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Art //
Artists / Photography

EXHIBIT | LORRAINE O'GRADY: ART IS...

Sometimes life is all about how you frame it.

by Miss Rosen Oct 30th, 2015



Art Is. . . (Man with a Camera), 1983/2009 Chromogenic color print 16 × 20 in. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York

Quiet as kept, the annual African-American Day Parade attracts millions of people each year as it arches through the heart of Harlem, beginning at Central Park North, and marching up Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Blvd to 136 Street. Founded in 1968 as an independent organization, the parade does not accept contributions. Instead, it was developed with the spirit of volunteerism and honoring the community. Featuring fire, police, and corrections departments, veterans associations, grand lodges, fraternities and sororities, step and drill teams, the African-American Day Parade is like Harlem Homecoming to the nation.

Art Is. . . (Girlfriends Times Two), 1983/2009 Chromogenic color print 16 × 20 in. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York

It was with in this spirit that conceptual artist Lorraine O'Grady stages a performance piece, "Art Is...", which she entered her own float into the September 1983 African-American Day Parade with fifteen collaborators dressed in white. At the top of the float was a gilded gold frame, enormous and ornate, like the type you'd find in a museum around a masterpiece. As the float went up the boulevard, it framed everyone it passed, providing a moving snapshot of the treasures of life. The words "Art Is..." were emblazoned on the float's skirt, offering an open-ended point of view. "Art is anything you can get away with," said Andy Warhol.

“Art is the only way to run away without leaving home,” said Twyla Tharp. “Art is the most intense mode of individualism the world has ever known,” said Oscar Wilde. Art is any possibility you can imagine, even the idea that those two words could inspire countless ideas from all points of view. Just try it at home. Ask yourself to fill in the blanks. What is art to you?

Art Is... (Line of Floats), 1983/2009 Chromogenic color print 16 × 20 in. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York

To Lorraine O’Grady, art is you, if you want it to be. She made that clear, when she and her collaborators would jump off the float and hold up empty, gilded picture frames, inviting people to pose in them. The responses were fantastic, inspiring people to see both themselves and the world anew. By taking the frames off the wall and emptying them, O’Grady made the frames an active, rather than a passive means, to engage with the idea of Art.

Art is expression. Check. Art is connection. True. Art is anything you want it to be. Come again now? Think about it. The performance art piece offers total freedom to like out that Shakespearean idea, “All the world’s a stage, And all men and women merely players.”

Art Is. . . (Girl Pointing), 1983/2009 Chromogenic color print 20 × 16 in. Courtesy
Alexander Gray Associates, New York

With “Art Is...” O’Grady makes the most of this, for she not only staged the performance but also documented it. Forty photographs from O’Grady’s performance piece are on view at the Studio Museum of Harlem, NY, now through March 6, 2016. The photographs capture the energy that the frames brought to the people at the parade, bringing out a joyous and open spirit that makes Harlem one of New York’s flyest neighborhoods. With the benefit of these photographs, O’Grady adds a new dimension to her on-going discussion of art, allowing us to consider the distinction between the experience of life and the representation of it. In this way, O’Grady reminds us that art is an idea without end, a conversation that goes into the wee hours of the night, after bottles of wine have been drunk and the candles give way to sunlight.

Photographs from O’Grady’s performance piece are on view at the Studio Museum of Harlem, NY, now through March 6, 2016.

Miss Rosen is a New York-based writer, curator, and brand strategist. There is nothing she adores so much as photography and books. A small part of her wishes she had a proper library, like in the game of Clue. Then she could blaze and write soliloquies to her in and out of print loves.