

Lorraine O'Grady's First-Ever Retrospective Honors Her 40-Year Fight for Inclusion

BY CASSIDY GEORGE

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In 1980, Lorraine O'Grady decided to become an artist, and because she was already 45, she felt she only had time for masterpieces. O'Grady had spent the years prior immersed in New York's flourishing counterculture, working as a rock critic for *Rolling Stone* and *The Village Voice* (a leap from her earlier career as an intelligence analyst for the U.S. government). The period that gave rise to art superstars like Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring has long been romanticized as a creative utopia, but O'Grady—both then and now—saw the city's art scene for what it was: an elitist world defined by hierarchies of race, gender, and class. Eager to make a change, she resolved not just to enter the New York art world but to “invade” it.



“You have to understand that I never thought I would be successful,” says O’Grady, who at 86 still maintains her rocker “uniform” of a black leather jacket and cowboy boots. At the Brooklyn Museum this spring, O’Grady’s invasion of the art world, staged over the course of 40 years, will culminate in her first-ever retrospective. “Both/And,” which opens to the public on March 5, offers a monumentally delayed moment of recognition for O’Grady’s pioneering body of work, one that combines the politics of intersectional feminism (a term that wasn’t even coined until nine years into O’Grady’s artistic career) with progressive mediums like performance art and conceptual photography.

The show chronicles O’Grady’s steadfast mission to challenge the art world, beginning with photographs of her debut performances in 1980. With the intention of giving “timid Black artists and thoughtless white institutions each a piece of her mind,” O’Grady staged unannounced performance-art pieces at Just Above Midtown gallery (a designated space for Black artists) and the newly opened New Museum as a character called Mlle Bourgeoise Noire. Dressed in a gown hand-sewn from 180 white gloves (and believed to have inspired a bodice in Maison Margiela’s spring 2001 collection), O’Grady recited poems to the crowds while occasionally whipping herself with a cat-o’-nine-tails made of sailing rope.

“Both/And” also includes photographs of the artist’s best-known work, *Art Is...*, which was devised to refute an acquaintance’s declaration that “avant-garde art has nothing to do with Black people.” In the performance, O’Grady and a team of dancers joined Harlem’s 1983 African American Day Parade. The crew marched beside a float designed by O’Grady with an empty, golden 9-by-15-foot picture frame on top of it. As the float rolled down Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard, it framed the passing crowds as works of art themselves.



Lorraine O'Grady, *Art Is. . . (Troupe Front)*, 1983/2009. Chromogenic photograph in 40 parts, 16 × 20 in. (40.64 x 50.8 cm.)
Edition of 8 + 1 AP. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York. © Lorraine O'Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



Lorraine O'Grady, *Art Is... (Girlfriends Times Two)*, 1983/2009. Chromogenic photograph in 40 parts, 16 × 20 in. (40.64 x 50.8 cm.) Edition of 8 + 1 AP. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York. © Lorraine O'Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



Lorraine O'Grady, *Art Is...* (Colt 45 "African" Float), 1983/2009. Chromogenic photograph in 40 parts, 16 × 20 in. (40.64 x 50.8 cm.) Edition of 8 + 1 AP. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York.

© Lorraine O'Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

One of the exhibition's central goals, however, is to break what O'Grady calls "the spell of *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* and *Art Is...*" and show the equivalent brilliance of her lesser-known pieces. Visitors will see a wide-ranging body of conceptual artwork hinging on intimacy and humanity, as O'Grady constantly refers back to her own life, body, and experiences. For example, she protested her own exclusion within the art world by curating an exhibition called "The Black and White Show," which showcased 14 Black and 14 white artists side by side to create open and equitable dialogue between the works (a rarity in galleries and museums in the '80s). In series like *Cutting Out The New York Times*, moreover, O'Grady cut and rearranged words from the newspaper to create personal poetry, telling her story through a medium that rarely prioritized ones like her own. "She's thinking about the language of media and whether those public languages accommodate the experiences of a Black woman," cocurator Aruna D'Souza says. The artist's lifelong fascination with the diptych form is highlighted in *Miscegenated Family Album*, which compares photographs of O'Grady's family members with artworks that depict ancient Egyptian royalty, calling into question the racial biases of history and who is worthy of being worshipped or remembered.



Lorraine O'Grady (American, born 1934). *Miscegenated Family Album (Sisters I)*, L: *Nerfnefruatē Nefertiti*; R: *Devonia Evageline O'Grady*, 1980/1994. Cibachrome photographs, 26 × 37 in. (66.04 × 93.98 cm.) Edition of 8 + 1 AP. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York. © Lorraine O'Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

It's tragically unsurprising that O'Grady's work, which seeks to expose the frivolity of white narratives that we have come to accept as truth, wasn't met with enthusiasm for the majority of her career. "Here's a person that was at the cutting edge of so many kinds of artistic practices and conversations but who flew under the radar in a way because what she was saying was not what people were ready to talk about or wanted to hear," D'Souza says. Things began to change for O'Grady around 2007, due in part to her inclusion in the group show "Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution" at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles and her dedicated [internet presence](#). A committed self-archivist, O'Grady built an expansive website that long served as the digital retrospective she hadn't been offered in real life. "I thought maybe 20 to 50 years after I died that people would come to remember and understand," O'Grady says. While the art world has often called creators who find delayed recognition ahead of their time, in O'Grady's case the descriptor is warranted. "She often says she felt that she was making her work for a future audience," cocurator Catherine Morris shares. "We feel that audience is here."



Lorraine O'Grady (American, born 1934). *Untitled (Mille Bourgeoise Noire celebrates with her friends)*, 1980–83/2009. Silver gelatin fiber photograph, 7 × 9.31 in. (17.78 × 23.65 cm.) Edition of 8 + 2 AP. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York.
 © Lorraine O'Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

O'Grady's ideas and aesthetics aren't only being embraced by major institutions in the art world— they've made their way into American politics too. Just after winning the election, President Joe Biden's campaign released [a video based on *Art Is...*](#), showing various Americans across the country framing themselves and each other as art. The montage of footage shot by 30 different videographers all over the U.S. has been viewed more than 48 million times on Twitter alone. Another major tribute to *Art Is...* in popular culture appeared a year earlier, when O'Grady's performance inspired actor [Tracee Ellis Ross's look at the 2019 Met Gala](#).

The exhibition title, "Both/And," speaks to the abiding mission of O'Grady's work: to challenge the prevalence of either-or thinking. This absolutist philosophy in Western thought has created a world in which people are categorized according to binaries: as either white or Black, male or female, straight or gay, or rich or poor. O'Grady's exhibition—a meditation on the power of nuance, equity, and inclusion—shows us that the differences between people and cultures aren't the problem—the hierarchizing of them is. As O'Grady explains, "We don't stand a chance of getting rid of hierarchies until we adopt the both/and and begin to live with the complexity in ourselves as well as in our culture."

- "Lorraine O'Grady: Both/And" will run at the Brooklyn Museum's Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art from March 5 to July 18, 2021.* [See here for visiting information.](#)