

Jacket, ISABEL MARANT. T-shirt (worn throughout), DOLCE & GABBANA. Tights (worn throughout), WOLFORD. Jewelry (worn throughout), her own.

The AUDACITY of LORRAINE O'GRADY

At 89, the eternally PUNK-ROCK PERFORMANCE and CONCEPTUAL ARTIST still gets a kick out of CRASHING art-world parties. Only now she's the GUEST of HONOR.

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What if Lorraine O'Grady—acclaimed artist, glorious wit, and the very best kind of miscreant renegade—turned out to be a knight in shining armor? It's a question I find myself contemplating as I sit across from her in the café at the Whitney Museum of American Art, just a few blocks from her studio in Manhattan's West Village.

For more than four decades, O'Grady has exercised a kind of valiance as she has sought to create a place for herself within the racism, sexism, and inhospitality of the art world. Beginning in the late 1970s and early '80s, her conceptual and performance art took aim at the constellation of forces that conspired to marginalize artists of color in mainstream institutions and galleries—and women of color especially. Instead, O'Grady found community with the group of artists that surrounded Linda Goode Bryant's scrappy, idealistic Just Above Midtown (JAM) gallery and contemporaries like David Hammons and Senga Nengudi, who chafed against the way the art establishment rejected the notion of a Black avant-garde.

O'Grady's exploits, at this point, are legend. In 1981, she crashed an opening at the New Museum with a performance of *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* (Miss Black Middle Class, or MBN), in which she dressed up as a debutante in a gown constructed from white gloves, brandished a cat-o'-nine-tails, and recited poetry that called out the racism of the art world. "It was so fucking amazing," says Goode Bryant, who had seen O'Grady debut *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* as a part of a group show at JAM a year earlier. "You have this unplanned, unauthorized performance," she says. "People's jaws dropped."

In 1983, O'Grady created *Art Is...*, a group performance piece that took place during the African American Day Parade that September in Harlem. It involved mounting a large antique gold frame on a float as a group of other participants dressed in white danced and milled gleefully about the crowd with empty gold picture frames in hand. Instead of flattening Black experiences, O'Grady framed them, literally, in all their ebullience.

O'Grady has been dreaming impossible dreams, fighting unbeatable foes, and slaying metaphorical dragons for years. But it's only relatively recently that the overwhelming influence of her work has been appropriately celebrated, culminating in her first institutional survey, a 2021 retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum titled "Lorraine O'Grady: Both/And," a version of which opened in February at the Davis Museum at Wellesley College, O'Grady's alma mater, in Massachusetts.

Now O'Grady is a bona fide punk-rock star in the art world. Nevertheless, she has managed to slip into the Whitney incognito, her petite frame swallowed up by a long black parka, her signature black-and-white mohawk obscured by a knit hat, with a black mask covering her face. Once seated, she unpeels her various layers, revealing a black leather vest over a long-sleeve black top.

"I mean, I like the idea that people are starting to catch up with me. I like that," O'Grady tells me after ordering a turkey sandwich with side bowls of Parmesan cheese, crushed red pepper flakes, and extra Dijon mustard. She eats the sandwich open-faced, with a knife and fork. "But the fact is that it makes not one bit of difference to the way I live. It's so late that it hasn't changed anything," she says. "You're the sum of your choices, ►



Above, from top: The original performance of *Art Is...* during the African American Day Parade in Harlem, 1983; *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* at the New Museum, 1981. Opposite, bottom left, from left: *The Fir-Palm*, 1991/2019; *Family Portrait 1 (Formal, Composed)*, 2020.



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ARTWORK FROM TOP: ART IS... (GIRLFRIENDS TIMES TWO), 1983/2009, C-PRINT, 16 x 20 IN (40.6 x 50.8 CM); Mlle BOURGEOISE NOIRE AND HER MASTER OF CEREMONIES ENTER THE NEW MUSEUM, 1980-1983/2009, SILVER GELATIN FIBER PRINT, 40 x 50 IN (101.6 x 127 CM); ALL ARTWORK: COURTESY THE ARTIST AND MARIANE IBRAHIM (CHICAGO, PARIS, AND MEXICO CITY) © 2024 LORRAINE O'GRADY/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK

ARTWORK, FROM LEFT: THE FIR-PALM, 1991/2019, ARCHIVAL PIGMENT PRINT ON HAHNEMÜHLE BARYTA PURE COTTON PHOTO RAG PAPER, 50 x 40 IN (127 x 101.6 CM); FAMILY PORTRAIT 1 (FORMAL, COMPOSED), 2020, FUJIFLEX PRINT, 60 x 48 IN (152.4 x 121.9 CM); ALL ARTWORK: COURTESY THE ARTIST AND MARIANE IBRAHIM (CHICAGO, PARIS, AND MEXICO CITY) © 2024 LORRAINE O'GRADY/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK



and so at any given moment, you are what you are.” O’Grady is carrying two iPhones. During her waking hours, she always keeps alarms set, and they chime at regular 15-minute intervals as prompts to keep her mind and spirit in motion. “I tend to be prolix,” she explains. “It keeps me moving.”

Last fall, O’Grady left her longtime New York dealer, Alexander Gray Associates, and joined Mariane Ibrahim Gallery, which has outposts in Chicago, Paris, and Mexico City. Her first show at Mariane Ibrahim, “The Knight, or Lancela Palm-and-Steel,” opens April 10 at the gallery’s Windy City flagship and will feature a character, the Knight, that was introduced in “Both/And” with a set of “announcement cards” titled *Announcement of a New Persona (Performances to Come!)*. Played by O’Grady, the Knight is named Lancela Palm-and-Steel and is accompanied by a toy wooden horse called Rociavant and a squire named Pitchy-Patchy. The Knight requires O’Grady to don a suit of armor, custom-forged to her measurements, that weighs 40 pounds and includes a helmet with an enormous banana palm protruding from its top. (The image of the Knight is an inverse of a 1991 work, *The Fir-Palm*, a photomontage that depicts a palm tree with the leaves of a fir growing out of a Black woman’s torso.)

Like so much of O’Grady’s work, the Knight combines her predilection for mischief with her continued focus on hybridity and the constraints and contradictions of identity. The Knight is both an apotheosis and a reflection of Mlle Bourgeoise Noire. Whereas the debutante dons a white gown and gloves to formally announce

her availability for marriage within a heteronormative, patriarchal, class-edited dating pool, the Knight is the storybook embodiment of the ideal male partner: dashing, brave, strong, dutiful. But just as Mlle Bourgeoise Noire exposed the limitations of Black people adopting the traditions of their colonizers, what O’Grady finds intriguing about the Knight is the way his most famous avatar, Lancelot, continually fails to live up to the characteristics his armor telegraphs, as depicted in Chrétien de Troyes’s 12th-century poem “Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart.”

Of course, women know what it means to be sold a gauzy fantasy and left wanting, whether it’s in marriage, motherhood, or love. But within Lancela Palm-and-Steel lives O’Grady’s own history—her sometimes quixotic-seeming efforts to shift the art world; her capacity for trolling; her refusal to take herself too seriously; and her rejection of exceptionalism, hierarchy, and pretension. “All this only works if I’ve got a character who has magic,” O’Grady says. “I feel like I have miraculously, accidentally created a character that is absolutely magical, funny, sexy—all these things that can carry the weight of this heavy messaging and convert it into something that will go someplace.”



Part of the legend of Lorraine O’Grady is that she was already in her mid-40s when she made the decision to devote herself to art. After graduating from Wellesley with a degree in economics, she held a series of jobs, working as an intelligence officer in the State Department, a rock critic, a translator, and a teacher. Growing up in a middle-class family in Boston, with parents who had immigrated from Jamaica, O’Grady was expected to be a well-behaved, high-achieving lady in every conservative sense of the word. Instead, she became the kind of

aspirational, uncontainable problem child Bikini Kill frontwoman Kathleen Hanna sings about in the riot-grrrl anthem “Rebel Girl” and the song “Hot Topic” by her other band, Le Tigre, which places O’Grady within the context of other nettlesome 20th-century luminaries such as Angela Davis, Yayoi Kusama, and Hazel Dickens.

Though O’Grady’s work has been described as multidisciplinary, curator and writer Kimberly Drew prefers the term *multimodal*: It expands to fill the crevices created by trying to place it into more discrete categories.

Some have bristled at O’Grady’s penchant for revising her older work, as she did with *Cutting Out CONY* (1977/2017), in which she attempted to make public language private by constructing poems by collaging clippings of Sunday (Continued on page 114)

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New York Times headlines. "People seem to understand sketching," O'Grady says. "They don't understand, in conceptual art or in performance art, how that applies. But I think it's up to them to be able to chart this process and to see how the work moves from one thing to the next."

O'Grady's fortitude has protected her work, but it has also paid multigenerational dividends, shaping what it means to be a feminist, to make feminist art. "She was one of one in her time in terms of what she was trying to do," says playwright and actor Zawe Ashton, who, in 2017, directed a short film about O'Grady, *Meeting Lorraine*, for London's Tate Modern. "In terms of using her body as a canvas, of embodying this perceived very eccentric performance-art space at a time when the art world was saying, 'Look, if you're Black, you need to make your work literal. We want photography. We want literal observations of your experience. We don't want metaphor. We don't deal in metaphor when it comes to unpacking your lived experience.'"

Perhaps what is most profound—and also most difficult to quantify—about O'Grady's work is the way it has reshaped what is considered normative or even permissible for artists, especially artists who are Black women like her. She has been a creative fairy godmother to Simone Leigh, whose bronze sculptures and installations engage in their own dialogues around identity and space. O'Grady has also served as an inspiration to Martine Syms, whose 2022 feature film about an MFA candidate at an East Coast art school, *The African Desperate*, comes suffused with the same frustrations and quiet humor that stretch through O'Grady's oeuvre.

Syms remembers stumbling upon O'Grady's thunderous early-1990s essay "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity," which put everyone on notice with a thesis we now take for granted: that whiteness cannot exist alone but has to be defined against, and warned against, Blackness. "Her work became a lighthouse for me," says Syms. Years later, the artist and educator Catherine Lord put Syms in touch with O'Grady. "Lorraine hopped on the phone to talk about writing, performance.... She's a genius, and she's generous and thoughtful too."

There's a triumph in being invited into the very institutions whose gatekeeping you've attempted to protest and subvert. The act alone can be interpreted as a kind of concession—an acknowledgment that your critiques were valid. At the same time, it's necessary to preserve the tension and distance that informed the ideological conflict in the first place, which O'Grady has always been intent on doing. "I was not happy for periods when a lot of things that I didn't think were as interesting as mine or as important as mine were being applauded and I was being shut out," she says. "But I never did not believe. I always believed. The question was, did anybody else believe?" Plus, she adds, "I knew I was right." **HB**

PADMA LAKSHMI

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fact that when she was young, she was driven by money. Modeling, in particular, was the fastest way to dig herself out of the overwhelming student debt she had acquired from attending Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, where she majored in theater arts and American literature. "I was qualified to do not much except sound good at literary parties," she quips.

When the large scar on her right arm (the ugly aftermath of a violent car accident as a teenager) caught the eye of the great photographer Helmut Newton, he propelled her modeling career to new heights. Lakshmi didn't look back. She wound up living in Italy for many years, in part because the country was more accepting of a South Asian model than the United States. Eventually, she discovered she had a knack for being in front of a live camera and ended up as a host for a popular Italian television show. Later came a short-lived acting career, as well as writing assignments at various magazines and newspapers, until eventually she published two cookbooks: *Easy Exotic: A Model's Low-Fat Recipes From Around the World* and *Tangy Tart Hot & Sweet: A World of Recipes for Every Day*.

The longevity and success of *Top Chef*, however, seems to have focused something for Lakshmi over the years. If there is a through-line in her remarkably varied career, it is her ability to use her love for food as a portal into better understanding the world. When we first met, Lakshmi had expressed hope that she might finally win an Emmy for hosting *Top Chef*. When we next speak, she had lost once again. She is disappointed. "How many Emmys does RuPaul need?" she jokes. *Taste the Nation* had also failed to win. "But that's okay," she says. "I made the best show I could possibly make with my crew," she says. And in that way, she has articulated the truth of what it means to create, which is that when you love what you do and you do it well, the awards and the accolades are secondary.

"We both entered this world of entertainment in our teens, and now we're at a new place in our lives," says Questlove, another old friend of Lakshmi's. "Now we're in our 50s and wondering, 'Are you still a thing, or do you still have a voice inside you? Or am I foolish to leave something so established to try something new?' But after the pandemic, I realized that the answer is a resounding yes. If anything, I feel the need to be the cheerleader, to pound my fist on the table. We've had real conversations where I might have to be that coach that shakes her by the shoulders, like Cher did to Nicolas Cage in *Moonstruck*. Like, 'Stop it.' To make sure we are walking the path that we're supposed to walk."

If *Taste the Nation* isn't renewed, Lakshmi has plenty of other work to keep her busy. In addition to the cookbook she is writing, she's editing an anthology of best food writing. She's also looking into developing and starring in a scripted series, as well as potentially producing an adaptation of a novel. Last year, she appeared in

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