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Art in Review

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LORRAINE O'GRADY

Miscegenated Family Album

Alexander Gray Associates

526 West 26th Street, Chelsea

Through Oct. 11

One of the most stimulating trends in New York galleries over the last few years has been the series of solo shows of historical work by women who first gained attention in the 1970s and early '80s. Many of them coincided with the larger museum exhibition "Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution." That show is now gone, but we can only hope that the solos continue. Lorraine O'Grady's "Miscegenated Family Album" is the latest.

Ms. O'Grady was born in Boston, the child of racially mixed Jamaican immigrants. She remembers her youthful efforts to balance what she has called her family's "tropical middle-and-upper class British colonial values" with the Yankee, Irish-American and African-American cultures around her. Much of the conceptual work she has produced since 1980 in some way deals with racial hybridization and its social and psychological consequences.

"Miscegenated Family Album" began in 1980 as a performance titled "Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline," using a spoken script and projected photographs to memorialize Ms. O'Grady's older sister, Devonia, who had died a few years earlier at 37. Ms. O'Grady conceived of the performance on a trip to Egypt, where she saw faces resembling her sister's on the streets of Cairo and in ancient sculpture, particularly in portraits of Nefertiti. She said she felt that a lost family member, one with whom she had had a troubled relationship, had been restored to her in Africa.

She later distilled the performance, which was an attempt to explore and continue that restoration, into the 16 photo-diptychs at Alexander Gray. Like the projections, the diptychs pair ancient Egyptian sculpture with contemporary photographs: snapshots of Devonia beside images of Nefertiti, of Ms. O'Grady herself beside a carved head of Nefertiti's younger sister and sometime rival, Mutnedjmet.

Complicated ideas and identities are in play, and as in much of Ms. O'Grady's work they hover

around the intersection of race and class. Ms. O'Grady has long taken a critical view of her upbringing in a black middle-class elite — her famous guerrilla performances as Mlle. Bourgeoise Noire are, in part, about this — and there is an edge identifying her sister and herself with an ancient Egyptian royal family. But there is something beyond irony here. The resemblance of some of the sculptures to the family snapshots Ms. O'Grady has chosen is startling. Clearly there is an attempt to redeem life as lived, always imperfect and regret-tinged, by filtering through the untouchable perfections of the past. HOLLAND COTTER