

## LORRAINE O'GRADY

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ALEXANDER GRAY

by andil gosine

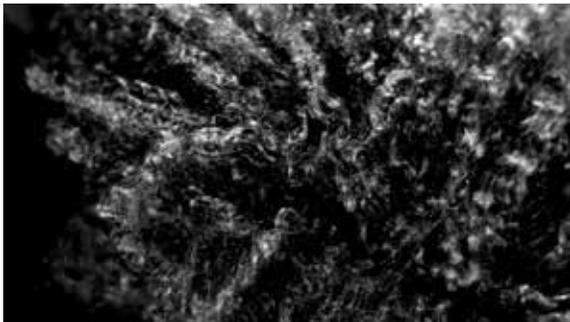


Photo: Lorraine O'Grady: *Landscape (Western Hemisphere)*, 2011, video, 19 minutes; at Alexander Gray.

**NEW YORK** In 1991, at the entrance to her debut solo exhibition in New York (at the INTAR Hispanic American Arts Center), Lorraine O'Grady revealed the conundrum that has provoked her practice from the start. In handwritten text on a wall, she asked: What should we do? By which she seemed to mean: What can be made of the mixing, both free and forced, of desires, identities and cultures in the Americas since colonial encounter?

Her response began at the time with the black-and-white photomontages of the series "Body Is the Ground of My Experience (BodyGround)." Two of these were reprinted at larger sizes for her recent exhibition "New Worlds." *The Fir-Palm* (1991/2012) features a hybrid of New England fir and Caribbean palm rooted in a black woman's prostrate torso. *The Clearing: or Cortez and La Malinche. Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hennings. N. and Me* (1991/2012) is a diptych showing conflicting scenes of interracial sex played out against the backdrop of a forest clearing. The photomontages prepared viewers for the main event in the adjacent screening room: O'Grady's newest work, the 19-minute *Landscape (Western Hemisphere)*, 2011. Through the three works, O'Grady uses her own story to trouble ours.

*The Fir-Palm* establishes the artist's identity, the tree's botanic mutation embodying O'Grady's heritage as the child of mixed-race immigrants who left Jamaica (palm) for Boston (fir). The image is at once an assertive claim of hybridity and, through the clouds hovering in the sky, an acknowledgment of social anxieties about mixing. O'Grady further elaborates these tensions in *The Clearing*. In the left panel of the diptych, a black woman and a white man appear elevated in clouds, their expressions matching the ecstasy of their sexual engagement. Below, children play in the clearing, where the couple's discarded clothes, topped by a gun, lie carelessly piled on the ground. There are no children in the image on the right. The black woman's stiff corpse stretches out on the ground, while the white man—robed in chain mail, his head replaced by a skull—looks down at her. The images suggest that interracial relationships are dream and nightmare, both innocent expressions of romantic love and condemnable acts of political treachery.

The video feels in fact like an extension, esthetic and thematic, of the forest lurking in *The Clearing*. *Landscape* is a continuous close-up of the artist's hair, but it suggests many other things. The flickering pili switch between sharp contrast and blur, feeding viewers' anticipation. The soundtrack of bird whistles, insect chirps and traffic noise creates sensations that are gentle yet harrowing. Over the course of the video, however, the tensions start to feel comfortable—not resolved, but comfortable.