

Bliss and Anger in Balance: The Art of Lorraine O'Grady

A survey at the Brooklyn Museum radiates high outrage even as it finds beauty and strength in a range of identities.



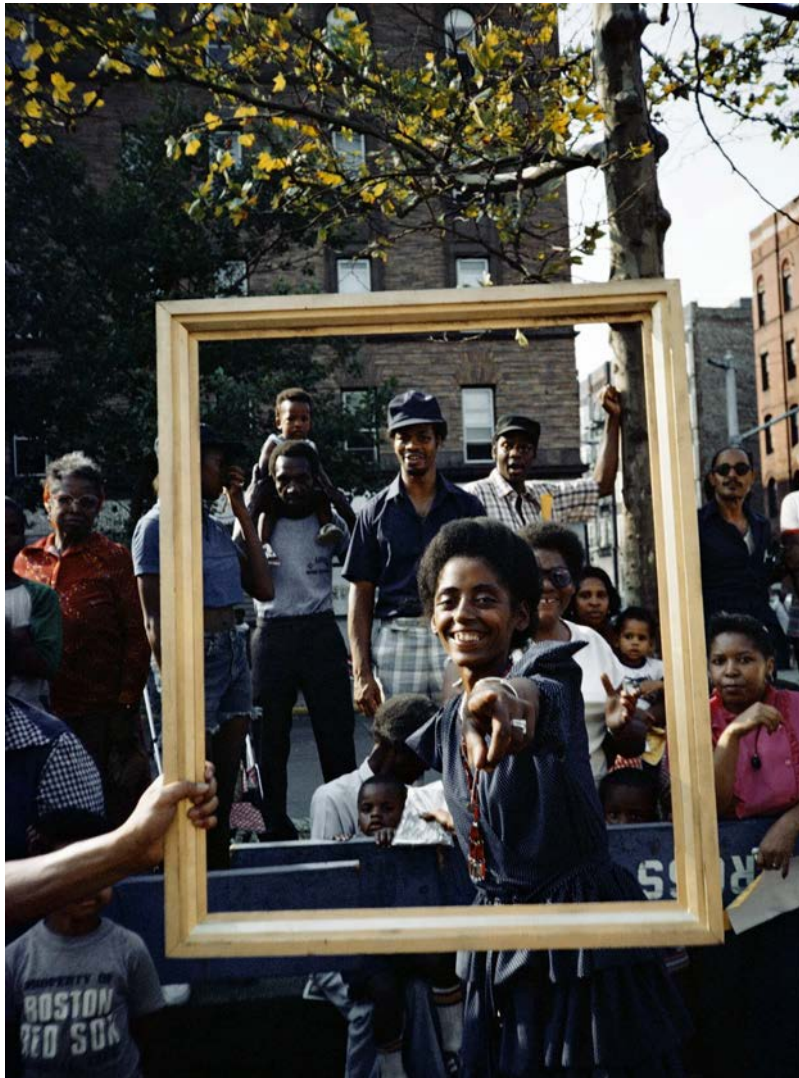
By Holland Cotter

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Back in the 1960s, some of us were taking drugs, scrambling genders, and sampling global religions to shake ourselves loose from what we saw as Western-style binary thinking, a view of the world based on strictly held good-bad, right-wrong opposites: white versus Black, straight versus gay, us versus them. Five decades later, such thinking still rules in a red-blue nation, which makes the retrospective of Lorraine O'Grady's career at the Brooklyn Museum a major corrective event.

The artist flags her own resistance to either/or in the very title of her show: "Lorraine O'Grady: Both/And." As, over a long career — she's now 86 — she has consistently shaped her art on a different model, one of balanced back-and-forth pairings: personal and political; home and the world; anger and joy; rock-solid ideas and a light formal touch.

Although the show's organizers — Catherine Morris, a senior curator at the museum, the writer Aruna D'Souza, and Jenée-Daria Strand, a curatorial assistant — have braided her art through several galleries on four floors, we're not in blockbuster country here. The bulk of this survey could probably be squeezed into a couple of carry-on suitcases. Most of her major works were one-off performances that survive now as photographs and handwritten notes.



"Art Is . . . (Girl Pointing)," 1983/2009. Lorraine O'Grady has been shaping her art on a different model. Lorraine O'Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Alexander Gray Associates

Writing is an important element in her work. Her earliest project, dating from 1977 and marking her debut as a visual artist at age 45, is a set of collage-poems composed of phrases clipped from issues of *The New York Times*. Their presence, along with cases filled with archival material — yellowing letters, lists, charts, statements — makes the show a slowdown experience, and fiber-rich meal after a pandemic year favoring eye-candy online.

And her art is the product of a textured personal history, one with few straight-ahead lines. O'Grady was born in Boston, the second daughter of Jamaican immigrants. She grew up in Roxbury, a neighborhood of newly arrived Black, Irish and Jewish populations, located just blocks from the city's main branch of the Boston Public Library and the Museum of Fine Arts. As a kid, O'Grady spent lots of time in both, with her early interest leaning toward literature.

After graduating from college, where she majored in economics and languages, she embarked on an episodically writing-centered career. She worked as a researcher and translator for the Department of Labor in Washington, then moved to Europe to start a novel. In the early 1970s, she was in New York City contributing rock reviews to *The Village Voice*, and teaching courses on Dada and Surrealist writing at the School of Visual Arts. In short, hers was a distinctly "both/and" life, to which, in 1977, she added artmaking.



"Untitled (Mlle Bourgeoise Noire celebrates with her friends)," 1980–83/2009. Lorraine O'Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Alexander Gray Associates

This began almost accidentally. After a medical procedure that year she thanked her doctor with a gift of a homemade valentine: a multipage collage-poem composed of phrases she clipped from the *Sunday New York Times*. Then, for herself, over the next six months she made two dozen. Three of the originals are on display in the fourth floor Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, where most of the show is installed. In this context, they seem emblematic of a life that was, to this point, itself a collage of interests and influences.

The next logical step was to introduce herself to the professional scene. What she encountered were levels of de facto segregation. The predominantly white mainstream art world had no time for her as a self-described Caribbean African-American. The small, tightly knit, mostly male Black art world had little room for her as a woman. The white, middle-class feminist art movement granted entry but kept her at arm's length.

Characteristically, her response was to strike out rather than retreat, and she did so through art: guerrilla-style performances in the persona of Mlle Bourgeoise Noire ("Miss Black Middle Class"), an aging but feisty and mouthy beauty queen who dressed in a gown stitched from formal white gloves and turned up, uninvited, at public art events.



Installation view, "Lorraine O'Grady: Both/And" includes her performance gown stitched from formal gloves. Lorraine O'Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Alexander Gray Associates; Brooklyn Museum; Jonathan Dorado

In this guise, in 1980, she crashed an opening at Just Above Midtown, a Manhattan gallery with an all-Black roster, shouting "Black art must take more risks!" She followed this up with an appearance at the opening of an all-white show of performance art at the New Museum, where she challenged the institution's claim to be an "alternative space" and declared that "an invasion" was imminent.

Mlle Bourgeoise Noire's white-glove gown is in the Brooklyn show, as is a series of photographs documenting her New Museum appearance. Radiating high outrage and sly humor, these now-classic gesture of Black feminist space-claiming feel years ahead of their time, as does a second major performance work of a couple years later.

In 1983, after being told by a colleague in the feminist movement that "avant-garde art doesn't have anything to do with Black people," O'Grady decided to demonstrate otherwise by participating in the annual Afro-American Day Parade in Harlem. For a performance piece titled "Art Is ..." she hired a float and a crew of performers to ride on it, each carrying an empty gilded picture frame. As the float made its way up Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard, the performers descended into the street and invited spectators to pose for photographs within the frames, to be turned into art. The piece was a hit. People who had their portraits made were — you can see it in photos — exuberant. (And it is still a hit: It inspired a video produced by the 2020 Biden-Harris campaign.)



“Rivers, First Draft: The Woman in White eats coconut and looks away from the action,” 1982/2015. Lorraine O’Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Alexander Gray Associates

O’Grady was on the float, too, smiling, watching this very public work of conceptual art unfold. My favorite of her performance pieces, though, dates from a year earlier, and was more private. Titled, “Rivers, First Draft, or The Woman in Red,” it’s a kind of semi-autobiographical “Pilgrim’s Progress.” Staged on a summer day, in a remote corner of Central Park, the piece symbolically re-enacts scenes from the artist’s life. An actor all dressed in white plays her aloof, impeccable mother; another plays O’Grady as a dreamy, bookish child. And the artist, dressed in passion-red, plays a version of her changing adult self. Traumas are enacted — romantic losses, political clashes, even a rape — but the narrative, paced like a Medieval mystery play and captured in 48 color photographs, ends with a ritualistic wade through healing waters and what feels like a state of peace.

Family is this artist’s recurrent subject. And “Miscegenated Family Album” (1980/1994), maybe her most familiar work, is made up of paired images of two of them: Queen Nefertiti and her children depicted in 18th Dynasty sculptures, and O’Grady’s older sister, Devonia, who died in 1962, leaving children behind, as seen in family photos.



“Miscegenated Family Album (Sisters I),” left, Nefernefruaten Nefertiti; right, Devonia Evangeline O’Grady, 1980/1994. Lorraine O’Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Alexander Gray Associates

On display in the museum’s third floor Ancient Egyptian Art galleries, the piece is a meditation on fundamental human connections — sisterhood, motherhood, aging — across time. But it’s also about an undying history of racism: Western historians have traditionally viewed Ancient Egyptian culture as too “Classical/white” to be African, and too “African/Black” to be European. O’Grady and her biracial

Jamaican-Boston family are assigned to a similar limbo, left floating among identities — African, American, African-American, Caribbean — without being anchored in any one in an either/or world.

The fact that they participate in all these identities, and that that is a source of their beauty and strength, seem to be the message of the show's single video, "Landscape (Western/Hemisphere)," made in 2010/2011. Installed on the Arts of the Americas galleries on the fifth floor and set between grand, land-grabbing New World vista paintings by Frederic Church and Thomas Cole, the video looks at first to be a continuous image of dense, rustling foliage. In fact, it's a close-up shot of O'Grady's "mixed-race hair," to borrow Aruna D'Souza's description in the catalog. With its shades and colors dark and light and its textures curled and straight, it's an embodied example of "both/and."



Installation view, "Lorraine O'Grady: Both/And," with a video of her "mixed-race" hair between landscapes by Frederic Church and Thomas Cole, fifth floor, Brooklyn Museum. Brooklyn Museum; Jonathan Dorado



Installation view showing Lorraine O'Grady's knight-errant persona, her latest, on the third floor of the Brooklyn Museum. Brooklyn Museum; Jonathan Dorado

In addition to being the retrospective's co-curator, D'Souza is editor of "Lorraine O'Grady: Writing in Space, 1973-2019," a book of the artist's writings published by Duke University last year. It's an absorbing cover-to-cover read, no surprise considering the artist's roots in literature. And the dates of its contents and those of the works in Brooklyn pretty much coincide, with the exception of the show's most recent piece.

Titled "Announcement of a New Persona (Performances to Come!)," and dated 2020, it's a photographic series featuring the artist herself in the guise of a knight errant entirely — indeed, invisibly — encased in a suit of Medieval-style armor on the third floor. Does the armor signal readiness for battle or self-protective retreat? You see it and think "conquistador" (bad), until you spot a miniature palm tree (good)

sprouting from the helmet, suggesting her Caribbean/Jamaican heritage. Precise meanings, like the promised performances, have yet to be revealed. But clearly, something “both/and” is up, conceived with the moral acuity, wit and humane gallantry that have always marked the standard this artist carries into the field.

Lorraine O’Grady: Both/And

Through July 18 at the Brooklyn Museum, 200 Eastern Parkway, Brooklyn, brooklynmuseum.org; 718-638-5000.

Holland Cotter is the co-chief art critic. He writes on a wide range of art, old and new, and he has made extended trips to Africa and China. He was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Criticism in 2009.

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