

A Walk Through the World of Lorraine O'Grady

by [Heather Kapplow](#) on December 31, 2015

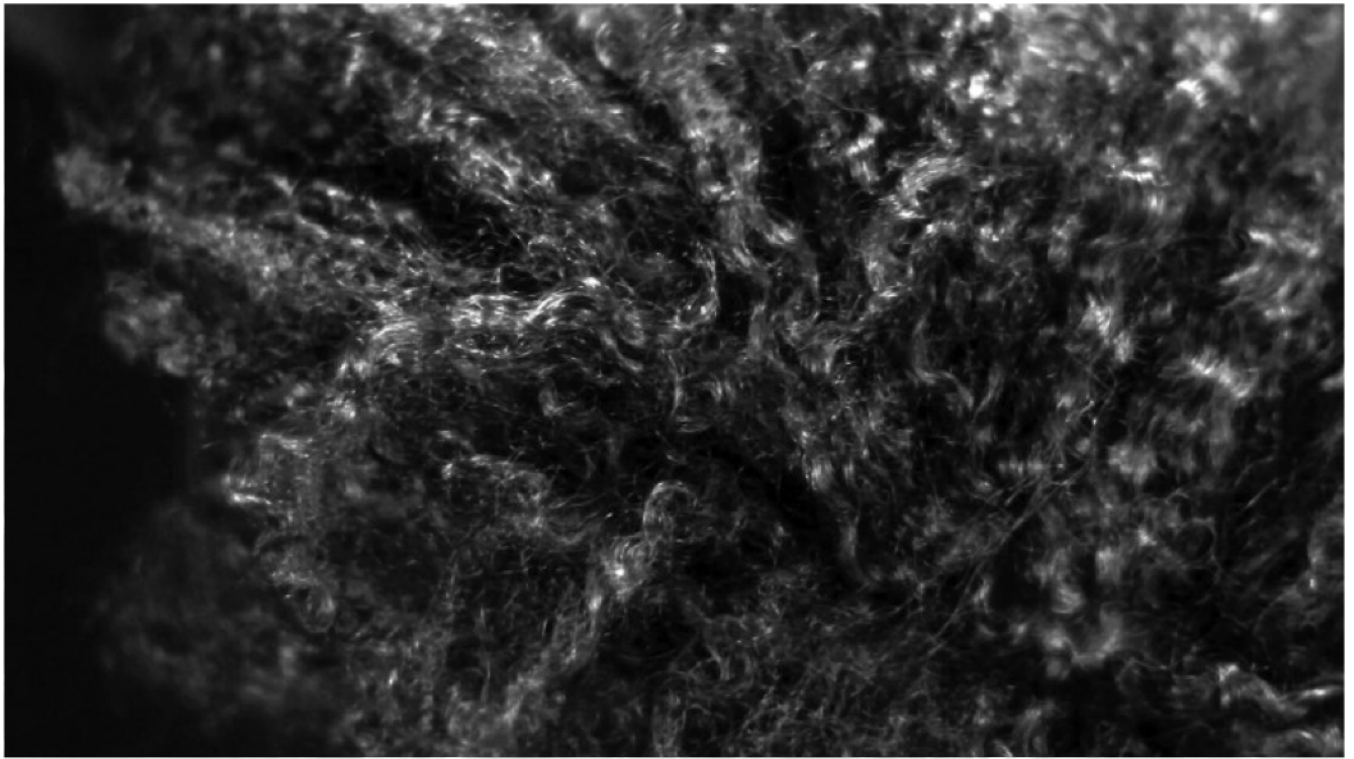


Lorraine O'Grady, "Body is the Ground of My Experience (The Clearing: or Cortez and La Malinche, Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, N. and Me)" (detail, 1991/2012), silver gelatin print (photomontage), 40 x 50 in, artwork courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic unless otherwise noted)

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — When visiting an art exhibit, there's a temptation to start at the entryway and work your way through it following the path established by the curator.

In the case of Lorraine O'Grady's [Where Margins Become Centers](#), at Harvard's Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts (CCVA), resist the tyranny of convention and signage and enter via the back door.

Start with as little interpretation as possible. Sit in the dark on a bench for an entire 18 minutes, if you can spare them, and watch item #10 (of 10) on the [exhibition checklist](#) available in the catalogue downstairs and at the guard's station at the main entrance to the gallery. In fact, open the publication, point to item #10 on the checklist, and ask the guard to direct you towards the back door to the piece to avoid being drawn in the intended way.



Lorraine O'Grady, "Landscape (Western Hemisphere)" (still, 2010/2011), single-channel video for projection, 18 min (image courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York)

"Landscape (Western Hemisphere)" (2010/2011) consists of close-up footage of O'Grady's hair and scalp paired with what seem to be a few varieties of ambient sound. It's the climax of the show, but also the best way to prime yourself to absorb the rest of the show's content as completely as possible.

If you move through things the way you're supposed to, you'll get caught up in the mathematics of identity, in the rights and wrongs of the art world, and in the aesthetics of documentation as art; "Landscape" will end up serving as a catharsis for all of the complexity and tension raised.

Avoid the catharsis.

Zoom in instead on the DNA of the matter. Meditate on all that gets coiled and released in the always-in-motion entanglements of our genes and history. Let the elusive, destabilizing scale of "Landscape" empty your mind. Let it hypnotize you, and then walk into the light of the main gallery, where questions begin to get asked more explicitly.



Installation view, 'Lorraine O'Grady: Where Margins Become Centers' at Harvard's Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts

This is not a quiz, but consider these thoughts as you move through the inner gallery space: Can sexual intercourse encompass many contradictory experiences at the same time? What is the implication of a place becoming inextricably intertwined — grafted — with a body? When you lose your sister, can that loss be a conduit into a larger sense of what it means to be be “related” to people?

Use the exhibition guide and the following works to answer these questions: “Body is the Ground of My Experience (The Clearing: or Cortez and La Malinche, Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, N. and Me)” (1991/2012), “The Fir-Palm” (2010/2011); and “Miscegenated Family Album (Sisters I)” (1980/1994).



Lorraine O'Grady, "Miscegenated Family Album (Sisters I)", L: Nefernefruatén Nefertiti; R: Devonia Evangeline O'Grady" (1980/1994), Cibachrome prints, 26h x 37 in (image courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York)

In each of these pieces, which line the periphery of the gallery's inner room, surrealism and juxtaposition are used to create spell-like parallels between the personal and the global, the past and the present — in the process problematizing distinctions between assumed binaries. For O'Grady, nothing is black and white. And yet everything is black and white.

At the center of the room, you'll find two vitrines. They contain some of the copious documentation that O'Grady has created and archived relating to her most well-known work, a persona and performance-intervention practice known as "Mlle Bourgeoise Noire."

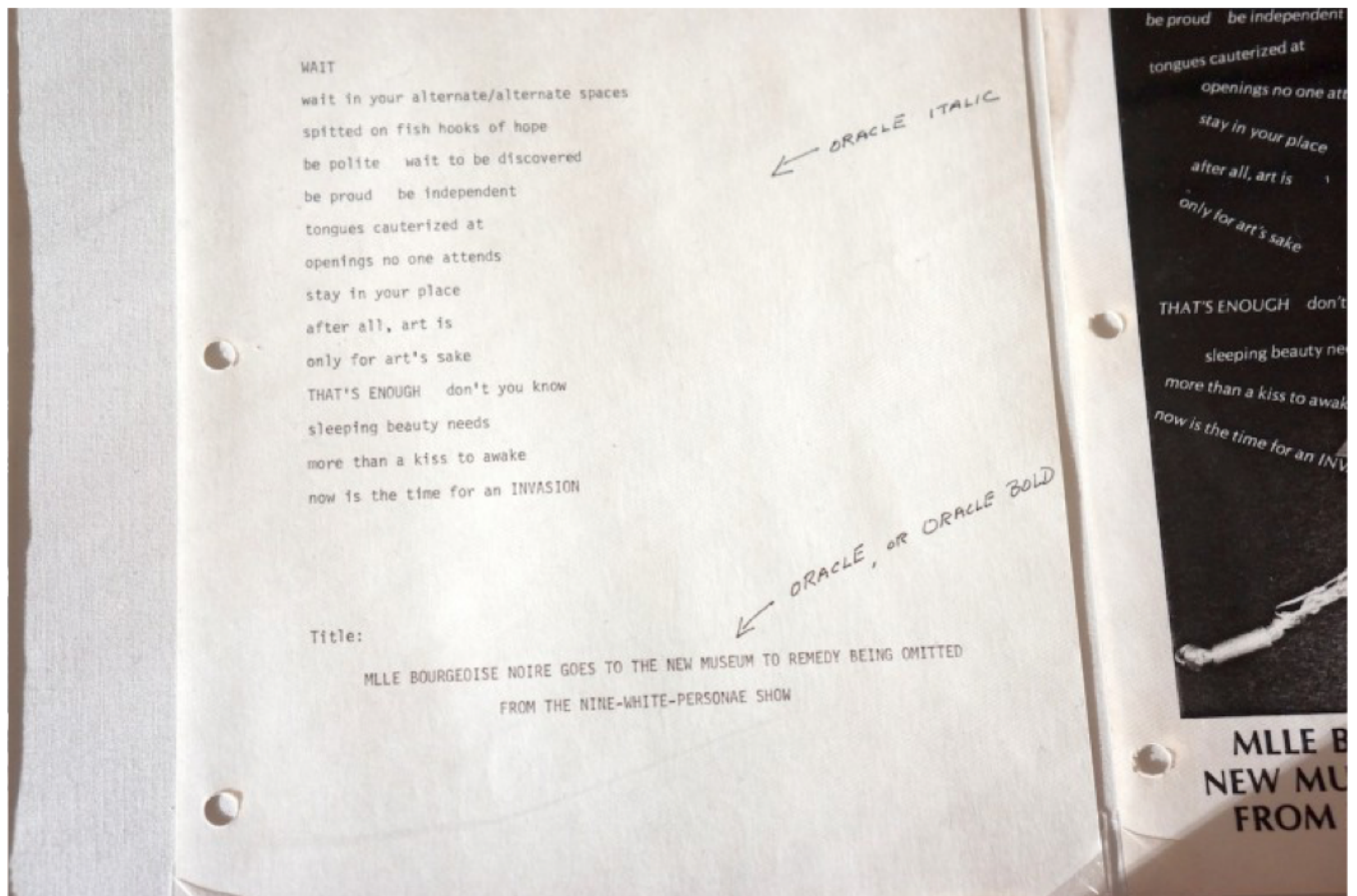


Photos of Lorraine O'Grady as Mlle Bourgeoise Noire

(click to enlarge)

Decked out in a beauty-pageant style sash and crown, and a fabulous dress made of white gloves, O'Grady as Mlle Bourgeoise Noire ("Miss Black Middle Class") appeared uninvited at a few choice art openings and other events in the early 1980s. These events were promoted as radically contemporary, but were in truth as racially segregated as they would have been 30 years prior.

Mlle Bourgeoise Noire's most famous appearance was at the opening of the (then brand new) New Museum's 1981 *Persona* show, where she appeared with an entourage and paparazzi and whipped herself while shouting poetry inciting black artists to take bigger risks. That's the short version of the story. See the vitrines and the gorgeous custom (CCVA-made) table in the outer gallery for the full details (including tallied cost of materials) of this intervention, plus some frank correspondence between O'Grady, New Museum staff, and members of the press that followed.



A poem for Mlle Bourgeoise Noire (click to enlarge)

By the time you exit the inner room, passing "Sisters I" — an unexplained pairing of a personal photograph with a chunk of ancient history — you should be thoroughly confused about what happened when and where. With your mind full of a stew that's half rage and half wonder — wrought by the combination of more abstract, image-based work and the cold, hard archival material — you can move to the main gallery space and access the contextualization you were supposed to get on your way in.

Boston-bred O'Grady's biography explains a few things about the four decades of work represented here, most usefully siting her experience as a biracial woman in a particular moment in time and space. Curator James Voorhies spells out the rest: "Her work challenges what is unwittingly agreed upon on a society-wide scale in a march towards dismantling accepted constructs." Though the

approach she takes to rattling the cages of these constructs (race, gender, class, the complex power structures of institutions) has shifted over time, her rallying cry against complacency is, as Voorhies observes, “no less topical today” than it was in the 1980s.



Lorraine O'Grady, “The First and the Last of the Modernists Diptych 1 Red (Charles and Michael)” (2010), Fujiflex print, 46.8 x 37.4 in (image courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York) ([click to enlarge](#))

Finally, for some ambiguous closure, take a trip down the passageway that you followed to get into “Landscape (Western Hemisphere)” the back way. Here find several quasi-stately portraits of Michael Jackson and Charles Baudelaire, bookending an impossible sociocultural divide in a way that makes it seem a possible one. The placement of this dual-portrait series, *The First and the Last of the Modernists* (2010), makes it a great exit point.

Before you leave, turn to look at the windows across from the series and you’ll catch yourself among the reflections of these two men (and the gaps between them), overlaid on the surrounding institution. It seems fitting to be reminded of exactly where you stand — within a complex of nested, refracted, sometimes oblique reflections, and encased in an institution to boot — before you step back out into the larger world, where what O’Grady’s work challenges in the art world continues to need challenging as well.



A reflection of Michael Jackson in the gallery windows

Lorraine O'Grady: Where Margins Become Centers continues at the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts (Harvard University, 24 Quincy Street, Cambridge, MA) through January 10, 2016.

Harvard UniversityLorraine O'GradyCarpenter Center for the Visual Arts