

THE ARTIST AS CRITIC

Lorraine O'Grady '55

By April Austin



Photo by Richard Howard

When Lorraine O'Grady '55 announced herself a visual artist at the age of 45, she had lived many lives: government analyst, translator, rock critic, educator, and writer. Now at 82 years old, she and her work are having a profound impact on the art world, which has not always welcomed her.

Interest in her art continues to grow. In the last year, O'Grady has been featured in two traveling exhibitions originating at the Tate Modern in London and at the Brooklyn Museum in New York. A major installation of hers will be mounted at the National Portrait Gallery in London next year, and she is busy creating new work for a solo exhibit to be held at Alexander Gray Associates, a contemporary art gallery in New York City, in fall 2018.

O'Grady's work is reaching a new generation of curators and artists who prize her fierce independence, penetrating intellect, and willingness to take on the art establishment. As a conceptual artist, she has created performance pieces, photomontages, photo installations, and videos, along with essays and criticism.

"Lorraine works at the intersections of performance and writing and image and text," says Jarrett Earnest, a writer who also teaches at the experimental art school BHQFU in Brooklyn. "She's dealing with complex issues that she never allows to resolve into an easy solution. That's a paradigm that younger artists, especially those marginalized by society, find inspirational."

O'Grady's body of work is an exploration of her identity as the daughter of West Indian immigrants. The branches of her family tree include both enslaved Africans and white slave owners. Her parents, immigrants from Jamaica who settled among middle-class blacks in Boston, had high expectations for their two daughters. O'Grady was a talented student, and received an elite education, attending Girls' Latin School and then Wellesley College.

After becoming pregnant in college, she got married, completed her coursework, and graduated a year after her 1955 class. O'Grady embarked on a series of careers-leading "all these juicy lives," as a former assistant, Nahna Kim, calls them.

Wherever she went, O'Grady frequently found herself the only black person. In academia and government, her achievements had been objectively measured, she says. But when she entered the more culturally subjective art world, she came to realize that her elite education scarcely made a difference-she was defined by the color of her skin. "The art world seemed to have little conception of a black intellectual, let alone a black female intellectual," she says.

By the 1970s, she was teaching literature at New York's School of Visual Arts. O'Grady says she felt an affinity with the artists there that she had not experienced before.

O'Grady sought a framework for her visual ideas. She came across a book on conceptual art (*Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object From 1966 to 1972* by Lucy Lippard). "I was absolutely convinced that this was the type of art I understood, and I could make it my own," she says.

"But it took three years between saying it and doing it. I didn't know how or where," she says. Over that time, she went to see performance art and exhibitions including the 1980 show, "Afro-American Abstraction," at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center (now MoMA PS1).

"That show really blew my mind," O'Grady says. "At the opening, I found myself surrounded by 200 black people who were thinking about things the way I was, and I thought, 'This is the world I want to live in.'" At the same time, she felt the art in the show was too self-conscious and too careful. "And as a black middle-class person growing up, I recognized a lot about being too careful," she says.

She began volunteering at the black avant-garde gallery Just Above Midtown (JAM), which represented many of the artists in "Afro-American Abstraction." When she learned about a show opening at JAM, she knew her moment had come.

O'Grady conceived of a persona: a fictional beauty queen who had won the "title" of "Mlle Bourgeoise Noire of 1955." (Miss Black Middle Class). Her costume consisted of a gown and a cape made of 180 pairs of white gloves, a sash, and a crown. On the night of the opening, O'Grady donned her character's costume and crashed the party. Her performance included flogging herself with a cat o' nine tails and shouting a poem with the final line "BLACK ART MUST TAKE MORE RISKS!!!"

"People were shocked. They didn't know what to do," O'Grady says.



Courtesy of Lorraine O'Grady and Alexander Gray Associates, New York, NY

It had taken courage to shed her "overly well-educated, overly well-bred" background. She was simultaneously mocking her own upbringing and critiquing the tendency of black artists to create art with gloves on. The white gloves were symbolic of internalized repression, while the cat o' nine tails was emblematic of external oppression, O'Grady has explained.

A few months later, O'Grady appeared again as Mlle Bourgeoise Noire at Manhattan's New Museum. This time her criticism was leveled at the downtown white art community for ignoring black artists. Her poem proclaimed, "Now is the time for an INVASION!"

"Lorraine is an equal opportunity critic," says Robert Ransick, an artist, designer, and educator who has known O'Grady since he was a photography student at the School of Visual Arts in the 1980s. "Her genius is that she doesn't preach; she trusts your capacity to see and understand and learn from her work."

Just Above Midtown gallery founder Linda Goode Bryant understood that O'Grady's performance was meant to be constructive as well as provocative. After Mlle Bourgeoise Noire's invasion of JAM, Bryant invited O'Grady to represent the gallery in a performance-art series that included artists from around the city.

In 1983, O'Grady entered a float in the annual African American Day parade in Harlem. She hired a dozen black dancers and actors to accompany the float on its route. On the sides of the float were the words, "Art Is..." The performers, led by Mlle Bourgeoise Noire, walked among the crowd, holding up gilt picture frames in front of the onlookers.

In photographs from the event, we see young and old black people interacting with the picture frames. Some pose and preen, others point and shout. They didn't need someone to tell them what the float was about, or to explain the purpose of the frames, O'Grady says. They seized the idea immediately: They were the art.

For O'Grady, the success of the event was a rebuttal to the notion that avant-garde art had nothing to do with black people.

"Lorraine showed that a work can be both in the street and avant garde, reminding us that the two never were mutually exclusive," says Zoe Whitley, who co-curated the Tate Modern exhibition, *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power*, which includes the 40-piece photo installation O'Grady created from the "Art Is ..." event.

Photographs of Mlle Bourgeoise Noire, along with her costume, are featured in the Brooklyn Museum exhibition, *We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965-85*. One of the exhibition's curators, Rujeko Hockley, now an assistant curator at the Whitney Museum, calls O'Grady's performance an example of her fearlessness. "She plumbs her own experience, but she's also exploding the boundaries between art and life, self and family, personal and political," Hockley says. "That makes her deeply current."

The personal and political collide in one of O'Grady's best-known works, *Miscegenated Family Album* (1980/94). Miscegenation is defined as "cohabitation, sexual relations, or marriage involving persons of different races."

In a series of diptychs, O'Grady pairs images of Queen Nefertiti of Egypt with photographs of O'Grady's older sister, Devonia Evangeline. There are also pairings of the two women's sisters, daughters, and husbands.

O'Grady had long been interested in ancient Egyptian history and had traveled to Egypt in 1963. The mixed-race heritage evident in the faces of Ancient Egyptians resonated with her own family's history.

"Lorraine uses these pairings to set up a dialogue," says James Voorhies, dean of fine arts at California College of the Arts in San Francisco. "She wants us to see the similarities and differences between the two women, and also to recognize the way our culture has structured these two identities."

Dialogues about identity continue to animate O'Grady's work, particularly questions of hybridity and the dislocation of diaspora peoples. Her most autobiographical piece, a photomontage called *The Fir-Palm* (1991/ 2012) shows the trunk of a Caribbean palm topped by the branches of a New England fir. More recently, she created a video of extreme close-ups of her mixed-race hair called *Landscape (Western Hemisphere)* (2011).

Writing is a critical component of O'Grady's body of work. In 1992, she wrote the landmark essay, "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity," which has found its way into college art-history curricula. "She uses the writing to take people further into the political questions she's asking," says Voorhies.

Today, O'Grady relishes the opportunities to connect with new and more diverse audiences through her ever-evolving website and now her archives at Wellesley College. She hopes to inspire other artists of color who have seen too few people like themselves in the art world. "A lot of people struggle and then they just give up. I'm not one to ever give up," she says.