

# Lorraine O'Grady's Hair Stare Fare

## A veteran artist turns cultural identity into abstract art

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Lorraine O'Grady, a performance pioneer, is herself a character more interesting than almost any she could invent. Born in 1934 of mixed Caribbean and Irish background, she graduated from Wellesley in 1954, worked as a government economist, lived in Scandinavia, volunteered for Jesse Jackson, did translations for *Playboy*, and penned some pioneering rock-and-roll criticism (including for *The Village Voice*)—all *before* deciding to become a visual artist in the turbulent post-conceptual New York of the late 1970s.

These days, O'Grady is having something of a renaissance. The inclusion of her work in a survey of feminist art at P.S.1 a few years ago led to a surge of fresh activity, inspiring, among other things, her current show at Alexander Gray Associates, which centers on a new video—a relatively new medium for her.

Why the interest now? O'Grady has lived between a heck of a lot of worlds, which probably makes her work resonate with the polymorphous sensibility that is the contemporary vogue. On the other hand, her art has an underlying honesty and social intelligence that makes it refreshing in the present context of easy nihilism.

Two works have become her signatures. The first, a guerrilla performance series that began around 1980, had her assume the fanciful persona known as "Mlle Bourgeoise Noire." Clad in a dress stitched together of white gloves and carrying a cat-o'-nine-tails, she would crash openings at the New Museum, then still a kind of alternative space catering to the mainly white downtown set, or the then-thriving Just Above Midtown gallery, dedicated to the African-American avant-garde, and issue cryptic, poetic rants about the parochialism of the separate scenes.

If this work seemed meant to shake up art, O'Grady's second-most-famous piece, from 1983, deliberately sidestepped the art context almost entirely: She created a float for a community parade in Harlem, giving marchers empty gold frames so that they could frame themselves and their surroundings as artworks, thereby crossbreeding conceptualism's rarefied "its art because I say it is" posturing with some up-with-people neighborhood empowerment.

Mixing a lyrically critical spirit and back-to-basics sobriety, the tone of O'Grady's new video, *Landscape (Western Hemisphere)*, falls somewhere in between this pair. A soundtrack of cicadas and bird chirps at first suggests that the black-and-white clip depicts a natural landscape, perhaps a field of blowing weeds. In fact, for close to 20 minutes, what it offers is a simple close-up of O'Grady's own hair as she stands between two fans, the air charging her tresses with jittery, wispy animation.

O'Grady has been preoccupied with cultural identity all her life, and hair is, of course, a potent symbol of both culture and identity. Her own hair bears within it the specific evidence of her mixed ethnic background, and the idea of dwelling on its texture is a deliberate part of the piece. (An earlier pair of photo works from the '90s on the theme of colonialism and miscegenation, also on view, hit home the theme.) Yet the video's entire essence is to zoom in until O'Grady's locks give up their hidden, abstract life—it really is a quiet pleasure to sit and stare at the patterns on-screen like a sort of hirsute Rorschach test. The video both is and is not about Lorraine O'Grady and her hair—the idea being that we always are and are not who we think we are or want to be, a thought that seems very contemporary indeed.