

## Lorraine O'Grady, Body Is the Ground of My Experience @Alexander Gray

By Loring Knoblauch (<https://collectordaily.com/author/loring-knoblauch/>) / In Galleries (<https://collectordaily.com/category/galleries/>) / May 16, 2022

**JTF (just the facts):** A total of 7 black-and-white photographic works, framed in black and unmatted, and hung against white walls in the main gallery space on the second floor and in the entry area on the ground floor.

The following works are included in the show:

- 3 archival pigment prints on cotton photo rag paper, 1991/2019, sized 50×40 inches, in editions of 10+3AP
- 2 archival pigment print diptychs on cotton photo rag paper, 1991/2019, each panel sized 40×50 inches, in editions of 10+3AP
- 2 sets of 4 archival pigment prints on cotton photo rag paper, 1991/2019, each panel sized 24×20 inches, in editions of 10+3AP

(Installation shots below.)



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**Comments/Context:** Lorraine O’Grady’s excellent retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum in 2021 (reviewed [here](https://collectordaily.com/lorraine-ograde-both-and-brooklyn-museum/) (<https://collectordaily.com/lorraine-ograde-both-and-brooklyn-museum/>)) provided a broad introduction (or re-introduction) to the work of a multi-talented artist whose lasting artistic importance had been under appreciated. The consistently insightful show covered her efforts in a variety of mediums – including performances and staged events, text-based collages, conceptual essays and statements, and photographs, both as documentation of her performances and in an evolving studio-based practice – and tied all of those disparate artistic threads together into a sophisticated and idea-rich package.

Part of what was on view in that larger exhibit was a series of photomontages O’Grady originally made in 1991 under the title *Body is the Ground of My Experience*. This much smaller gallery show offers a second look at that particular project, as paired with additional works made during the same year. Presented now in a spacious open installation, we can more easily examine the photomontages on their own, outside the larger flow of O’Grady’s entire career.

After a number of years of orchestrating her own performances in front of the camera, in the early 1990s O’Grady turned to the photomontage as way to combine and control her presentation of imagery, and to bring a more biting Surreal tone to her work. *Body is the Ground of My Experience* is a decently literal title for the project that became her first one-person show at INTAR Gallery in New York, as not only do the works draw from O’Grady’s lived experience as a Black woman of Caribbean heritage, several use cropped photographs of the curves of Black bodies as an unexpected representation of the land.

All three of the single image collages in this show use this “body as landscape” motif at the bottom of the compositions, the undulating curves providing a foundation for the visual stories and allegories O’Grady has built on top. In “Lilith Sends Out Destroyers”, a swarm of battleships emerges from a dark mound of hair nestled between two curves of Black skin, the birthing of war providing Lilith’s response to her mythological banishment from the garden of Eden. The work’s themes also make a timely link back to Barbara Kruger’s 1989 “Your Body is a Battleground”, with O’Grady providing a connection between body and cultural conflict that is even more literal. In “The Fir-Palm”, O’Grady offers a visual representation of her own complicated life story, with an uneasy hybrid tree rising from a woman’s navel, the evergreen (of America) grafted on top

of the palm trunk (of Jamaica and elsewhere) and the resulting combination rooting itself in the dark “land” below. And in “The Strange Taxi: From Africa to Jamaica to Boston in 200 Years”, a Black body provides the jostling road on which a New England-style brick house on wheels travels, with various female ancestors (her mother, aunts, and others) riding along on top, linking O’Grady back to the generations of women populating her past.

Two additional photomontage diptychs find O’Grady experimenting with double-wide story spaces and time-shifted sequences. In “The Clearing: or Cortés and La Malinche, Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, N. and Me”, O’Grady creates a bucolic green space in which two children play with a ball, oblivious to two disrobed ghost couples (presumably the mismatched power relationships in the title) who get together, the women in both partnered pairings seemingly dominated or disinterested; again, O’Grady is diving back into the past in search of resonant and contradictory links, connecting these histories to her own perception of how these embedded binaries inform identity. In “Dracula and the Artist”, O’Grady turns a bit more inward, with jagged-toothed combs flying at a young woman with threateningly Surreal menace; the accompanying scene finds the woman more in control, at work at her desk, with the fallen combs now lying in a spotlight pile. Whether fighting her own demons or resisting violent impulses, the artist in the diptych seems to have ultimately settled down to work.

Two other sets of pictures, also from 1991, step away from psychologically-charged scene creation and construct a straightforward double portraiture setup, with large and small head shots of the same individuals layered together. In both “Gaze” and “Dream”, O’Grady asked questions that prompted the African-American sitters to think or react to certain subjects, creating paired combinations of faces filled with a range of inner and outer reactions. The works wrestle with the masks of society, from faces offering welcoming smiles and comfortable ease to tougher exteriors adorned with wariness and confident resistance, leading to complex portraits that capture individuals with more than one face to offer the world.

As largely a reprise of works recently seen in her retrospective, this gallery show doesn’t add much to our larger understanding of O’Grady and her work in the 1990s. But that doesn’t diminish the lasting power of these photomontages – in fact, seeing them again reinforces their importance and more firmly slots them into the arc of 1990s photo history. In conjunction with her “Miscegenated Family Album”, which was forming at roughly the same time and was fully displayed in 1994, these photomontages probe O’Grady’s own identity and use it as raw material for broader studies of the psychological tensions and conflicts that surround the Black female body. Both projects deserve to be better known and exhibited, and targeted shows like this one should help to ensure that going forward histories of the 1990s more fully include O’Grady’s innovative contributions.

**Collector’s POV:** The works in this show are priced between \$50000 and \$160000, based on the place in the edition. O’Grady’s work has little consistent secondary market history, so gallery retail likely remains the best option for those collectors interested in following up.