HYPERALLERGIC

Opinion

Baudelaire, Michael Jackson, and Modernism

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Still from Performa's video of Lorraine O'Grady speaking (screenshot via YouTube)

One of my favorite pieces included in *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art* at the Studio Museum in Harlem earlier this year was Adam Pendleton's "Lorraine O'Grady: A Portrait" (2012). The video captures O'Grady, a pioneering black feminist artist, telling the story of her career in art. Pendleton shakes up the narrative a bit with abrupt cuts and unusual perspective,

but the most fascinating part of the video is unquestionably O'Grady herself, speaking smartly, thoughtfully, and eloquently about racism and sexism in the art world as well as her own work. She seems to possess an incredible magnetism and magnanimity.

Unfortunately "Lorraine O'Grady: A Portrait" isn't online anywhere, so I can't include it here. But there is a video on YouTube, thanks to Performa, that conveys some of what captivated me about O'Grady that day at the Studio Museum. It's a recording of her talking about her work "The First and the Last of the Modernists" (2010), which pairs photographs of Charles Baudelaire and Michael Jackson. As she explains in the Performa video, O'Grady is "obsessed" with the two men, and she sees a unique connection and parallel between them: "Charles was the first modernist. There will never be another modernist with a vision as total as Michael Jackson. … And yet when you look at both their lives, they were so destroyed by this desire to be God."

The whole thing is excellent, filled with insights not only into the lives and careers of Baudelaire and MJ, but also into O'Grady's own mind. (I particularly like her discussion of the actress Jeanne Duval, Baudelaire's lover for 20 years and, for O'Grady, "the first postmodernist.") And if you need any more incentive: today would have been Michael Jackson's 56th birthday. A good time to listen to O'Grady discuss how he changed the world.