

A homecoming for Roxbury's trailblazing artist Lorraine O'Grady

Decades after attending Wellesley College and becoming one of the school's few Black graduates at the time, the groundbreaking artist has a career survey set to open at the Davis Museum

By [Murray Whyte](#) Globe Staff, Updated January 19, 2024, 6:00 a.m.



A photograph from Lorraine O'Grady's 1983 "Art Is..." performance. LORRAINE O'GRADY/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK

Lorraine O'Grady was an intelligence analyst for the US State Department at the height of the Cold War, a professional translator, a rock critic at the Village Voice, a professor of art and literature at New York's School of Visual Arts, and finally, in her 40s, a groundbreaking artist. That last one stuck, late as she came to it, prompting her to muse that she's "only had time for masterpieces." Boston will be able to see for itself when "Lorraine O'Grady: Both/And," her career survey, arrives at Wellesley College's Davis Museum next month.

Initiated by the Brooklyn Museum, the exhibition touches O'Grady's deep roots right here: She grew up in Roxbury, the child of Jamaican immigrants, and was among the few Black students to graduate from Wellesley itself in the 1950s. "Both/And" would appear to close the circle, but O'Grady, at 89, is still active — her exhibition of all-new work opens in Chicago in April. Here, a look at a few of her landmark works coming home to Boston next month.



Lorraine O'Grady, "Mlle. Bourgeoise Noire celebrates with her friends," from Mlle. Bourgeoise Noire Goes to the New Museum, 1980. © LORRAINE O'GRADY/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK

"Mlle. Bourgeoise Noire," 1980

O'Grady began her art career almost by accident, creating spontaneous, provocative collage poems from the pages of *The New York Times* (she was prompted by a crush on her doctor, the legend goes; she made them as a flirtation). But she's best-known for her public performance pieces, and "Mlle. Bourgeoise Noire," the persona she created for that purpose, is the beating heart of her early practice. Remember, O'Grady declared herself an artist only in her 40s — after the Black Arts Movement of the 1970s, and on the cusp of the stock market spike of the early 1980s that established crass, acquisitive commercialism as a permanent feature of the art world. "Mlle. Bourgeoise Noire" was her antidote to a self-satisfied, almost exclusively white New York art scene brimming with cash: Wearing a long gown made of elbow-length white gloves, O'Grady would crash louche opening affairs peopled by the art world elite and their moneyed patrons and do outrageous things like whip herself with a cat o' nine tails, as she did at a 1981 opening at the New Museum. Noire's debut a year earlier had been telling: Storming into an opening at the Just Above Midtown gallery, a hub of the Black avant-garde art scene, she admonished her peers for tailoring their work to wealthy white art buyers; in full character, she belted, that "Black art must take more risks!"

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Lorraine O'Grady, "Rivers, First Draft: The Woman in Red starts painting the stove her own color," 1982/2015. © LORRAINE O'GRADY/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK

"Rivers, First Draft," 1982

For New Englanders, this one hits home. Staged in Central Park in 1982 as a guerilla one-time-only theatrical production — no permits, no permission — "Rivers" loosely tracked O'Grady's experience growing up as the child of Black Caribbean immigrants in Boston. If you'd wandered off the path that day, you would have seen O'Grady herself starring as the Lady In Red, navigating a cast of surly characters such as the Debauches and the Art Snobs, but the piece was made to reconcile her long journey to becoming the self-possessed artist she is. The performance took place on two sides of a stream trickling through a glade in the park, a metaphorical division between O'Grady's New England upbringing and Jamaican heritage. Three characters track O'Grady herself across eras: the Little Girl in a Pink Sash, the Teenager in Magenta, and finally, The Lady in Red, all of whom exit the scene together at the end, guided by an actor portraying [the Nantucket Memorial statue](#) — a resolution, of sorts, between past and present.

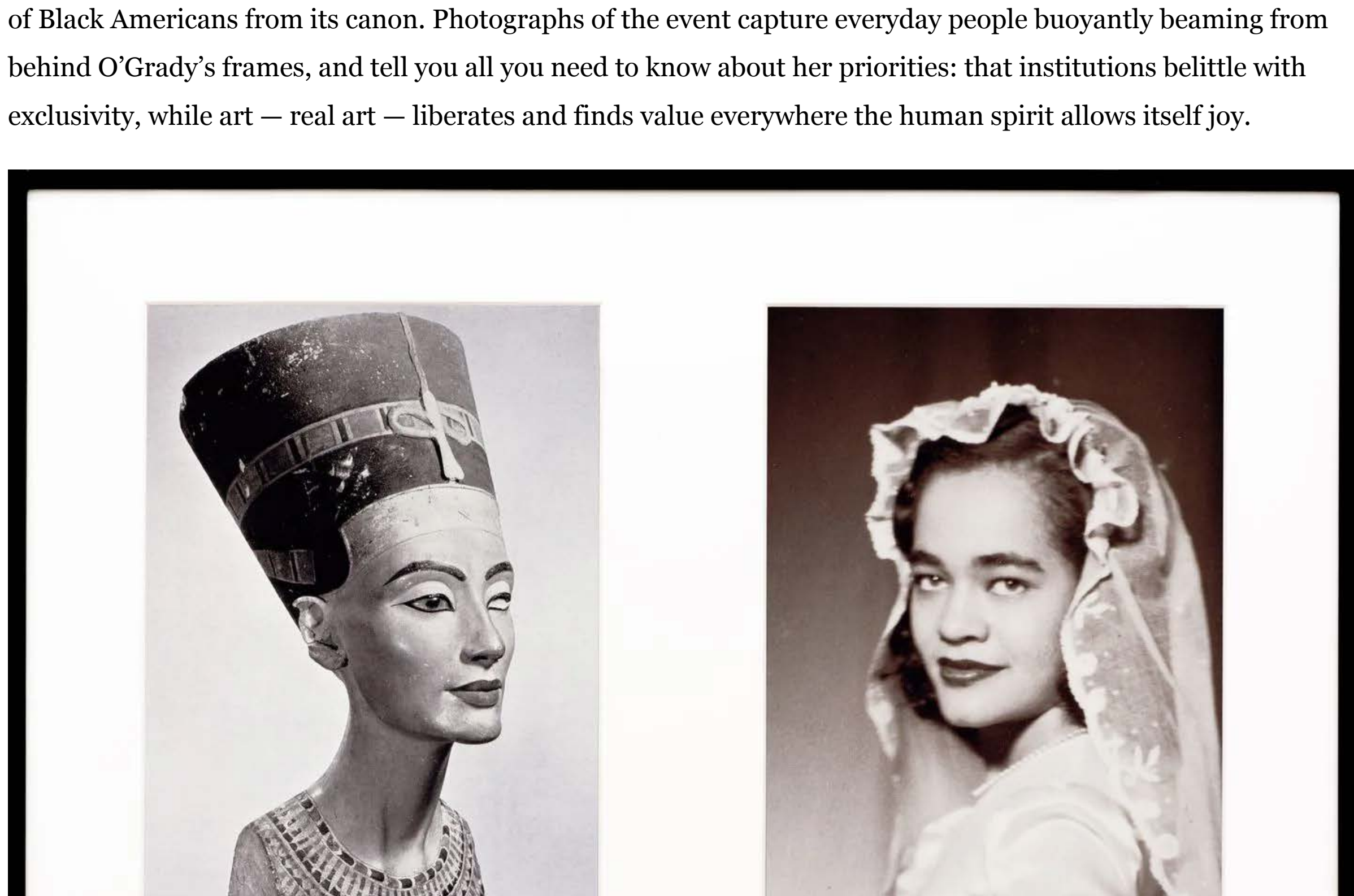
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Lorraine O'Grady, "Art Is..." (Girl Pointing), 1983/2009. © LORRAINE O'GRADY/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK

"Art Is," 1983

Staged as part of the African-American Day Parade in Harlem in 1983, "Art Is ..." is quintessential O'Grady, as ebullient as it is biting. Dressed in a long white gown as Mlle. Bourgeoise Noire, O'Grady waved from the float rolling down Adam Clayton Powell Blvd., from within a gilded frame. As the float crawled down the street, her entourage, also dressed all in white, skipped gleefully from person to person lining the streets, holding up their own golden frames to the parade-goers and capturing them within. Joyful but pointedly defiant, "Art Is ..." was a direct refutation of institutional power that had long excluded the lives and experiences — let alone the images — of Black Americans from its canon. Photographs of the event capture everyday people buoyantly beaming from behind O'Grady's frames, and tell you all you need to know about her priorities: that institutions belittle with exclusivity, while art — real art — liberates and finds value everywhere the human spirit allows itself joy.

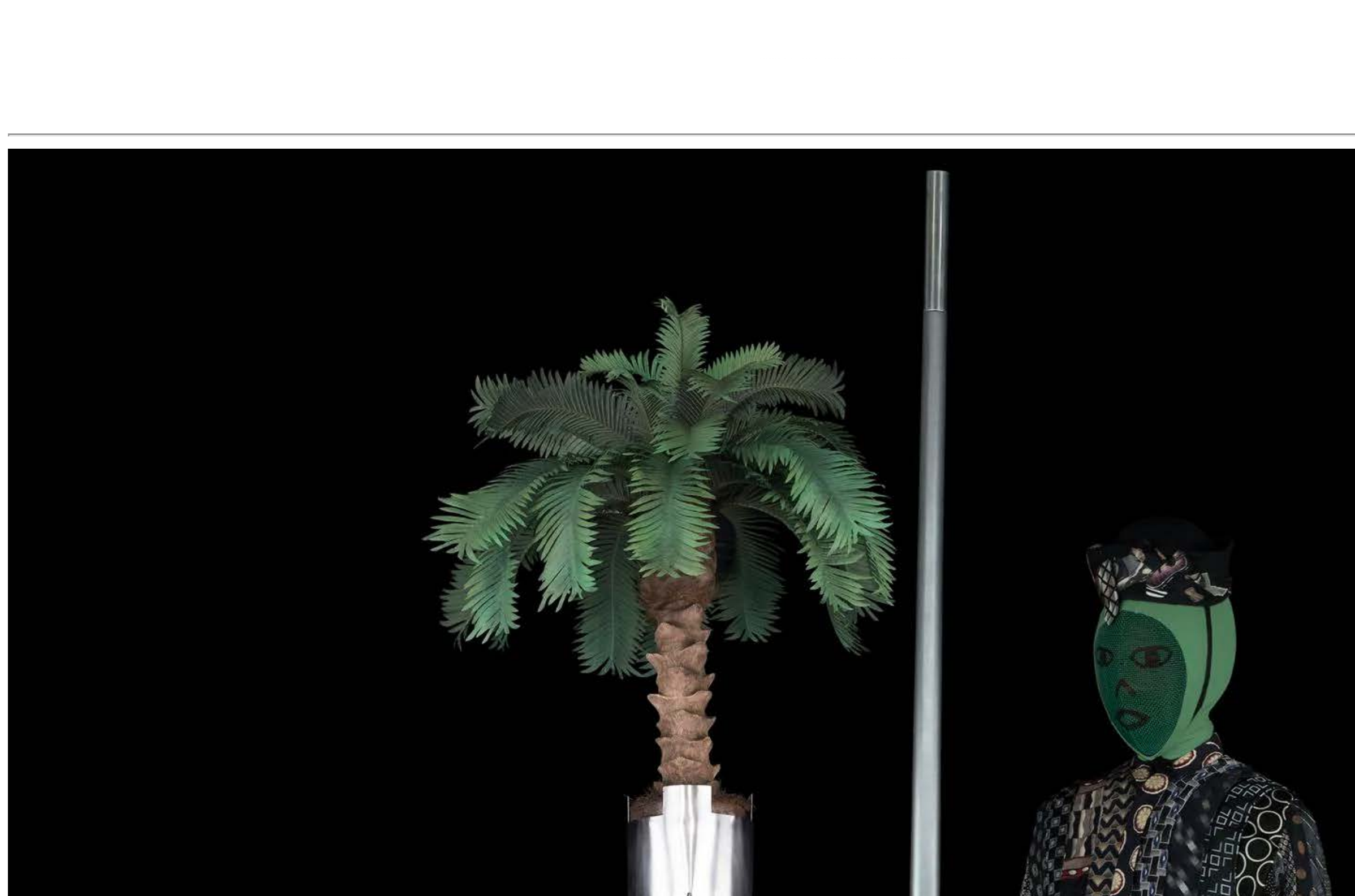


Lorraine O'Grady, "Miscogenated Family Album (Sisters I), L. Neferefruaften Nefertiti; R. Devonia Evangeline O'Grady," 1980/1994. © LORRAINE O'GRADY/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK

"Miscogenated Family Album," 1994

Both bluntly confrontational and deeply complex, O'Grady paired images of Egyptian royalty with her own family portraits for this 1994 series. On the surface, it's clear enough: O'Grady is creating equivalence between ancients like Nefertiti, the legendary queen who many believe to have been the nation's shadow ruler behind her husband, the Pharaoh Akhenaten, and Devonia Evangeline O'Grady, her older sister. Intended as a direct response to western culture's lack of regard for Black achievement, O'Grady's series also called out a complex historical record that regarded Egypt as the height of ancient civilization, and [the neighboring African kingdom of Nubia as primitive and inferior](#). More recent research has proven the kingdoms to in fact be cultural peers. O'Grady often uses diptychs to create productive interpretive friction; here, she makes clear that black-and-white comparisons serve neither side.

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Lorraine O'Grady, "Family Portrait 1 (Formal Composed)," 2020. © LORRAINE O'GRADY/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK

"Family Portrait 1 (Formal Composed)," 2020

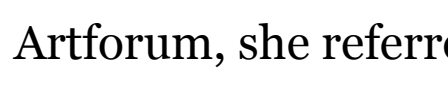
O'Grady has long referred digital composite photographs that dig in to her hybrid background (in an essay for *Artforum*, she referred to herself as "someone who'd spent my life on the hyphen between *Caribbean* and *American*"). At the Davis you'll see images like "Strange Taxi: From Africa to Jamaica to Boston in 200 Years," from 1991. In it, three women from O'Grady's family emerge, giant-like, from a dull brick Boston walk-up, slowly escaping the strictures of their uptight New England landing pad. This more recent series introduces more oblique, absurdist symbolism with much the same intent. A medieval knight in shimmering armor sports the thick trunk of a palm tree growing from its helmet; the knight's attendants, in O'Grady's imagining, are a horse and squire, the latter of which is inspired by characters from the Jonkonnu festival of Jamaica, where her parents grew up, and the Wanaragua festival of Belize, where her maternal grandmother was born and raised. The collision of cultures makes O'Grady who she is — always both/and, never either/or.

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LORRAINE O'GRADY: BOTH/AND

Feb. 8 - June 2. The Davis Museum at Wellesley College, 106 Central Street, Wellesley, MA. 781-283-2051. www.wellesley.edu/davismuseum.

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