



PBS NEWS HOUR

Acclaimed artist Lorraine O'Grady on her long path into art world acceptance

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Transcript Audio

Some 50 years into her career and at almost 90-years-old, artist Lorraine O'Grady has her first-ever museum retrospective at Wellesley College's Davis Museum. If that sounds like an honor delayed, much of O'Grady's career has played out with a slow burn. She looks back at her long path into art world acceptance with Jared Bowen of GBH in Boston. It's part of our arts and culture series, CANVAS.

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Tamara Keith:

Some 50 years into her career and almost 90 years old, artist Lorraine O'Grady was recently honored with a prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship. If that sounds like an honor delayed, much of O'Grady's career has played out with a slow burn.

With her first ever museum retrospective now at Wellesley College's Davis Museum, she looks back at her long path to acceptance in the art world.

Special correspondent Jared Bowen of GBH in Boston has the story for our arts and culture series, Canvas.

Jared Bowen:

In her work and in life, artist Lorraine O'Grady has long confronted a world of black and white, as in either/or thinking, as in her own art-making, but also in racism, including what she experienced working at the Bureau of Labor Statistics in the 1950s.

Lorraine O'Grady, Artist:

Even though we were all intellectuals and they saw me as an intellectual, they could not imagine a Black intellectual or a Black female intellectual. They had not seen it. And that was because the Black middle class was being willfully ignored.

Jared Bowen:

But she would not be ignored and, over the next 20 years, she established her voice, covering the arts as a writer, translator and rock critic.

And then O'Grady decided to be seen. In the 1970s and '80s, she became an artist herself, zeroing in on the New York art world by reinventing herself as a conceptual and performance artist.

Lorraine O'Grady:

Those fields did not have a history. And that meant that you could make a history. You could make the present and the future.

Jared Bowen:

And make career-defining statements. The art world of the time was deeply divided along racial lines.

So O'Grady called it out. She invaded New York City art spaces under the guise of Mademoiselle Bourgeoise Noire, a fictional character O'Grady devised with a backstory, that she'd been crowned Miss Black Middle Class, complete with crown, sash, and a gown comprised of white gloves.

It was a vision that had come to O'Grady after many encounters with what she describes as the safe white art world.

Lorraine O'Grady:

I said, oh, that's what that art was. It was art with white gloves on.

This piece had two motivations, to kind of introduce myself as an artist and to answer the white art world.

Nikki Greene, Associate Professor of Art History, Wellesley College: She's an icon. She is one of the most prominent contemporary conceptual artists that we have among us.

Jared Bowen:

Nikki Greene is an associate professor of art history at Wellesley College, O'Grady's alma mater. On view now at the college's Davis Museum is her first ever retrospective, coming nearly half-a-century into the now 89-year-old artist's career.

Nikki Greene:

Because of Lorraine's persistence over the last four decades, I think people have finally seen the light in many ways.

Jared Bowen:

Gallery after gallery reveals O'Grady's argument that the world is so much more than black and white. Cross-pollination courses through her work, the trunk of a palm tree crowned by fir tree branches, a family album that features Egyptian Queen Nefertiti alongside the artist's sister Devonia, Harlem parade attendees suddenly framed as art.

So are they simply joyous bystanders or the subject of a portrait? Is it a fir tree or palm tree, royalty or family? The answer, as O'Grady has argued time and again, is Both/And, the name of this show.

Nikki Greene:

She always had a sense of a kind of duality in her own personal heritage, being Black, but also having ancestry of European descent, being American, but living at home with parents who had very strong Jamaican accents.

Jared Bowen:

In 1982, O'Grady depicted her life in a one-day-only performance in Central Park. Called Rivers, First Draft, or The Woman in Red, a figure emerges from her blended New England and Caribbean background.

Lorraine O'Grady:

The key moment is when she sees a white stove and she realizes it's now or never and she begins to paint it her own color. She paints it red. It's me becoming an artist.

Jared Bowen:

For her project titled Art Is... O'Grady hired dancers and actors toting gild frames to join the annual Afro-American Day Parade in Harlem.

Mademoiselle Bourgeoise Noire was there, but the greater focus was on the community, where parade-goers joyously made themselves the art.

Nikki Greene:

When one thinks of an ornate gold frame, often, they're thinking of precious, fine art, perhaps from the Renaissance or Baroque era.

So taking a gilded frame means you are the finest, most precious art as well.

Jared Bowen:

Less precious to O'Grady, The New York Times. In one of her most famous series, she spent successive Sundays cutting out headlines, words and phrases, restructuring them into her own poetry.

Nikki Greene:

We see it too in quilts. I think that's probably one of the most beautiful examples, invisible examples of how this cutting and pasting and stitching can really create something on its own that's completely new and innovative.

Jared Bowen:

For O'Grady's latest work, she's gone back to the beginning, remembering statues of both Athena and Joan of Arc that adorned her Boston high school. She commissioned her own suit of armor. And in making this, she's also going back to her creative roots, fusing Renaissance armor with a Caribbean palm tree.

Lorraine O'Grady:

I never know which part of my body is getting me into trouble and which part of my mind is getting me out of it. So I said I need an image that's the opposite.

So I knew I needed -- I needed -- in the position of the body, I needed Europe. In the position of the mind, I needed the Caribbean.

Jared Bowen:

For Lorraine O'Grady, the sum of her parts is as great as the whole, or, as she would put it, both/and.

For the "PBS NewsHour," I'm Jared Bowen in Wellesley, Massachusetts.

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