Eager to immerse herself in the art world, she volunteered to assist the filmmaker and pioneer of black art, Linda Goode Bryant. Bryant had just been evicted from the space that housed her 57th Street gallery, Just Above Midtown, that she ran, and needed help promoting her new space in Tribeca. O'Grady made calls to persuade editors to attend a new show Bryant had organized. On one call, she spoke with an editor at *The New Yorker*.



Lorraine O'Grady, "Art Is. . . (Girlfriends Times Two)" (1983/2009), C-print in 40 parts, 16h x 20w in (courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York, © Lorraine O'Grady/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York)

“The editor asked what the show was about,” O’Grady recalled in an essay for *artjournal*. “I told her ‘it’s called *Outlaw Aesthetics*.’” In response, she said the editor coldly replied, “They like to put titles on *their* shows, don’t they?” She added, “When I heard the sound of her voice it sent chills through me. That was the moment at which I had stopped being the artist who had made *Cutting Out the New York Times* and I started being some other artist.”

That “other” artist would embark on a bold and uncompromising mission to challenge the status quo, and demand more not only of the white Western arbiters of taste, but of black artists themselves.



Lorraine O'Grady, "Untitled (Mlle Bourgeoise Noire leaves the safety of home)" (1980-83/2009), silver gelatin print, 9.31h x 7w in (courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York, © Lorraine

In her first public performance, and perhaps her best known work, O'Grady debuted her persona Mlle Bourgeoise Noire (Miss Black Middle Class). Dressed in a white gown composed of 180 pairs of debutante gloves (an ironic nod to her black brahmin upbringing) she stormed into gallery openings wearing a sparkling tiara and circulated the room, whipping herself with a cat o'nine tails and commanding: "THAT'S ENOUGH! / No more boot licking ... / No more ass-kissing ... / No more pos ... turing ... / of super ass ... imilates ... / BLACK ART MUST TAKE MORE RISKS!!!

With confrontational works like Mlle Bourgeoise Noire — which O'Grady has said was an attempt to address and "explain" to the "them" of the Eurocentric, white, Western art world — she felt as if she'd put herself in a straitjacket.

It is a corner into which many black artists find themselves painted. Jean Michel Basquiat, for example, is often quoted as saying "I am an artist, I am not a black artist." And yet it also feels important to consider, while on her remarkable journey addressing the "them," the ways in which her presence, her visibility, and the visibility she has bestowed on others (in *Art Is ...*, for example) has spoken to "us," black people.

Take, for instance, the photo series *Miscegenated Family Album* (1980/1994): an installation of cibachrome diptychs that paired images of her sister, Devonia, and other family members with iconic busts of Nefertiti and additional busts of Egyptian royals. If part of the intent was to challenge white Western ideas about the relationship of black people to world history — by aligning her own family with Egyptian royalty — hasn't she also been pushing us to see ourselves differently? As people *with* history (that predates slavery), with our own exalted bloodlines, and as actors on the world stage?

That said, *From Me to Them to Me Again* makes an exciting proposition. If the show marks the artist's return for the artist to herself, then perhaps it also marks a moment in art history in which

