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Four joyous girls in Harlem: how Lorraine O'Grady showed that art is for everyone



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Joyous ... Lorraine O'Grady's Girlfriends Times Two. Photograph: Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York/©2022 Lorraine O'Grady / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

In the second of our new series about artworks by women that have relevance to today's news, our writer pays tribute to an artist who, like the England Women's football team, set out to inspire young girls

Responding to a comment by a "non-artist acquaintance" that "avant-garde art doesn't have anything to do with Black people" - and to prove that it did - in September 1983, artist Lorraine O'Grady took her camera to the "largest Black space she could think of" - the African American Day Parade in Harlem, New York, to document the crowds for her series Art Is ... Hiring a gold fabric-covered float, complete with a giant gilded frame, O'Grady instructed 15 actors and dancers, all dressed in white, to reach out to the excited onlookers and have them pose inside empty gold picture frames.

With her camera, under the glittering sunlight, O'Grady shot celebratory images of people of all different ages and myriad personalities, ranging from energetic locals to those in a moment of reflection, taking everything in. But it is the group of young girls in Girlfriends Times Two, smiling from ear to ear with their hands gripped tight to the gold edges - confidently showing that they belong in these frames - that I find the most joyous.

Over the past few weeks, we've watched Sarina Wiegman's unstoppable England team thrill the nation in the Women's Euros. There was the 95th-minute long-range goal by Georgia Stanway, which clinched their spot in the semi-final, Alessia Russo's backheel to secure the Lionesses's place in the final, and last night Ella Toone's epic lob giving them the initial lead in the final, and then Chloe Kelly's goal securing England as the triumphant and deserved win. It's all been documented by the team's official photographer, Lynne Cameron, who has captured the euphoria of their success, from the aftermath of Fran Kirby's momentous goal to Rachel Daly storming the pitch in celebration.



Lorraine O'Grady's Troupe With Mile Bourgeoise Noire, taken at the African American Day Parade in Harlem in 1983. Photograph: Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York/©2022 Lorraine O'Grady / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Just as the Lionesses have shattered any preconceptions that football belongs in a man's world - as shockingly revealed in an anonymous note tweeted by Woman's Hour presenter, Emma Barnett - O'Grady too broke free from traditional ideas about what art is and where it should be situated. Rightly ignoring society's rigid viewpoints on a gender-imbalanced art world, and bringing art back to its simplest and most effective terms, Art Is ... showed that anyone could be worthy of belonging "inside the frame" - of being a subject of "art". It's up to us, the viewers, participants - or in the case of the England team, the fans - to rewrite the rules and be inclusive of everyone.

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This month, the Lionesses achieved that, not only through their incredible success on the pitch but in the impact on those watching them play. An amazing 9.3 million people watched England thrash Sweden; records were broken as Sunday's game became the most attended for a Uefa tournament

in men's or women's football; TV viewing figures are up 58% from previous Women's Euros. The former England men's star Ian Wright proclaimed after the team soared into the final: "If after this, girls aren't allowed to play football like the boys in school, then what are we doing?"

Art Is ... brought art out of the museum and into the public realm. It expanded the fabric of photography and performance, and showed the "non-artist acquaintance" - and perhaps the establishment they came from - the relevance of art and its power to drive inclusivity. It showed that art can be a performance, a question, a call to action, in a museum or out in the streets. For O'Grady, art is "a joyful performance in Harlem's African American Day Parade".

Just like O'Grady telling the beaming young girls that they too should be included on museum walls, the Lionesses are encouraging the next generation of footballers. This is powerfully outlined by the striker Nikita Parris, who has written: "So I know how young women, young black women feel growing up in today's world because there's not much representation at the highest level, where they see a pathway or they feel a sense of, 'I can attain that dream.'"

In the way that Art Is ... was groundbreaking in the realm of art, the Lionesses, not only in making history by lifting their trophy last night, have changed minds and hearts. Now everyone can feel that they are worthy of being part of the game.

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