The New York Times

Lorraine O'Grady, Still Cutting Into the Culture

And at 86, the pioneering conceptual artist isn't done yet. She's getting her first retrospective ever, at the Brooklyn Museum.

By Siddhartha Mitter

Feb. 19, 2021

Had her life been more conventional, Lorraine O'Grady would have been, that Thursday in June 1980, at Wellesley College for her 25th class reunion.

Instead, she was donning a dress hand-stitched from 180 pairs of white gloves — accessorized with a tiara, sash and cat-o'-nine-tails — and heading to the gallery Just Above Midtown, to carry out a guerrilla-theater intervention.

O'Grady, a daughter of Jamaican immigrants in Boston, had a picaresque itinerary already. An economics graduate, she had worked for the Labor and State Departments, including as an intelligence analyst in the period leading up to the Cuban Missile Crisis; attempted a novel in Europe; dropped out of the Iowa Writers' Workshop; run a translation agency in Chicago; been a New York rock critic. Two marriages, both brief, were over.

Now, at 45, she was taking her decisive turn — as an artist.

Just Above Midtown was a hub of the Black avant-garde. O'Grady had turned up a few months earlier, presenting herself as a writer, volunteering for office tasks. But now, in character as "Mlle Bourgeoise Noire," she had a message.

Lorraine O'Grady's shock appearance as the character Mlle Bourgeoise Noire at the New Museum in 1981. She documented the appearance and subsequently exhibited the photographs. Lorraine O'Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Alexander Gray Associates

Mlle Bourgeoise Noire in character at the New Museum with the Whip-That-Made-Plantations-Move, from O'Grady's "Untitled (Mlle Bourgeoise Noire)," 1980-83/2009. Lorraine O'Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Alexander Gray Associates

The plumage of white gloves symbolized the repressed psychology of the Black middle class, consumed with respectability. The whip represented the history of external violence that conditioned it. Her critique was that Black artists should scrutinize their own privileges. Barging into the venue, she handed out flowers, then proceeded to flail herself with the whip, declaiming a poem. It concluded with the shout: "Black Art Must Take More Risks!"

The next year, Mlle Bourgeoise Noire reappeared, crashing the New Museum opening for an exhibition featuring only white artists. This time, after the flowers and self-flagellation, her poem ended with a challenge to the white-dominated museum crowd: "It Is Time For an Invasion!"

O'Grady was just getting started. For four decades she has played a pivotal role, clearing her own terrain at the hinge of feminist, Conceptual, and Black art. She burst on the scene with performances that would acquire a gloss of legend. But her work spans collage, photomontage, video, and cultural criticism — a

voracious and eclectic practice, mixing image and word, theory and play.

"I am somebody who is moving from one idea, to the next, to the next, to the next," the artist, now 86, said recently during a series of telephone and video conversations. "I feel that I'm working on the skin of the culture and I'm making incisions."

And now, having long held her on the fringes, like so many older Black and female artists, the mainstream art world is finally catching up. O'Grady's first-ever retrospective, titled "Both/And," opens on March 5 at the Brooklyn Museum. It follows the publication last November, by Duke University Press, of an anthology of her essays and interviews.

"For 40 years nobody knew what I was doing, really," she said, welcoming of the new attention while casting a critical eye. The retrospective, she said, "is a wonderful opportunity, not just for everyone to get to know my work, but for me to get to know my work better."

Lorraine O'Grady's "Rivers, First Draft: A Little Girl with Pink Sash memorizes her Latin lesson," 1982/2015. The work was staged in Central Park for passers-by and has been reprised in photographs that she reorganizes for her shows, like a remixer. Lorraine O'Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Alexander Gray Associates

"Rivers, First Draft: The stove becomes more and more red," 1982/2105. Actors including O'Grady played scenes that narrated, through allegorical characters, the artist's own journey from strait-laced New England Caribbean family to the New York art scene. Lorraine O'Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Alexander Gray Associates

"Rivers, First Draft: The Debauchees dance in place, and the Woman in Red catches up to them," 1982/2015. It showed apparent freedom, but revealed unacknowledged tensions. Lorraine O'Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Alexander Gray Associates

Lorraine O'Grady's "Rivers, First Draft: The Nantucket Memorial guides the Woman in Red to the other side of the stream," 1982/2015. Lorraine O'Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Alexander Gray Associates

O'Grady's influence has swelled in recent years. Her audience skews young, likely identifying with her restlessness and constant changes. "She's had this growing group of students and young artists that are dedicated to her," said Linda Goode Bryant, the founder of Just Above Midtown who became a lifelong friend.

The sculptor Simone Leigh called her a trailblazer. "Lorraine's pioneering makes clear that an artist must be uncompromising and brave," said Leigh. "Decade after decade she made work not knowing if the audience for it would be created in her lifetime. It has been thrilling to see her ideas become common knowledge."

Leigh said that she found a powerful model in O'Grady's stubborn commitment. "I would not be who I am without Lorraine." When Leigh organized Black feminist gatherings at the New Museum in 2016 and the Guggenheim Museum in 2019, she invited O'Grady as a main participant.

The performance artist Ayana Evans said that O'Grady opened the space that made her own practice — bold, public, intellectually complex — possible. "The idea that a Black woman in America can be a performance artist and it can work; she is proof," Evans said. "And she did it pretty much alone."

O'Grady's establishing works in the early 1980s were one-off events — you had to be there. They live on in photographs that she reorganizes each time she exhibits them. Like a remixer, she considers each rearrangement a new work.

In "Rivers, First Draft," staged by a stream in Central Park for a few friends in 1982, actors including O'Grady played scenes that narrated, through allegorical characters — "The Woman in Red," "The Art Snobs," "The Debauchees," and so on — the artist's own journey from a strait-laced New England Caribbean family to the New York art scene with its apparent freedom but unacknowledged race and gender tensions.

Scenes from Lorraine O'Grady "Art Is. . . (Line of Floats)," 1983/2009. The artist showed up with an unauthorized float — a truck mounted with a gigantic gold picture frame. Lorraine O'Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Alexander Gray Associates

"Art Is . . . (Cop Framed)," 1983/2009. The work is much admired, and imitated. Performers she had recruited jumped into the crowd

"Art Is. . . (Cop Frame)," 1983/2009. The work is much admired, and imitated. Performers she had recruited jumped into the crowd carrying small frames, inviting people to pose, to see themselves as art. Lorraine O'Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Alexander Gray Associates

"Art Is. . . (Dancer in Grass Skirt)," 1983/2009. Lorraine O'Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Alexander Gray Associates

Lorraine O'Grady, "Art Is. . . (Man with Baby)," 1983/2009. Lorraine O'Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Another defining intervention, "Art Is…," in 1983, took place at a parade in Harlem. O'Grady showed up with an unauthorized float — a flatbed truck mounted with a gigantic gold picture frame. Performers she had recruited jumped into the crowd carrying small frames, inviting people to pose, to see themselves as art.

"'Art Is…' was fabulous, in concept and execution," said Bryant, who was there. "For anyone who's been in a position of social and cultural oppression, it was such a poignant statement and could be absorbed instantly." The concept has spawned tributes — such as the actress Tracee Ellis Ross's gold-frame look at the 2019 Met Gala — and was recently reprised in a Biden-Harris victory ad.

O'Grady's full range will become clear with "Both/And." The retrospective spans her art since 1977, revisiting her iconic happenings but also presenting the photo-based series at the heart of her practice since the 1990s.

She is also revealing a new project in which she dons bespoke medieval armor — her first new performance persona since the 1980s.

Hosted by the museum's Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, the exhibition will be displayed there and throughout the permanent collection, setting up pointed dialogues with some of O'Grady's historical inspirations.

Catherine Morris, the senior curator of the Sackler Center, who organized the retrospective with the art writer Aruna D'Souza, said that beyond its salience as feminist and racial critique, O'Grady's "engagement is rooted, so much, in the larger historical exercise of modernity."

Speaking from her home in the Westbeth artist community in downtown Manhattan, O'Grady expounded on her personal history and a host of inspirations, from Egyptology to Caribbean colonial history, Baudelaire and Rimbaud, to the writers of the Negritude movement.

For O'Grady, coming to grips with hybridity, in her own history and in society, has been a lifelong project. "My work is about a philosophic approach to culture," she said. Lelanie Foster for The New York Times

Slightly elfin, casually stylish with a streak of red lipstick, she was warm but precise, apt to turn a question around to her interviewer. She was especially interested in the racial and cultural mixes in my family background, and how they shaped my upbringing and life journey.

Those are her signature inquiries. For O'Grady, coming to grips with hybridity, in her own history and in society, has been a lifelong project. "My work is about a philosophic approach to culture," she said.

"Both/And" is more than a show title. It offers an alternative to the Western winners-and-losers thinking, she once wrote, "that is continuously birthing supremacies from the intimate to the political, of which white supremacy may be only the most all-inclusive." She wrote elsewhere that the "lack of resolution" needs to become the cultural goal. In that spirit, her preferred format is the diptych — a juxtaposition that invites multiple interpretations.

In "Miscegenated Family Album," for instance, she paired photographs of her older sister Devonia opposite images of Egyptian artifacts depicting Nefertiti and family. The project did many things: It acted on a sense of kinship O'Grady had felt on a visit to Egypt; it invoked alternatives to the Greco-Roman civilization narrative; it responded to how Devonia's unexpected death at age 38, in 1962, had left her "feeling orphaned."

"Miscegenated Family Album (Young Queens)." Left, Nefertiti, age 24; right, O'Grady's sister Devonia, age 24, 1980/1994. Her preferred format is the diptych — a juxtaposition that invites multiple interpretations. Lorraine O'Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Alexander Gray Associates

What it all *meant*, however, remained open.

By her own admission, O'Grady is the consummate "insider-outsider," never knowing the comfort — or illusion — of cultural certainty.

Her parents arrived from Jamaica, but met in Boston. They carried the status privilege of light skin and the rupture experience of migration, landing in the United States, as she wrote in an essay on her childhood, "with more education than they would be allowed to use in this country."

Her mother confected dresses; her father worked as a railway steward, with a sideline in illicit card games. The Jamaican community was small, exposing O'Grady, growing up in Roxbury, to Jewish, Irish and other influences.

"What we lost was so great; at the same time, what we had as advantages remained advantages here," she said in our interview. "I sometimes wonder if my concern with history has to do with the loss of history."

"Strange Taxi: From Africa to Jamaica to Boston in 200 Years," a 1991 photomontage, depicted her mother and aunts, prim in white dresses, hovering above a brick mansion. It shows a certain class of Black women escaping from restrictions in post-World-War-I Boston. At the same time, the house rolls on wheels over a darker-skinned body, suggesting that some hierarchies endure.

Last year, a version was displayed on a facade of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, the image stretched with an expanded field of sky.

Her photomontage, "The Strange Taxi: From Africa to Jamaica to Boston in 200 Years," 1991/2019, incorporates women from O'Grady's family trying to escape restrictions of Boston. Lorraine O'Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Alexander Gray Associates

"Lorraine O'Grady: Strange Taxi Stretched," 2020, on the facade of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston. Lorraine O'Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston; Stewart Clements

"That was great because it gave them more room to grow," she said of the installation. The museum sits across the street from the former Girls Latin School where O'Grady was one of very few Black students in the late 1940s. The work "felt like a vindication," she said.

At Wellesley, likewise, she was one of three Black women in a class of nearly 500. "We were totally invisible," she said. But she excelled academically. She took time off when she married her first husband, Robert Jones, and became pregnant with her son, then returned and graduated swiftly. "Even though people didn't know I existed, I was thriving," she said.

She chose government work because meritocratic selection opened it to a Black woman of her ability but left when she hit the glass ceiling. In Iowa she met her second husband, the filmmaker Chappelle Freeman Jr. They moved to Chicago in 1967. O'Grady ran a translation agency, personally handling seven languages.

The couple separated in 1970. Three years later she landed in New York, teaching English at the School of Visual Arts while writing rock reviews. She immersed herself in a "single-issue feminism" that revolved around reproductive rights in the aftermath of Roe v. Wade.

Although she was barely in her forties, her journey already had twists worthy of a Netflix series. To her, however, it followed a clear logic.

"I was never running away," she said. "I was running toward myself, to find out who I was, and what I wanted, and what I was capable of. And I kept moving."

Working at SVA edged her toward producing art. In 1977 she made her first newspaper poems — collages of words cut from The New York Times. Though fond of Surrealism and Dada, she was working in an opposite vein: Where they used language to cultivate absurdity, she found in the chaos of words, phrases that touched her mood and memories.

Lorraine O'Grady's newspaper poems, a collage with words cut from the New York Times, "Cutting Out CONYT 07," 1977/2017. Lorraine O'Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Alexander Gray Associates

But it was Just Above Midtown that provided the setting for her breakthrough. She arrived in 1980 having learned it was the haunt of regulars such as David Hammons and Senga Nengudi.

"JAM was always a place where people hung out, " Bryant said, "and she became part of the family."

Soon after, Mlle Bourgeoise Noire made her debut.

O'Grady's immersion in the scene challenged and sharpened her feminism. In the 70s her focus on reproductive freedom tended to align her with white feminists. But she observed how Black women artists were still held at the margins of second-wave feminism.

Invited to contribute to a race-themed issue of the feminist journal Heresies in 1982, she noted that its editorial collective was almost allwhite. Still, she felt no choice but to engage.

"I was awfully convinced that we needed allies," she said. (Later, she would spend several years as a member of the Guerrilla Girls, the masked art-world feminist activists.)

O'Grady blazed trails in specifically Black feminism in a 1992 paper, expanded in 1994, "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity." It had an immense scholarly impact.

She wrote it after showing "The Clearing," a photomontage diptych that included a Black female nude figure. "A lot of people responded adversely," she said.

Piqued into research, she found there was little tradition of the nude in Black painting, perhaps understandably given the history of racist degradation. Yet this reticence, she observed, reinforced the tendency in Western art to limit the roles allowed Black female figures — "the construction of not-white women as not-to-be-seen."

Starting from Manet's "Olympia," the 1863 painting of a white woman, a courtesan, gloriously nude, attended by a clothed Black maid who fades into the background, O'Grady built to a bigger point — drawing on psychoanalysis and cultural studies — that Black women must be free to represent themselves on their own terms.

Leigh, the sculptor, called "Olympia's Maid" one of O'Grady's greatest contributions, presaging today's dynamic Black feminist thinking in history, storytelling and art: "She wrote that essay making clear what needed to be done."

Gradually, the art world has inscribed O'Grady into the canon.

Lorraine O'Grady in her new persona, its symbols suggesting European conquest (armor) and her Caribbean roots (palm tree headgear). It will be revealed at the Brooklyn Museum. Lorraine O'Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Alexander Gray Associates

"The times have finally caught up with me, so I don't feel out of step now," she said.

Her work has appeared in recent landmark shows, notably "We Wanted A Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965-1985," organized by Morris and Rujeko Hockley at the Brooklyn Museum, and "Soul of a Nation" at Tate Modern, both in 2017. A market has slowly formed: Alexander Gray, her gallerist, said that editions of her photo-based pieces appeal to "sophisticated collectors."

But O'Grady feels there is still work to be done. Her new persona will appear in photomontages at the Brooklyn Museum — one clad in custom-made medieval armor with small palm trees as headgear, connoting European conquest and her Caribbean roots. The outfit weighs 40 lbs., and takes 45 minutes to put on, she said. (A longtime cyclist and swimmer, she keeps fit now by walking and stretching.)

The outfit also obscures identity traits — age, gender, race — which she finds productive. "I had been looking for a way to eliminate all those identifiers that are overloaded," she said. "What happens if you denied yourself all of that? What would be left?"

At 86, Lorraine O'Grady is trying to move the culture forward, away from the shoals of narrow identity politics, in the belief that greater insights lie ahead.

"It's work that I will be doing for the rest of my life," she said.