

Lorraine O'Grady: The Bicameral Self Interview

Photography by Brigitte Lacombe
Interview by Karen Leong

Across her life's work, American artist and writer Lorraine O'Grady has spurned the notion of a binary. Going against the grain of classic Western imagery, her body of work impels one to consider the boundlessness of creating, with radical attention to phenomenology, race and gender.

O'Grady's experience of straddling language and visual art is founded by her desire to call into question structures of imbalance and power. She assumes this stance explicitly and implicitly, embedding it into text, video and photo installation.

In conversation, O'Grady uncovers the breadth of her artistic dogma and how this has bled into the critique of the world she creates within.





A-M Journal: You self-identify as concept-based across the disciplines of writing, art and critique. What, in your own words, does this entail?

Lorraine O'Grady: The 'either/or' logic of the binary is a conceptual problem with profound social and political implications when it comes to issues of diaspora, cultural hybridity, and Black female subjectivity, which are key subjects of study for me. It was therefore necessary to refute this reasoning on a conceptual level, which is what I've done by advocating for the logic of 'both/and'.

A-M: How did you come across the diptych as your central framework, and why has it remained with you over the four decades of your artistic career?

O'Grady: I use the diptych 'both/and' thinking to frame the key themes in my work – diasporic experience, cultural hybridity, Black female subjectivity – as symptoms of a larger problem tracing the divisive and hierarchical either/or categories underpinning Western philosophy. The diptych functions in my work as a tool, concept, and symbol. It is one way that I am able to confront the limitations of Western culture, a culture whose intellectual and philosophical traditions are built on exclusivity and resistance to difference. With the diptych, there is no before and after, no either/or; it's both/and, at the same time.

The logic of 'both/and' enables a constant exchange between equals and sidesteps what I call 'miscegenated thinking' by eroding hierarchical oppositions within racial, gender and class identity. My use of the diptych is in service of an anti-hierarchical approach to difference, one that favours the concepts of hybridity and process, over rigid oppositions and resolution.

As a native New Englander and child of Caribbean parents, the diptych has been a tool for self-exploration as well as cultural critique. It is a device I have used to grapple with the supposed divisions within my own subjecthood. Yet, the goal of my diptychs is not to bring about a mythic 'reconciliation of opposites'. It is, rather, to enable or even force a conversation between dissimilar long enough to induce familiarity.

A-M: A lot of your work is accentuated by the idea of archiving – how does this slot into your art?

O'Grady: Reprising previous works in the process of making new work is a conceptual and artistic strategy I continue to return to. This is a form of archival engagement that has proven productive, in the sense that it has allowed me to generate new meanings and truths from my own history as an artist.

In works such as *Body Is the Ground of My Experience* (1991/2019), I created a number of photomontages, both diptychs and 'collapsed diptychs', that reprised several ideas from *Rivers, First Draft* (1982) in still form.

In *Cutting Out CONYTT* (1977/2017), I revisited and reworked pages from my 1977 work, *Cutting Out the New York Times*. While I felt the original work succeeded in its goal to make public language private, I believed it had failed in other respects and would benefit from the 40 years of experience I had gained. This proved to be the case.

Of course, I have also spent considerable time working with historical archives of images and texts that are not my own. This form of archival research has been important to works like *Miscegenated Family Album*, which pairs images of my own family members with images of ancient Egyptian figures such as Nefertiti.

In weaving together narratives that connect personal stories with past events, I was able to present both families – one ancient and royal, one modern and descended from slaves – as products of shared forces of migration and hybridisation. The archive makes such historical linkages available to me as an artist.

A-M: When did you fall in love with writing and text as a medium?

O'Grady: My work with the written word predates my career as an artist. In fact, I came to artmaking only after achieving professional success as a translator, researcher and writer. One of my first jobs was as a Research Economist at the Bureau of Labor Statistics. In 1961, I left my post in the US government to write fiction, ultimately entering the Iowa Writers' Workshop in 1965.

By the late 1960s, I was working in Chicago at a commercial translation agency and ultimately opened my own translation agency, fulfilling large

contracts for *Playboy* and *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Translation requires talent and intelligence, but at some point I realised that if I had those qualities, I didn't want to use them in service of someone else's work. I wanted to use them to express myself and contribute to making change.

After moving to New York in the 1970s I became a critic for *Rolling Stone* and *The Village Voice*, reviewing acts like the Allman Brothers, Bruce Springsteen and the E-Street Band, and Bob Marley and the Wailers. Eventually, I grew dissatisfied with my role in the music world and accepted an offer to teach literature at the School of Visual Arts (SVA) in 1977. This was a significant shift in terms of my relationship to writing and text, to be working with the written word in an expressly artistic context.

During the two decades I was at SVA, I taught work by the Futurists, Dadaists and Surrealists. Their approach to working with text and image was deeply influential to my work, and it was not long after I joined SVA that I produced my first artwork, *Cutting Out the New York Times* (1977).

I did, however, continue to write cultural criticism, even after turning my attention to artmaking, and this is a practice that has shifted and developed to today. I published a text titled *Black Dreams* in 1982, in [feminist publication] *Heresies #15: Racism Is the Issue*. This was my first attempt to publicly engage with issues of Black female subjectivity. The essay employs personal anecdote and psychological description more than later writings, which became more theoretical.

Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity is the title of an essay I published in 1992, which, in a way, shaped the theoretical contours of my art practice. The text considered Black subjectivity in both artistic modernism and Western modernity as a whole.

A-M: What have been some breakthrough moments in your journey of artistic discovery?

O'Grady: Critically, the most important time in my journey was Girls' Latin School [in Boston] and my days spent in the Boston Public Library. This was the most formative time that would later lead to my artistic discovery.

As I mentioned, joining SVA to teach literature was a significant event in my development as an artist. It was here that I felt I was home, and I knew I was an artist. My engagement with Just Above Midtown (JAM), the Black avant-garde gallery founded by Linda Goode Bryant, in the early 1980s was another important point. As a volunteer at JAM, I was working mainly on the communications for the gallery, but it was during this time that I began to really produce work that critically reflected on race, class and social identity.

My performance, *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* (1980–83), was a critique of the racial apartheid I had observed in the mainstream art world at the time, something that JAM brought into sharp focus. I performed as the invented titular character whose unannounced 'guerrilla' actions intervened in public art events. I considered the performance a 'failure' due to its not having begun a meaningful integration of Black voices in the art world at the time, however *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* had a mythic aftermath that continues to be felt to this day.

My new body of work is an update of *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* which centers on a new persona, that of 'The Knight', a striking figure who wears custom-forged armour, in the Renaissance style of the conquistadors but topped with Caribbean headdresses emblematic of the Global South. The Knight is an avatar of *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* 40 years later, setting out to finish what she started. It will be a hard job. If you conceal everything – race, class, age, gender – what is left? What is possible?

A-M: Over the course of your career, what has remained true to this day in principle and practice?

O'Grady: People tell me my work looks as if it could have been made yesterday. To me, this is a sign that little has fundamentally changed. Even our successes stay safely bracketed. My tasks in art remain the same: to find ways to develop and maintain a rich inner life while standing firm in the attempt to overturn the depredations of the outer world.

A-M: What is the relationship between your art and your personal, unarchived life?

O'Grady: I use my personal, unarchived life to uncover my art. I find my art by examining my unarchived life and shaping it in such a way that it has application to other people's lives.

Playing the Power Game with Mariane Ibrahim

Photography by Brigitte Lacombe

Words by Karen Leong

Mariane Ibrahim-Lenhardt's vocational practice started with a piqued interest in art-collecting. Now, as her eponymous galleries have spread from Seattle to Paris and Mexico City, the Somali-French art dealer has forged a path forward in the curatorial realm with a revitalised approach. The dividends of her hard work in the past decade have resulted in partnerships with artists such as Amoako Bofofo and Lorraine O'Grady (both of whom are also featured in this edition).

Speaking from Chicago to Karen Leong of A-M Journal, it seems Ibrahim's mission has not changed – her approach to acquisition remains a pledge to the untarnished pursuit of beauty.

A-M Journal: How was the world of art-dealing introduced to you?

Mariane Ibrahim: Exclusively... It was a power game and a small circle of players. Now, there is a conscious change to include more diversity.

A-M: You credit your vocation as an initial creative pursuit – how did you retain your sense of passion as your profession bloomed?

Ibrahim: Despite all the changes, I have tried my best to preserve my integrity, to stay closer to my initial mission. To look at art with an uncorrupted eye. To seek beauty.

A-M: What's the most valuable piece of advice you would offer to anyone want to start collecting art?

Ibrahim: To learn to see art. The novice collectors apprehend the art world. It is all about initiation, and it begins with pushing open the door of an artist studio, a gallery or a museum. It is a quest, and they should never be served art on a plate. It is a personal search.

A-M: What compels you about your respective galleries in each country, and how do those sociocultural differences inform your role?

Ibrahim: Each gallery is part of an ecosystem, a culture, a specific geography. I enjoy moving from one space to another, as I constantly adapt. I physically live in three spaces – Chicago, Paris and Mexico City – and each offers me a unique experience. It is quite transformative as I connect with all three countries. It is becoming more and more difficult to pick a place.

A-M: If possible, please share a memory or anecdote of a time when you felt moved by your passion for this discipline. How has it paved the way for your current state of mind?

Ibrahim: When I attended a conference titled Black Portraiture[s] in Paris in 2013, I felt something unprecedented was going to happen in the art world. It was the first time I felt a deep connection to the shifting narrative. I met artists from all over the world that addressed the subject. I knew that moment I was in the right place.

[NOTE: Black Portraiture[s] was co-hosted by Awam Amkpa, Professor at NYU Tisch School of the Arts and Cheryl Finley, Inaugural Director of the Atlanta University Center Collective for the Study of Art History and Curatorial Studies. The 2013 conference was the event's first edition.]

A-M: On the topic of mindfulness and social media, how do you ensure you remain plugged in without overstimulation?

Ibrahim: I started the gallery in Seattle, an import hub for technology. Being remote from the art epicenters forces you to use promotional tools – we were the early adopter of Artsy [the world's largest online art marketplace] and used social media to promote our shows. In my work, I come from marketing and database management, which helps a lot in this business.

The influx of excessive visual sharing, which has now become the norm, has not changed how we present news on our social outlets, including our website. We communicate when we have something to say and, sometimes, we don't.

