

Press Release

Brooklyn Museum



Lorraine O'Grady (American, born 1934). *Rivers. First Draft: The Woman in White eats coconut and looks away from the action*, 1982/2015. Digital chromogenic print from Kodachrome 35mm slides in 48 parts, 16 x 20 in. (40.64 x 50.8 cm). Edition of 8 + 2 AP. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York. © Lorraine O'Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

The Brooklyn Museum Announces the First Comprehensive Retrospective of Pioneering Conceptual Artist Lorraine O'Grady

Opening March 5, 2021, *Lorraine O'Grady: Both/And* will span four decades of the artist's career and feature nearly all of the artist's major projects, including the *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* trilogy, *Rivers*, *First Draft*, and *Body Is the Ground of My Experience*, plus a wide selection of archival materials on view for the first time. The exhibition will also mark the debut of a much-anticipated new body of work titled *Announcement of a New Persona (Performances to Come!)*.

Lorraine O'Grady: Both/And is the first comprehensive overview of the work of Lorraine O'Grady (b. Boston, 1934), one of the most significant figures in contemporary performance, conceptual, and feminist art. O'Grady is widely known for her radical persona Mlle Bourgeoise Noire, and has a complex practice that also encompasses video, photomontage, concrete poetry, cultural criticism, and public art. The artist has consistently been ahead of her time, anticipating contemporary art world conversations about racism, sexism, institutional inequities, and cultural oversights by decades, and her prescience has inspired younger generations of artists. *Lorraine O'Grady: Both/And* will mark the first time that O'Grady's four decades of artistic output will be given its much-deserved institutional credit. The exhibition is curated by Catherine Morris, Sackler Senior Curator Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, Brooklyn Museum, and writer and critic Aruna D'Souza, with Jenée-

Daria Strand, Curatorial Assistant, Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, Brooklyn Museum.

Raised in Boston by middle-class Jamaican immigrant parents and educated at Wellesley College, O’Grady began her career as a visual artist at the age of forty-five. She previously spent years working as an intelligence analyst for the United States government, a translator, a rock music critic for *The Village Voice* and *Rolling Stone*, and literature instructor at the School of Visual Arts. It was, in part, her encounter with Just Above Midtown (JAM) gallery in the late 1970s (and its community of African-American artists and other artists of color) that prompted her to begin her own artistic career. Some of her most important early performances were attempts to lay bare what she recognized as the deeply segregated nature of the art world. At the same time, O’Grady has continually imagined her own history, body, relationships, and biography within a cultural landscape that often erases or obscures Black female subjectivity.

These parallel threads—of outward-facing critique and inward-turning self-reflection—are some of the many binaries that O’Grady’s work addresses. By putting seemingly contradictory ideas into proximity and refusing the possibility of resolution, O’Grady seeks to undermine the power and hierarchy that usually attaches to such oppositions as black and white, museum and individual, self and other, West and non-West, and past and present. The exhibition’s subtitle *Both/And*, alludes to O’Grady’s ambitious goal of dismantling the either/or thinking that forms the basis of much of Western thought, and its attendant structural inequalities.

“A Lorraine O’Grady retrospective is long overdue,” says exhibition co-curator Catherine Morris. “For forty years—from the moment she bravely launched herself into the New York art world via the critically astute and unflinching character Mlle Bourgeoise Noire in 1980—Lorraine O’Grady has utilized the tools of the avant-garde to make work prioritizing and valuing her own lived experience as a diasporic subject.” She adds, “We are proud to present the first comprehensive survey of such an important and long underappreciated artist. In addition to holding an important work by O’Grady in our collection, the Brooklyn Museum has featured several of her compelling projects in two recent groundbreaking exhibitions, *We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965–85* and *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power*. We are so pleased to have this opportunity to further our support of Lorraine’s extraordinary vision and to build her legacy at the Brooklyn Museum.”

Both/And is organized in six sections; three sections will be located in the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, and three in the European Art, Ancient Egyptian Art, and Arts of the Americas galleries located throughout the Museum. These important bodies of work will be embedded in the collections to highlight O’Grady’s long-standing critical engagement with the biases underlying mainstream art historical and cultural institutions. Alongside all of these projects will be a critical selection of materials from O’Grady’s personal archive, which will shed light on the careful decision-making and ambitious intellectual range of her creative process. This ephemera, fastidiously preserved by the artist, is now housed at her alma mater, Wellesley College, and includes correspondence with Adrian Piper, Kobena Mercer, Lucy R. Lippard, and Martha Wilson, along with drafts of writings, journals, interviews, and photographs.

The three sections in the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art begin with O’Grady’s 1982 performance *Rivers, First Draft*, a conceptual source of many of the ideas that would go on to animate the artist’s career. A one-time performance staged in a secluded corner of Central Park before a few dozen spectators, the complex event lives on as a carefully-constructed photo installation. *Rivers, First Draft* draws upon practices ranging from Dada cabaret and contemporary theatre to West African Vodun symbolism to narrate O’Grady’s own transition from child to teenager to adult artist. The performance speaks to the double

bind Black women face, excluded from white spaces because of their race and from Black spaces because of their gender.

A selection of the original collages from *Cutting Out the New York Times* (1977) will be on view in the same gallery, and additional examples reproduced in vinyl will be installed throughout the building. Over the course of six months in 1977, O’Grady created her first works of art in the aftermath of a medical crisis, crafting a group of twenty-six highly personal poems from words and phrases extracted from the headlines of the Sunday edition of the *New York Times*. *Both/And* will mark the first time the original collage poems will be on public view. Elsewhere in the Sackler Center is *Cutting Out CONYT* (2017), a recent “remix” of the 1977 *Cutting Out the New York Times*, which distills the original collage poems into “haikus” in the form of diptychs.

The exhibition’s second section focuses on O’Grady’s critique of the art world’s unexamined cultural assumptions, and the institutional structures it has built to support them. The three projects represented here—*Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* (1980), *Art Is...* (1983) and *The Black and White Show* (1983)—pinpointed the ways in which the art world excluded Black people both as artists and as audiences. O’Grady made each of these works, produced between 1980 and 1983, while in the guise of her performance persona, Mlle Bourgeoise Noire (Miss Black Middle Class). The character, an aging beauty queen wearing an evening gown made from 180 pairs of secondhand white gloves, appeared in O’Grady’s landmark guerrilla performances at both Black and “mainstream” (white) cultural institutions in New York City such as JAM and the New Museum. In *Art Is...*, she responded to a Black acquaintance’s assertion that “avant-garde art doesn’t have anything to do with Black people” by creating a conceptual artwork for the largest public Black space she could envision: a parade float at Harlem’s annual African American Day Parade. In *The Black and White Show*, Mlle Bourgeoise Noire invited thirteen pairs of artists—half of them Black, half white—to contribute works in a black-and-white color palette to her exhibition at the important Black-owned Kenkeleba Gallery. In each of these works, the artist’s piercing critique of the racism and sexism of the art world established her as an active voice in the alternative New York art scene.

The third section will feature photocollages from the artist’s series *Body Is the Ground of My Experience* (1992), including the diptych *The Clearing: or Cortés and La Malinche, Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, N. and Me*. Perhaps one of O’Grady’s most controversial and misunderstood works, it imagines even the most intimate relationships between Black and white people to be inevitably shaped by the deep history of racism and colonialism in which they occur.

To illuminate O’Grady’s critical engagement with the sweep of art history, a number of projects will be installed in galleries throughout the Museum. In the Ancient Egyptian Art galleries, viewers will have a rare opportunity to see in its entirety *Miscegenated Family Album*, one of O’Grady’s best-known works and an important part of the Brooklyn Museum’s collection; the 18-minute video installation *Landscape (Western Hemisphere)* (2010–2012) will be sited in the Arts of the Americas; and an exciting new body of work entitled *Announcement of a New Persona (Performances To Come!)* will premiere in the European Art galleries. The placement of these works in the Museum’s collection galleries provides visitors to *Both/And* the opportunity to see O’Grady’s work within the art historical contexts that have simultaneously inspired and infuriated her.

The newly-debuted work *Announcement of a New Persona (Performances To Come!)* will offer a recontextualization of the driving concepts and complex narratives that form the basis of Lorraine O’Grady’s entire career. While much of the project remains secret, O’Grady says that the work consists of a four-part series of character studies in the form of life-size *cartes-de-visites* for a performance she has been developing since 2013. Though it is a complete work in itself, the series also signals future possibilities for performances and critiques centered around the new persona.

Lorraine O'Grady: Both/And will be accompanied by a catalogue documenting the full span of O'Grady's artistic career, the first publication to do so. It will include essays by Harry Burke; Malik Gaines; Zoé Whitley; Stephanie Sparling Williams; and the editors, Catherine Morris and Aruna D'Souza, along with a conversation between O'Grady and Catherine Lord. A detailed timeline of O'Grady's life and career will also be included. Concurrently, a volume of collected writings, *Writing in Space: 1973–2019*, edited by D'Souza for Duke University Press, will bring together O'Grady's extensive and important theoretical and critical writings. Conceived in dialogue, the exhibition catalogue and the collection of writings will provide both a robust overview for those unfamiliar with O'Grady's work, and a valuable permanent resource for those who aim to explore her work in depth.

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