

Artist Highlight: Lorraine O'Grady

By Larissa Ramey, Content Strategy Intern

Crystal Bridges will close early at 4 PM on Friday, May 3, to prepare for the VIP Premiere of *The Portal: An Art Experience* by Jewel. Lunch will be served in the Great Hall on Friday. The Coffee Bar and select galleries will close at 3 PM.

Feb 7, 2024 Art & Collection

Lorraine O'Grady (1934) is a contemporary artist and critic whose work redefines the narrative around Black women being seen and used as a subject in art. One of her most iconic works, *Untitled: Mlle Bourgeoise Noire*, was recently acquired by Crystal Bridges and is currently on view in the Contemporary Art Gallery. This series of fourteen prints documents the artist as her guerilla art persona named Mademoiselle Bourgeoise Noire (Miss Black Middle-Class). It shows her celebratory tour and performance surrounded by other artists, skeptics, admirers, and critics. O'Grady used this performance to enter the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York to make sure a big institution, like a museum, heard her and remembered that she stood up and spoke her mind through her artistry.

This series of groundbreaking images signified O'Grady's commitment to pushing the boundaries of what Black women and artists could do while sparking dialogue.



Lorraine O'Grady, *Untitled (Mlle Bourgeoise Noire)*, 1980-83/2009. Fourteen gelatin silver prints, printed 2014. Each, approx. 8 1/2 x 10 in. © 2024 Lorraine O'Grady / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Active participation plays a substantial role in Lorraine's career and within Crystal Bridges. Being in conversation with the images in our contemporary art gallery allows for both the elements of growth and dialogue to blossom. A way to participate is by asking questions and sitting with each image. One way O'Grady actively pushed boundaries was through performance. Performance allows more space to be utilized, and the opportunity to be a part of the work yourself is more available. Try leaving us a comment on social media and tag us @CrystalBridges to share with us "What does making space for yourself at CB mean to you?" This is how the development of practicing analog photography is brought forth from a modern to a contemporary conversation. The artist used analog works to understand the world by "writing in space."

From October to December, Crystal Bridges will display Lorraine O'Grady's 14 photograph series in the Contemporary Art Gallery. This work offers a way to learn about the power of visual art and performance through a contemporary lens. O'Grady's artistic practice shares the power of seeing oneself in the world and how to use art as a transformative power for change. O'Grady is quoted as saying, "The reasons I go on with performance are two: first, because I'm stuck with it. It's the only art form that I feel capable of both mastering and expanding aesthetically. And second, because I believe it is an acceptable political option. I'm convinced the struggle for a just society is a kaleidoscopic one that has to be fought in all shapes and colors simultaneously. An upper-middle-class Black woman making art that insists on cultural equity performs just one necessary political function." Page 37, *Writing in Space*. The way performance allows people to spark action, build community, and show their bodies, voices, and thoughts matter. O'Grady used her performance piece, *Art Is (Troupe Front)*, 1983, to share that art is political.



Lorraine O'Grady, *Art Is... (Troupe Front)*, 1983/2009, c-print in 40 parts, 16 x 20 in. Courtesy the artist and Alexander Gray Associates, New York, NY. © 2017 Lorraine O'Grady / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Analog photography is an essential element of O'Grady's artistic practice. She uses this medium for its aesthetic qualities and to connect her work to the history of photography, which has often marginalized Black subjects. Her use of film and analog processes harkens back to an era when photography was still a developing art form, emphasizing the timelessness of her themes.

O'Grady's use of diptychs, a pair of complementary images displayed side by side, is a deliberate artistic strategy. This format invites viewers to make connections between the images, often revealing complex relationships or contradictions. In her diptychs, Grady juxtaposes images of herself with images from popular culture, challenging viewers to confront their preconceived notions of Black womanhood.

Grady's *Untitled: Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* challenges viewers to confront the commodification of Black identity, particularly in the art world. Her white gloves symbolize both luxury and servitude, highlighting the complexities of race and class. The mask she wears is in the form of her alter egos, which alludes to the masking of identity often required of marginalized individuals. Through this diptych, O'Grady invites viewers to question the roles society imposes on Black women and the struggle for self-identity.

Lorraine O'Grady's use of diptychs, as a way to share the power in numbers, and analog photography, particularly in *Untitled: Mlle Bourgeoise Noire*, is a testament to her ability to provoke thought and conversation about Black female individuality. Her work challenges stereotypes, celebrates individuality, and sheds light on the intricate intersection of race and gender in contemporary society. O'Grady's art continues to inspire and empower, reminding us of the power of visual storytelling to challenge and reshape our understanding of identity and representation.

Ready to see Lorraine O'Grady's work for yourself? Visit our [Plan a Visit](#) page to learn more about [Campus Parking](#) and start planning your next visit to the museum.

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