

SLANT

AFTERSHOCK: LORRAINE O'GRADY

November 09, 2020 • Lorraine O'Grady on the US presidential election

Artforum has invited artists to share a text, image, or video in the immediate wake of the United States presidential election and will be posting their contributions throughout the next week.

OPTIMISM? PESSIMISM?

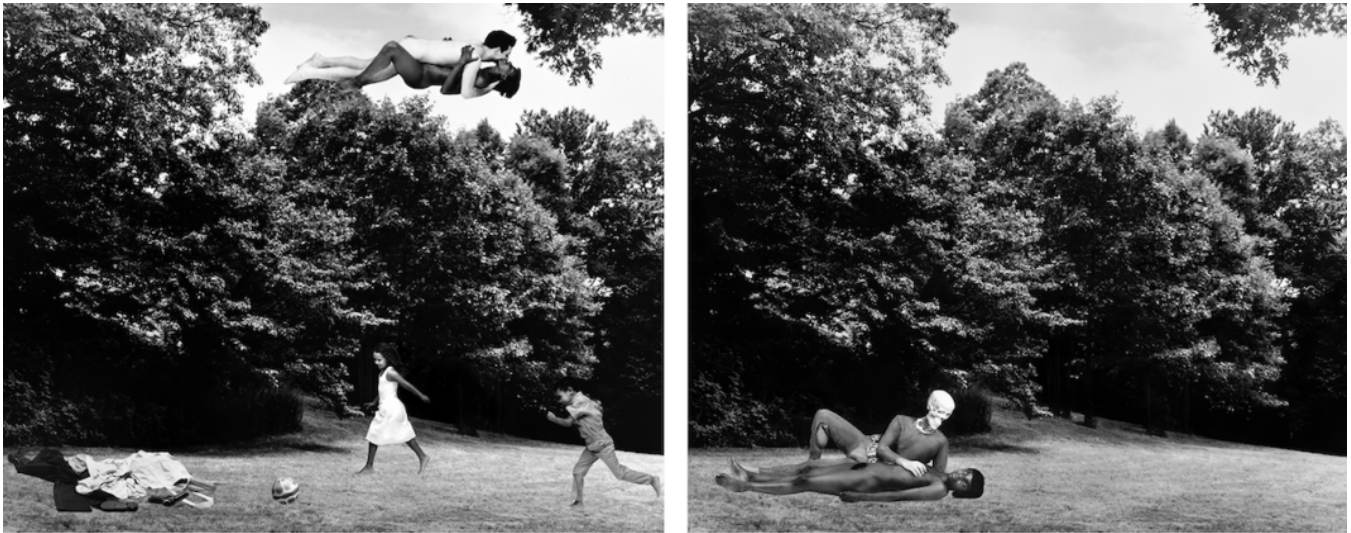
Exhibit A



"America the Beautiful," a video released by the victorious Biden campaign, drew inspiration from Lorraine O'Grady's iconic 1983 performance *Art Is*. . .

THE BIDEN CAMPAIGN contacted me in early August, to ask my blessings for their project. And now they have blessed me. It's overwhelming to be part of Biden's first post as president-elect, the one in which he announces victory—to be part of its celebration. I still break out in sobs of joy and relief. I can't help myself.

Exhibit B



Lorraine O'Grady, *The Clearing: or, Cortés and La Malinche, Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, N. and Me.* Left: *Green Love*. Right: *Love in Black-and-White*. From the series "Body Is the Ground of My Experience," 1991/2019, digital prints from analogue photomontages (diptych), 50 x 40" each. © 2020 Lorraine O'Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy the artist and Alexander Gray Associates, New York.

DID WE EVER have a democracy here? When independence was built on decolonization for whites, slavery for blacks, and genocide for reds? Not to mention the cult of Manifest Destiny and an ahistorical assumption of superiority over the entire rest of the world. And on through the collusion of Northern white women with Southern white women to get the vote at the expense of, and expropriating the work done for, the voting rights of blacks. Then up to and including the ownership of knowledge by elites of all political persuasions, with the "great unwashed," or low-information voters, left to their prejudices and either not participating or doing what they are told. All while a tiny group of megawealthy individuals is forced to buy more and more power to maintain their increasingly threatened position.

In my lifetime, I've watched GOP corruption go from worse to unimaginable. The evening I watched Nixon on TV, saw him lambast my old boss Harold Goldstein, whom we used to call "Mr. Incorruptible," demand that Harold resign from the Bureau of Labor Statistics because he felt Goldstein's interpretation of the unemployment rate was politically motivated and out to "get" him, I thought I'd seen the bottom of the barrel. Then came

Reagan, routinely praised for upending leftist Latin governments with impunity and idolized for sending the marines to Grenada, a Caribbean island with fewer than 100,000 people. Followed by the first Bush, who didn't pretend the Gulf War was anything other than a grab to save Kuwaiti oil for Saudi and US interests after Saddam's Iraq had claimed it for themselves.

The second Bush—the less bright and more easily controlled son of the first—under Cheney, his appointed tutor, purveys the lie that Saddam is behind Osama Bin Laden and the Taliban and fights the second Gulf War for the same reason his father fought the first: to control the oil. While in between each of the above, there is a Democratic center swinging pragmatically back and forth, as did the Clintons in 1994, trading mass incarceration to pass universal health care (they failed). But we are still safely in the hands of the elites, so at least there has been a veneer of rationality. Then comes Trump. And with the new social media, the prejudices are no longer voiceless.

Now we've elected Biden, who seems a last gasp of the old civic virtues. But this is going to be HARD. I can't speak as elegantly and authoritatively as Michelle Obama on just how hard it will be: “always uphill,” “no margin for error,” “turn out even more voters in each election after this.” I only know that Biden's method—listen to everyone, give everyone something they need and no one everything they want—may require patience of his followers, but could be the only path to success. And there are no guarantees, even for this classic dealmaker. The Trumpists will not cut him a break, so luck had better break his way. Nearly every time.

—Lorraine O'Grady

ALL IMAGES