

SX art 5 - 01.2025

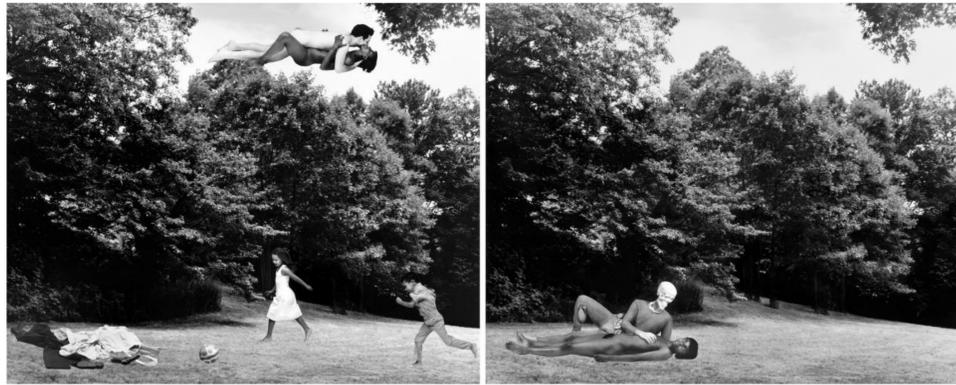
Lorraine O'Grady

LANDSCAPE (WESTERN HEMISPHERE)

Now renowned performance and visual artist [Lorraine O'Grady](#), passed away on December 13, 2024, a few months after she was named a Guggenheim Fellow and shortly after her 90th birthday was marked. Although she never visited the Caribbean, endlessly postponing an invited, funded trip to Jamaica because the timing, it seemed, was never right, she described herself as a "West Indian woman." Born to Jamaican parents in Boston in 1934, she would grow up in a highly accomplished group of Caribbean folks tagged the "Black Brahmins," and would contend with these and other aspects of her heritage throughout her life.

In the fifteen years since our introduction to each other on February 19, 2010, O'Grady pursued the making of only three new works, including *Looking for a Headdress* (2015), a video shown at the *En Mas* traveling exhibition curated by Claire Tancons, in which I also appeared. She was still in the throes of the long-forming project *Sir Lanceola*, elements of which were previewed at *Both/And*, her 2021 solo exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum and at her 2023 exhibition, *The Knight, or Lanceola Palm-and-Steel* at her new gallery, Chicago-based Mariane Ibrahim. *Sir Lanceola* was the primary subject of thirteen hours of recorded Zoom dialogues between us in 2021 and 2022, an effort she anticipated would result in an authoritative essay about her life's work, in *Small Axe*, which will still come.

Lorraine was a singular force in my own life, and our engagement since 2010 shaped my thinking and practice in ways that will take me years more to unpack. But in beginning to pay tribute to her, here I recall the making of the oldest of these three new works, the video she created for the Buffalo art biennial "Beyond/In Western New York" in 2010, *Landscape (Western Hemisphere)*, to draw a few, truncated thoughts about her remarkable creative methodology.



The Clearing: or Cortés and La Malinche, Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, N. and Me (1991/1992) © 2025 Lorraine O'Grady / Artists Right Society (ARS), New York

Prior to my first invitation to her apartment on April 28, 2010, her studio manager, the surrealist and archivist Sur Rodney (Sur), prompted me for a response to her work. "Will you have a look at the diptych and related material," Sur wrote, "and see if it inspires a dialog you might consider having?" He was talking about *The Clearing: or Cortés and La Malinche, Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, N. and Me*, the piece of hers that had most interested me. Lacking a substantive knowledge of art history (I was an adult before I got to visit my first museum), I drew on my primary training in reading images, from Black British Cultural Studies, and my experience of analyzing popular environmentalist representation. I quickly replied with my first impressions of the work, which were absent of the hallmarks of art crucial writing; there would be no mention of materials, lighting, or composition. My thoughts read as follows:

The diptychs get to the heart of the matter about how power functions with desire—and the complicated ways in which gender and race are harnessed to turn us off and on, and how this works to produce ambivalent anxieties as responses to the violences of colonialism. The first time I came across these images, my thoughts turned to agency (the eroticism of domination for all engaged, not just the dominator) and, especially, to nature. I was really struck by how much these images manage to capture the tensions between 'race,' sex, and nature—right from its very title. ... The threat of illicit sex, and difficult truths about desire, pose to the natural order of things; the ways in which racialized sexual violences become regarded as nature, etc. Those big trees, dark, dense, hovering over the children, the skull (which I think can point to many kinds of deaths)—there's so much here I'd want to hear from Lorraine about.

The next day Sur replied first, "She said something like 'he's inside my head.'" A few hours later Lorraine confirmed her approval: "I read your response to Sur and was just amazed at how in tune you are with my thinking." From there things moved quickly. We met in her apartment, where she showed me the original prints of *The Clearing*, and within the week Lorraine had identified a schedule for completion of the video that would become *Landscape*. Production would be coordinated by Sur and biennial curator Carolyn Tennant.



From the opening of *What's Left: Artworks made for A Public*, February 19, 2010, courtesy Andil Gosine



Behind the scenes, June 21, 2010, courtesy Sur Rodney (Sur)

We were to record first a conversation between us about *The Clearing* first, on June 21. Lorraine left it to me to come up with the questions, and would then use her audio from the conversation, or newly recorded audio drawn from it, to soundtrack newly shot video of her hair blowing in the wind. I was in the throes of my first heartbreak at the time and brought that energy to our conversation. My first question, "What is love?" That set us off on a wide range of discussions about colonization, "race," and sexuality, and responses by her that remain my favorite to this day. One insight became the seed for much of my subsequent work. "Every culture feels that they've created these hard-won distances between themselves and the animals, and anything that reminds you that you haven't come quite so far is problematic," she observed, "puts the culture in jeopardy." Her storytelling of her first sexual experience was so memorable that I can recall every burst of laughter that punctuated it:

I lived on a street and it was a dead-end street, there were not very many houses, but at one end of the street, the corner house was a HUGE wooden mansion, I'm sure it was a hundred or more years old at that time, and it probably had had a very glorious life with people and parties and so forth, but it had become a factory of some kind. Nothing had changed about it, it was still set back in its lawn, and it was still wood, and it was, . . . but there was, over the top. . . a big sign in the front, above the porch, it said "Egyptian Chemical Company." And what the Egyptian Chemical Company manufactured was embalming fluid. And they would put the trash cans with the embalming fluid stuff. . . whatever it was. . . out in the back in a shed. And that was the shed we all used to go to. It was the only place in the neighborhood that was more or less public but closed in and that you could actually get it on. Isn't that amazing? Can you imagine? And so the smell of embalming fluid.. is like an intricate part of my sexual memories!

Radio producer Omme-Salma Raheemullah and I would edit the conversation into a thirty-minute audio documentary about Lorraine that aired across College campuses in North America, but no audio from our dialogue would appear in *Landscape*. In the end, and with my encouragement, things took another direction in the editing suite. Rather than soundtrack the video with audio, which would likely produce too didactic a result, she turned to sounds of nature from her environment, thus casting her "miscegenated" hair as 'the landscape' of the Western Hemisphere. She borrowed my audio recorded and directed her team to capture particular sounds. Lorraine was meticulous in her planning throughout each stage of the process, and investigated many different possibilities before she felt things were exactly right. She reviewed shots of her hair from different angles and under different lighting, and at various speeds, and even when settling on the 'right' one, Lorraine had thousands of edits done to the video. This massive effort is largely unseen in the final work, in which sound and image seem to flow along organically, as if bereft of any interruption by technology or human hand.



Clip from *Landscape (Western Hemisphere)* © 2025 Lorraine O'Grady / Artists Right Society (ARS), New York

Detailed attention, deep thinking, and research are hallmarks of many artistic practices, but there were particular contours of Lorraine's that I witnessed during the making of *Landscape* that forever shaped my own. One, I believe, stemmed from our shared understanding of ourselves as *creole* subjects, and our full alignment with the philosophy and politics of Stuart Hall; on February 10, 2014, I broke the news of his passing to her, and her reply was not surprising. "The only voice I ever ALWAYS agreed with," she said of him, "because he spoke from a place we both shared but so much more deeply than I could." We consoled each other over emails and phone calls throughout the day, unified in our shared assessment, at that time, that no thinker had mattered to either of us more. We truly believed culture was perpetually in motion, unfixable and always evolving, and brought that agility to our art practices. Another important aspect of her practice which shaped my own, and which was evident across all of her work, was her uncanny ability to connect the personal with the social-historical. It was never one or the other, or one above the other. For Lorraine, both were always imbricated, and necessarily in need of attention. Our coming late to artistic practice after training in social science, and after proving our mettle in the "more serious," "more respectable," and "more purposeful" business of economics (Lorraine) and international development and politics (me), provided to us a profound appreciation of art's greatest contribution as a form of knowledge and analysis: its ability to render material the conscious and subconscious. This reverence bonded our practices, and I learned from her the importance of doing enough research and thinking to feel confident about a subject such that one could let go of it, and allow instinct and intuition to guide creation. Didactic forms of artistic expression offered no poetry and, worse, evaded the truth. An artistic practice was above all else a search for truth. And an artist's practice had also to simultaneously be guided by the first and ultimate priority and commitment, of making beauty in the world. Time and time again she would advise me about my own emerging practice, that whatever I was doing, I should strive to do all I could do to "make it beautiful." *Landscape*, like all of her post-2010 works, was clear in its purpose as a reconsideration and appreciation of a preceding work. Decades later, she was still grappling with what her artworks said, and in the process created a new one from that critical reflection. For many decades more, we will all be, as one *New York Times* tribute headline stated, "catching up to Lorraine O'Grady." -[Andil Gosine](#)



search field type here 🔍