

Timely before her time: Sprawling show at the Weatherspoon traces the prescient art career of Lorraine O'Grady



“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-by-20 inches. © Lorraine O’Grady/Artists Rights Society. Courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates, New York

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Documentation, documentation, documentation.

Like the proverbial key factors in real estate — location, location, location —documentation may be the most important element in a performance artist’s career.

For a case in point, take the sprawling exhibition of Lorraine O’Grady’s work at Weatherspoon Art Museum on the UNCG campus. More than half of the show consists of photographs and texts documenting performances and other ephemeral presentations O’Grady enacted several decades ago.

A wealth of documentary materials has enabled this belated, comprehensive appreciation and revisitation of O’Grady’s work, timed for an era when the world seems more attentive to the issues she has consistently emphasized.

“Both/And” originated at the Brooklyn Museum in Brooklyn, N.Y., and is accompanied by a profusely illustrated catalog primarily authored by the show’s co-curators, Catherine Morris and Aruna D’Souza. This 225-page book gives a thorough accounting of O’Grady’s complicated, still-evolving relationship with contemporary art.

At the outset, I referred to O’Grady as a performance artist, and that’s an accurate characterization as far as it goes. But she has consistently resisted limiting herself by genre or medium, moving easily from painting to photography, montage and interventionist actions, depending on the subjects she’s treating. At various points, she has also been a writer, critic and theorist, not to mention an archivist who carefully saved everything remotely pertinent to her work.

Born in Boston to Jamaican immigrant parents, O’Grady was an academic high-achiever who earned a full scholarship to Wellesley College, where she earned a bachelor’s degree in economics. During her 20s, she was employed as an intelligence analyst for the federal government, and she subsequently worked as a teacher, translator and freelance writer.

Fifty years ago, she moved to New York, and from 1974 through the 1980s, she was an adjunct English instructor at New York’s School of Visual Arts. It was this experience that belatedly jump-started her art career. She was well into her 40s when she began making art.

The exhibition’s earliest evidence of her journey into art is a selection of text montages from O’Grady’s 1977 series “Cutting Out the New York Times.” The original cutout

“poems,” as she conceived of them, are displayed in vitrines (or glass showcases). They’re juxtaposed with wall-mounted displays of substantially enlarged prints she made in 2017, excerpting and literally reframing words and phrases from the earlier montages, hence the series title “Cutting Out CONYTT.”

Clipping out words and phrases from popular print sources and recombining them is a widespread, informal practice — a kind of folk-art form, typically incorporating figural imagery. Although O’Grady initiated this series as a somewhat whimsical, personal project, she did so with full awareness of its connection to earlier cutout-text experiments by avant-gardists Tristan Tzara, William Burroughs and Brion Gysin.

O’Grady’s “poems” are also visually sparse, limited to black typography floating in white space, in keeping with the prevailing minimalist aesthetic of the era when she made them. Her revisioning of the originals after 40 years is a characteristic move, reflecting a strong impulse to return, rearrange and reinterpret.

Selected examples of the original Times-derived poems were first exhibited in 1980, a pivotal year for O’Grady’s development as an artist. It was also the year she began an affiliation with JAM Gallery, a nonprofit venue for the Black avant-garde, where she made her first forays into performance art and photographic imagery.

The Weatherspoon show includes black-and-white photographs documenting several apparently improvised performances and public appearances in which O’Grady assumed the persona of an aging beauty queen she dubbed Mlle Bourgeoise Noire. This character — invariably clad in a tiara, a gown made of white gloves and a sash bearing her ironically pretentious French name — was introduced in a 1980 performance at JAM and made subsequent appearances elsewhere, including a high-profile opening reception at the New Museum.

O'Grady staged her most elaborate performance — whose 20-person cast was about half the size of the audience — in 1982 in New York's Central Park. Titled "Rivers: First Draft" or "The Woman in Red," it was an autobiographical work in which O'Grady played a version of herself interacting with other costumed characters representing different aspects of her life.

In 2015, O'Grady used color photographs documenting the "Rivers" performance to create an installation that serves as a focal point of this show. Thirty-seven of the photos are sequentially arranged on the gallery walls to follow the performance's seven vignettes. The cruciform configuration in which the images are hung references the crossroads motif, a symbolic tradition rooted in West Africa.

When a non-artist associate commented that "avant-garde art doesn't have anything to do with black people," O'Grady took it as a challenge to prove otherwise. The result was the participatory project she titled "Art Is ...," which symbolically, if briefly, placed ordinary Black residents of New York's Harlem at the center of attention.

The occasion was a 1983 parade celebrating "Afro American Day" in the neighborhood. A float that O'Grady entered in the parade carried a 9-by-15-foot, decorative frame, while she and a group of hired actors and dancers carried smaller ornamental picture frames as they followed the procession.

Spectators along the parade route were encouraged to place themselves within these frames as a means of emphasizing democratic participation — a factor that O'Grady felt was overlooked by the New York art world of that era, especially when it pertained to the Black community.

In the exhibition, this largely improvised, participatory performance is represented by color photographs that highlight the exuberance and enthusiasm of parade-goers while celebrating their identities as ordinary, working-class Americans.

"Landscape (Western Hemisphere)" is a much more recent video projection from 2010, in which close-up footage of O'Grady's densely curled, windblown hair is paired with an audio track of nocturnal sounds in a coastal setting.

The photographs that make up most of the rest of the exhibition are conceptual rather than documentary. These include the black-and-white diptychs in O'Grady's

"Miscegenated Family Album," several photomontages from the 1990s and her most recent series on view, "Announcement of a New Persona (Performance to Come)."

Dating from 2020, this group of six large-format color photographs highlights an anonymous figure — purportedly O'Grady herself — wearing a full-body suit of medieval armor and striking a different pose in each image. The armor alludes to the Spanish conquistadors who colonized and plundered the Americas, and the palm-tree headdresses worn in three of the images reference the indigenous landscape irreparably scarred in the process.

O'Grady may have gotten a late start, but this recent photographic series indicates that she still has more to say as she approaches age 90.