

## Lorraine O'Grady Still Won't Play It Safe

Much like her writing, O'Grady's photomontages pressure binaries until something *other*, something “both/and” emerges.

by Ela Bittencourt



Installation view of Lorraine O'Grady: *Body Is the Ground of My Experience* at Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2022. Pictured: Lorraine O'Grady, "Dracula and the Artist" (1991/2019), archival pigment print on Hahnemühle Baryta pure cotton photo rag paper in 2 parts, 40 x 50 inches each (courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York © 2022 Lorraine O'Grady / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York)

Lorraine O'Grady first presented her show of photomontages, *Body Is the Ground of My Experience*, at INTAR Gallery, New York, in 1991. Inspired by brazen countercultural art movements such as Dada and Fluxus, she had crashed parties at the New Museum and elsewhere, engaged strangers in street performances, and staged happenings in Central Park. In her seminal essay of Black feminist thought, “Olympia’s Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity,” O'Grady referred to her transition from live performance to the “safety of the wall.” And yet, to see the original show’s reprise, currently on view at **Alexander Gray Associates** and including seven photomontages, is to recognize it as anything but safe.

O'Grady's essay positioned her in the ever-broadening context of Black feminism and anti-colonialist critique, but also as an artist fiercely opposed to the confines of social politics and identity. Why must we be either/or, she was asking. A work of piercing analysis, “Olympia’s Maid” endures as O'Grady's artistic proclamation —particularly in her insistence that, to preserve its mystery, art must guard jealously against all theory, even when it comes from sources as vital as the writings of her Black feminist compatriots such as bell hooks.



Installation view of Lorraine O'Grady: *Body Is the Ground of My Experience* at Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2022. Pictured: Lorraine O'Grady, "Gaze" (1991/2019), archival pigment print on Hahnemühle Baryta pure cotton photo rag paper in 4 parts, 24 x 20 inches each (courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York © 2022 Lorraine O'Grady / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York)

Much like her writing, O'Grady's photomontages pressure binaries until something *other*, something both/and emerges. (*Both/And* was the title of her career retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum.) Consider her two tetrptychs, "Gaze" and "Dream" (both 1991), which collage double portraits of Black sitters, seen from the shoulders up. Beneath each sitter's face is a smaller image: a double with a slightly altered expression. The faces in the larger images are more tense, as if the gaze's intentionality has hardened them. From this doubling, of seeing oneself seen, emerges a sense of not only being, but becoming. This is an essential duality since, as O'Grady wrote in her essay, in art, critique isn't everything; presence —visualizing oneself — is paramount.

O'Grady's enigmatic diptych "Dracula and the Artist" (1991/2019) best encapsulates her belief that an artist must keep her secrets to remain invigorating. Dracula clearly serves the artist's aim to challenge the Victorian imagination, which dictates that the female body be written out biologically yet codified as always sexually available. Citing O'Grady essay, one could add that whereas the *White* female body is codified as sexuality, the *Black* female body, always implied, is dehumanized, desexed (as in Monet's 1865 painting, *Olympia*, for which O'Grady's essay is titled), or not seen at all. In her montage, by contrast, the Black female body is the subject and, in picturing herself seated at her desk in the image, also authors the world. But O'Grady pushes beyond this art-historical critique. She appropriates Dracula's secretive potency as the surplus other — a paradigmatic both/and. Such association is suggested by the figure keeping her back to us, and by the lushly dark montage on the right, in which art and crepuscular alchemy entwine. On the left, subtitled, "Dracula Dreaming," the Black female body's magnetic pull holds teathy combs in mid-air, in a magical conjuring — these same combs lay tamed in the image on the right, subtitled, "Dracula Vanquished by Art." In this gorgeously oblique, absorbing work, O'Grady leaves the ultimate riddle — is the artist vanquished, vanquishing, or both? — tantalizingly unsolved.



Installation view of Lorraine O'Grady: *Body Is the Ground of My Experience* at Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2022. Pictured: Lorraine O'Grady, "The Clearing: or Cortés and La Malinche, Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, N. and Me" (1991/2019), archival pigment print on Hahnemühle Baryta pure cotton photo rag paper in 2 parts, 40 x 50 inches each (courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York © 2022 Lorraine O'Grady / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York)



Lorraine O'Grady, "The Fir-Palm" (1991/2019), archival pigment print on Hahnemühle Baryta pure cotton photo rag paper, 50 x 40 inches, edition of 10 plus 3 artist's proofs (photo Ela Bittencourt/Hyperallergic)

**Lorraine O'Grady: *Body Is the Ground of My Experience*** continues at Alexander Gray Associates (510 West 26th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through June 11. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.