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A Homecoming For Lorraine O'Grady At Wellesley College

Chadd Scott Contributor @ I cover the intersection of art and travel.

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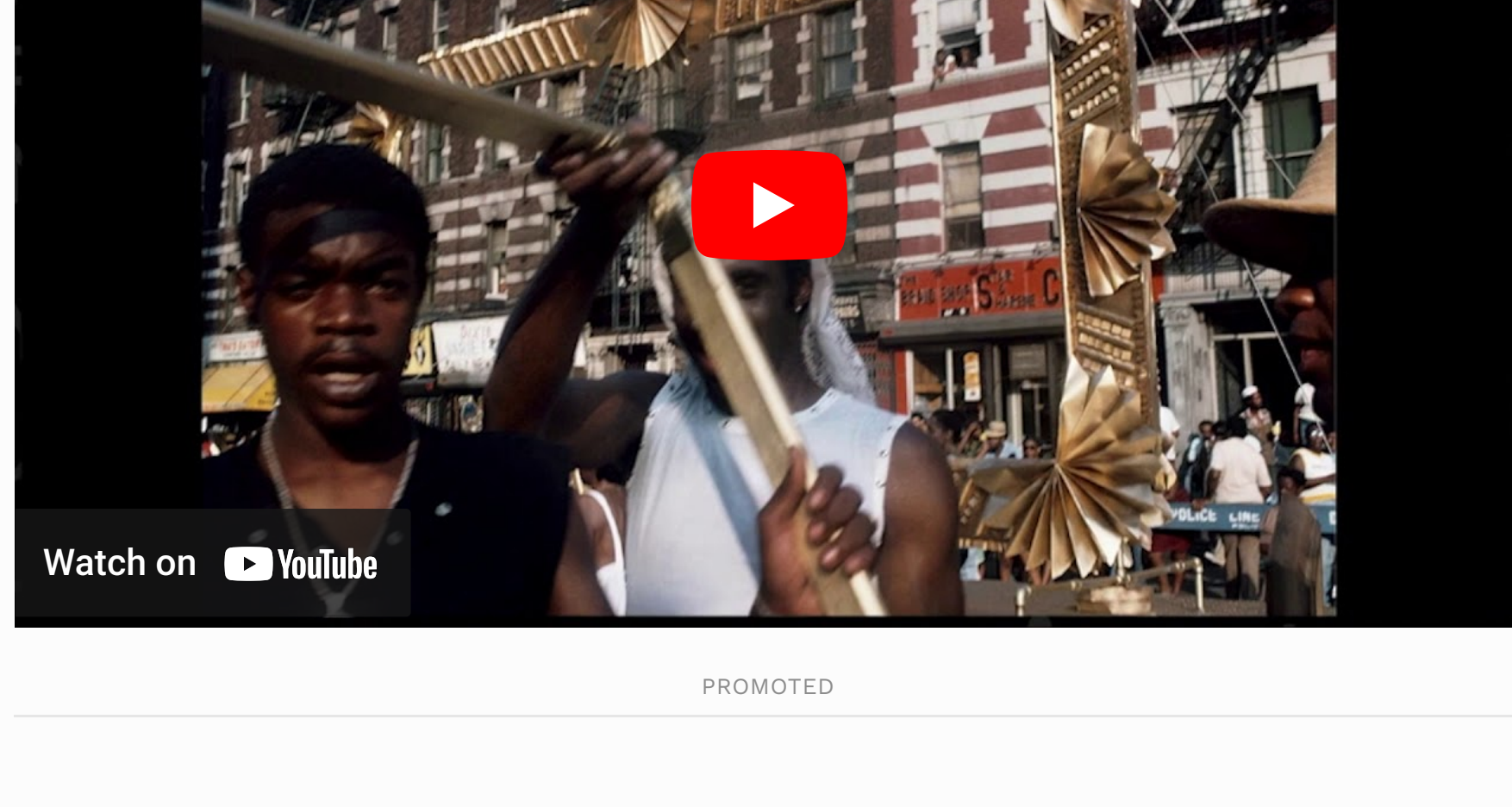
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- The smiles.
- The faces.

in [Lorraine O'Grady's Art Is](#) intervention into Harlem's 1983 African American Day Parade saw her position a 9 x 15-foot antique-style gold frame on a float moving along the parade route. Performers dressed all in white followed behind with smaller frames, engaging attendees to place themselves in the frames and become art. The subsequent photographs spectacularly captured the joyous celebration.

Twentieth-century art, reflecting the time span it covered, was largely tortured. Think German Expressionism, [Guernica](#), [Kara Walker](#). With *Art Is*, O'Grady went dramatically against the grain, capturing irrepressible expressions of Black Joy decades before that term would enter the mainstream.

It was also thoroughly avant-garde and deeply conceptual, attributes many critics at the time felt absent in African American art.



PROMOTED

Art Is takes its place alongside other unforgettable projects produced by O'Grady (b. 1934) over the past half century during "[Lorraine O'Grady: Both/And](#)" at the Davis Museum at Wellesley College through June 2, 2024. "Both/And" marks the first major career survey of the renowned conceptual artist whose work has long challenged prevailing understandings around gender, race, and class.

Originally organized by the Brooklyn Museum in March 2021, the exhibition charts the development of O'Grady's artistic production spanning collage, photo-installation, performance, and video. It brings focus to the artist's skillful subversion of the "either/or" logic inherent in the Western philosophical canon, and explores her longstanding commitment to the reasoning of "both/and."

Lorraine O'Grady



Lorraine O'Grady (American, born 1934), *Mille Bourgeoise Noire* celebrates with her friends, from *Mille ...* [1] © LORRAINE O'GRADY/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK

Lorraine O'Grady's long career belies her late start.

Born in Boston to Jamaican parents, she was classically educated at the Girls Latin School before studying economics and Spanish literature at Wellesley College (class of 1955). Her alumni status and the school's suburban Boston location makes "Both/And" a homecoming.



O'Grady would become the first Wellesley graduate to pass the U.S. Federal Management intern exam, thereby receiving a coveted job at the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Despite professional successes as a research economist, a literary and commercial translator, and a rock music critic—for "Rolling Stone" no less—O'Grady transitioned to artmaking in the late 1970s pursuing a desire to express her own ideas.

She did so in the most unusual, original and provocative ways. Almost straight out of the gate, [her *Mille Bourgeoise Noire* \(1980–83\) performance](#), "a critique of the racial apartheid still prevailing in the mainstream art world," in her words, was a hard open hand slap to the art world's head it never saw coming. It remains one of the most memorable, confrontational, courageous performance art pieces ever made.

As a Black woman, a native New Englander, and child of Caribbean parents, O'Grady has made art as a means of self-exploration as well as cultural critique. Her work deals with a range of overlapping themes: Black female subjectivity in Western modernity and artistic modernism; hybridity and diasporic experience; multiplicity and selfhood; colonialism and slavery.

ARTH 314: "Lorraine O'Grady'55: Writer, Artist, Archivist"



Lorraine O'Grady (American, born 1934), *Miscegenated Family Album (Sisters D, L, Nefeneffruaten ...* [1] © LORRAINE O'GRADY/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK

With the famous graduate getting her own exhibition at the on-campus museum, [Nikki A. Greene](#), Wellesley College Associate Professor of Art, quickly put two and two together.

"Once I found out that the Davis Museum was going to pick up the Brooklyn Museum's Lorraine O'Grady book and exhibition, it immediately came to me that this is a great opportunity to dig deep into the life and career of a single artist," Greene told Forbes.com. "That's not really anything new, per se, but it's unusual to study a living person. It was especially inviting to think about engaging with Lorraine O'Grady directly."

O'Grady will be visiting campus during the exhibition's run. Greene's students will not only be studying the artist, but meeting her, giving gallery talks on the show, and assisting Greene, who's curating [a performance art series](#) to accompany the retrospective.

Were her students familiar with O'Grady before starting the class?

"If they've taken a class with me, they had some introduction," Greene, who teaches a performance art seminar and another class called "The Body, Race, and Gender in Contemporary Art" where O'Grady comes up, said. "Otherwise, for many of them, this is all new. They're reading about her fresh. They are walking into the exhibition fresh; most (are) starting from scratch."

Throughout "Both/And," faculty, staff, and students from across the Wellesley campus will be studying and discussing the works in several departments including Africana Studies, American Studies, Anthropology, Art, Cinema and Media Studies, Classical Studies, English, History, Philosophy, Physical Education, Recreation and Athletics, Women's and Gender Studies, and Writing.

ARTH 314 students will additionally be working with O'Grady's archives donated to the school's library in 2010.

"What the archive material does is make their experiences as students here come alive," Greene said. "Seeing a graded Spanish paper is one experience from the archive—a paper she submitted for a class while she was at Wellesley College. It's marked (with) the professor's comments. The work (the students are) doing now, they too are building their personal archives, and they can model themselves after the career—or multiple careers—that Lorraine O'Grady had."

Greene wants students to pay particular attention to that last detail.

"That Lorraine O'Grady doesn't become a quote/unquote artist until she's in her 40s and to still have such a high level of success, and in her later years, my hope is that (students) don't feel like they have to have everything figured out, that they can find their voices now, explore all the things they want to explore now," she said.

"Both/And"



Lorraine O'Grady (American, born 1934), *Art Is ... (Girl Pointing)*, 1983/2009. Chromogenic ... [1] © LORRAINE O'GRADY/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK

Among the works created by O'Grady between 1977 and 2021 that will be on view at the Davis Museum are her photo-installation of *Rivers, First Draft*, a one-time only performance staged in New York's Central Park in 1982. The exhibition also includes pieces from O'Grady's more recent (2020) body of work, revolving around the artist's latest artistic persona known as the Knight, or Lancela Palm-and-Steel. The Knight wears a 40-pound suit of custom-forged, plated steel armor in the Late Renaissance style of the conquistadors, but topped with Caribbean headdresses emblematic of the Global South.

And, as mentioned, *Art Is*, Greene's favorite.

"That kind of guerrilla work of quickly giving people a frame and people calling out—I want to be art; choose me, pick me—that kind of instant, unscripted, spontaneous interaction with the audience, and that experience of capturing these moments," Greene explains of what attracts her to the piece.

The exhibition displays a sequence of photographs from *Art Is* all in a row.

"The repetition of the series of those photos is really moving and not all of those photos were taken by her," Greene adds. "This is so 80s—no instant photography—she gave (participants) her card and said could you send me your negatives when you're done. So, there are also these unknown photographers that are in that series, that took these moments. That's not just Lorraine O'Grady's hand, that's the hand of people who were in Harlem on that day."

Put it all together and a complete picture of an astonishing career comes into view.

"The many galleries the museum has installed create these unique experiences. When you're looking at *Art Is*, you're enveloped by a wall of those photographs. When you're looking at *Rivers, First Draft*, you walk down one wall and then you turn, and then on both sides are other images of that performance in Central Park," Greene explained of the exhibition installation. "The mood changes from one gallery to the next, and it feels like each grouping of works, they're complete, you really get the sense that you are seeing these vignettes into to her artistic production."

"Both/And" along with the performance art series at Wellesley College are free and open to the public.

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Chadd Scott Follow

I still remember visiting the Prado museum in Madrid. What I knew about art prior to that trip would comfortably fit on the end of a paint brush. My life would be changed... [Read More](#)