

Five From the Whitney Biennial: Lorraine O'Grady

by [aimee walleston](#) 02/23/10

"There are lots of twists to me, because I'm not like your usual artist," (under-)stated Conceptual performance and visual artist Lorraine O'Grady last week. Born in Boston, the 75-year-old O'Grady (she looks and acts like an incredibly bright, beautiful person half her age) has never been comfortable in the white box, leading instead a life in pursuit of new forms of knowledge. An economics major at Wellesley, she studied postgraduate at the Iowa Writers' Workshop; then she was a rock critic, before becoming a theorist of feminism and race. She says her most important contribution to feminism is not art, it's a 1992/94 article on the black female body in art, "Olympia's Maid," a classic in Women's Studies programs. A daughter of West Indian émigrés, O'Grady was herself a teenage mom ("I got pregnant and married, in that order")—almost 30 years and myriad identity incarnations later, she became an uncompromising artist with a resolutely political practice. And, some 30 years from that point, her work is finally being celebrated in earnest: following her conclusion in 2007's WACK show, she was selected for the 2010 Whitney Biennial.



O'Grady came to New York in 1972 ago under far different circumstances. After finishing at Iowa, she joined her boyfriend, the new head of publicity at Columbia Records, in New York. "It was all very glamorous, but for somebody with a brain in their head, it was pretty bad to just be somebody's 'old lady'—to be dressing up as a pretty little chick and going to parties. I couldn't justify my life doing that, she says. So, of course, O'Grady became a rock critic. Earning \$50 an article and selling records to augment her income, she began teaching an English class at The School of Visual Arts. "I became an artist as a result of being at SVA. Within two or three months I was so struck by the energy and attitude, I was so amazed. Some of the students couldn't even really write—but yet they were so smart."

O'Grady is best known for creating the character Mlle Bourgeoise Noire, who first appeared in 1980 at an opening at the Just Above Midtown Gallery, which primarily showed the work of black avant-garde artists. Clothed in a gown made from 180 pairs of white gloves, carrying a hand-made

cat o' nine tails, she "invaded" the opening of the gallery's "Outlaw Aesthetics" show and demanded, "Black art must take more risks!" The next year, she appeared again as Mlle Bourgeoise Noire at the opening of the "Persona" show at the New Museum, and was subsequently uninvited by the museum from giving outreach lectures to school children. It was the museum's loss: O'Grady is a woman of the people, as evidenced by 1983 work, "Art Is...", a performance piece O'Grady staged at the African-American Day Parade in Harlem, wherein the artist created a large float carrying an enormous, ornate gold frame. As it passed through the streets, the float "framed" the streetscapes and onlookers, making everyone and everything art. O'Grady also held gold frames up to individuals, making the piece as much a work of Relational Aesthetics as a Duchampian comment on art objects, and a political and social comment on the nature of the artist and the art venue. Documentation of the piece went on view at [Alexander Gray Associates](#) in Chelsea this weekend, where the joy and exuberance of this caper is evident in each photograph.

O'Grady's visual works, which more often than not feature images of African American men, women and children, are deceptively lovely—which is the point, says O'Grady: "There's a lot of elegance in black culture. Elegance and style are very important. I always felt that I couldn't make anything that was ugly, no matter how tough it was being—and it was tough! But I was aware that people thought: Oh that's too pretty. But I thought, are you kidding? I am being tougher and rougher than you, but it's elegant."

"It's really been shocking to be recognized in this way," says O'Grady of her inclusion in the Biennial. "It's not

something I could have ever imagined happening. I actually laughed when they told me. But I was real cool—and I'm still real cool." O'Grady kept mum about the work she'll show, allowing only that it was "about being taken seriously." Her grin made the element of surprise too delicious to spoil. "My assistant was joking," she says, unable to hold in her mischievous glee, "and she said 'oh yeah—they're going to come and expect 'little old lady' art from you.' This piece is definitely *not* old lady art!"

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