

# Art in America

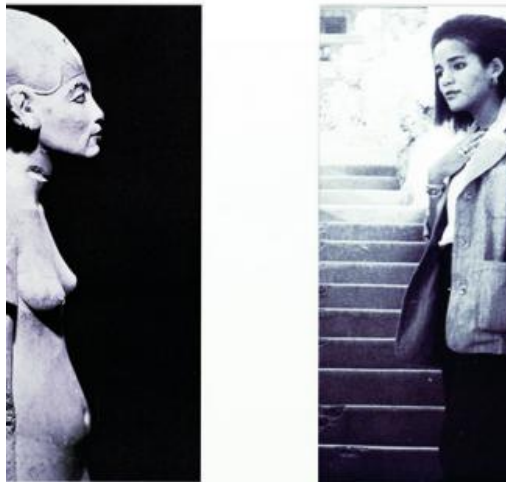
REVIEWS FEB. 19, 2016

## Lorraine O'Grady

CAMBRIDGE,  
at Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts

by Kirsten Swenson

Lorraine O'Grady:  
*Miscegenated Family*  
*Album (Sisters III)*, L:  
*Nefertiti's daughter*,  
*Maketaten*; R:  
*Devonia's daughter*,  
*Kimberly*, 1980/94,  
Cibachrome prints, 26  
by 37 inches overall; at  
the Carpenter Center  
for the Visual Arts.



At the time, it seemed unremarkable to walk onto the Harvard campus to view “Lorraine O’Grady: Where Margins Become Centers,” tucked inside the Carpenter Center, America’s sole Le Corbusier-designed building. The exhibition pivoted around O’Grady’s iconic 1981 performance, *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire Goes to the New Museum*. Archival materials from this “guerrilla invasion” were displayed in vitrines throughout the show. O’Grady had crashed the opening of the New Museum’s “Persona,” an exhibition featuring nine artists working with alter egos. The concept seemed progressive—Collette, Lynn Hershman Leeson and Eleanor Antin participated—but every artist was white. The rapidly politicizing New York art world of the early 1980s still had its margins. O’Grady, New England-raised and of Caribbean, African and Irish descent, protested her exclusion. After all, her persona, Mlle Bourgeoise Noire, had achieved a degree of art world notoriety, and the museum had invited her to lead a program for schoolchildren (later rescinded). O’Grady was not pleased. She arrived at the opening in a dress and cape stitched of white gloves. She handed out chrysanthemums, smiling sweetly, then beat herself with a cat-o’-nine-tails—“the whip that made plantations move,” according to her own description of the piece. Finally, she read an acerbic poem that took aim at the art world’s so-called alternative spaces. It ended with a call to black artists: “Now is the time for an invasion!!!!”

“Where Margins Become Centers” explored forms of internalized and externalized oppression. Photographic diptychs filled the walls, establishing seductive dualities—aesthetic twinnings that propose both false origins and uncanny parallels. The series “Miscegenated Family Album” (1980/94) pairs O’Grady’s sister, Devonia, and Devonia’s daughter with ancient Egyptian renderings of Nefertiti. The women strike similar poses, prompting a sort of mythmaking—imagined matriarchies, a confusion of nature (genetics) and culture. A hallway outside the main galleries was hung with the series

“The First and Last of the Modernists,” diptychs of Baudelaire and Michael Jackson. Both figures are flamboyant expositions of identity, the channeling of conflicted emotions into public personae. Dandyism is a lineage like race in this proposition.

Photomontages depict hybridized bodies and plants in surrealist dreamworlds generated by history and culture. *Body Is the Ground of My Experience (The Clearing: or Cortez and La Malinche, Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, N. and Me)*, 1991/2012, portrays an interracial union in an idyllic, Manet-inspired landscape, while in *The Fir Palm* (1991/2012) a tree combining a New England fir and Caribbean palm is rooted in the back of a dark-skinned, gender-ambiguous body.

A final gallery contained the video projection *Landscape (Western Hemisphere)*, 2010/11. Here, O’Grady’s tightly framed frizzy hair is both image and abstraction. A sound collage of rushing water, birdcalls, wind and then muffled city noises plays as her hair jumps with the movements of her body and sways in the breeze like tall grass. An image of hair—a body’s metonym, specific in its race and age—is burdened with the history of Western civilization. For O’Grady, the body is always laden with culture; like landscape, it condenses many investments and significances.

Some weeks later, it seemed not unremarkable but improbable to have seen O’Grady’s show at Harvard. Students at Yale and Brown were protesting the hostile environment engendered by the ivory tower’s lack of diversity. Angry editorials reacted to Hollywood whitewashing in the casting of an upcoming epic, *Gods of Egypt*. O’Grady’s longstanding explorations and accusations had broached these dynamics decades ago. Le Corbusier’s functionalist, visionary space, where things feel unresolved and in progress, was the perfect setting for O’Grady. Now, we are beginning to see her art.