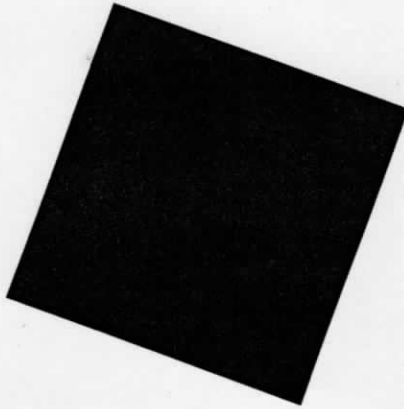
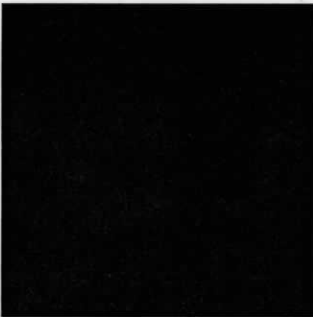


International Critics' Choice

2	Acknowledgments
3	Contents
4	Introduction
5	Foreword
6	Michael Archer Tessa Robbins Amikam Toren
7	Donald Kuspit Lucas Samaras Philip Tsiaras
9	Gianfranco Mantegna Alfredo Pirri Michelangelo Pistoletto
11	Charles Merewether Fabian Cerejido Valeska Soares
13	Charles Miller Thomas Ruff
15	Gary Nickard Margaret Bailey Doogan Stephan Shortt
17	Nkiru Nzegwu Kolade Oshinowo Chinwe Uwatse
20	Calvin Reid Young-Soon Min Lorraine O'Grady
22	James Yood Julia Fish Gladys Nilsson
24	Artists & Object List
26	Afterword
27	Lenders to the Exhibition



An exhibition organized by
The Mitchell Museum at Cedarhurst

Lorraine O'Grady

O'Grady's work is characterized by an ingenuous sense of exploration and experimentation as she has moved along an intellectual and emotional journey from wife, to teacher, to performance artist, to ritualized installations and her current works of photomontage. After years of casting about as rock critic and English teacher, talented but frustrated, she discovered Lucy Lippard's book *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object*, and through the discussion of the artists in that book, discovered a language of expression through performance and the manipulation of both real and metaphysical social space as theatrical as the vivid images in her own imagination and as complex as the questions of culture and identity that fascinate her. Specifically, her works focus on the inner life, the structuring of identity in black women within a society that either masks or denies her presence intellectually and sexually and her social import. In her early performance pieces in the early 1980s she would appear as Mlle. Bourgeoisie Noire, black debutante, dressed in a long gown made entirely of long white gloves, and carrying a bouquet of flowers that concealed a whip—elegant symbols of internalized female repression and external social repression respectively.

She would appear, uninvited, at the opening of exhibitions both uptown and downtown, chiding the black arts community for what she described as its creative timidity and complacency. Her subsequent invasion of a New Museum exhibition on performance art (nine white performance artists), registered an equal challenge to the white performance community for their narrow cultural framework and de facto eurocentricity. In her work the dominating ethos of white racism and eurocentricity is often addressed through an exploration of intra-racial psychology. Nevertheless O'Grady's focus on race is not an essentialist fixation. She is not so much concerned with what is black art as much as what is it to black at this point in time. What, her work seems to ask, is the meaning and psychological consequences of our historical experience in America? Is blackness monolithically constructed? What are all the ingredients in the racial/cultural mix? What are the fallacies of a romantic, putatively fixed racial identity?

The child of West Indian immigrants, raised in Boston in black middle class privilege, she probes as well the complexity of historical currents and class in works like *Nefertiti Devonia Evangelina*, a photographic series combining family history and Egyptology with a conceptual flourish. The pictures inspire with a grand meta-narrative on the African American diaspora and the profoundly hybrid influence African Americans have had on American culture. This quirky and ingenious examination is evoked through the timely imagery and mythology of an ancient Egyptian dynasty. The work creates a strangely personal narrative analysis of African American mulatto culture, centered on the heterogeneous nature of Egyptian civilization identifying it as a black mulatto cultural antecedent to sub-Saharan, Greek, and European cultural development and the equally hybrid mutative

character of U.S and North American culture. O'Grady, who presented these works as exhibition pieces and in the form a ritual performance in the early 1980's served to introduce a staple of black historical debate into the milieu of New York's downtown bohemia, placing the issues of black female sensibility, cultural mutation, authenticity, and the blackness of Egyptian antiquity into the presumed center of the American arena for the examination and discussion of radical western art. While her work examines the grand panorama of cultural hybridization, O'Grady's focus remains the reclamation, the representation of the sentient inner life of the black female through pictorial representations of latent female power, interracial sexuality, cultural transformation, death, and social domination.

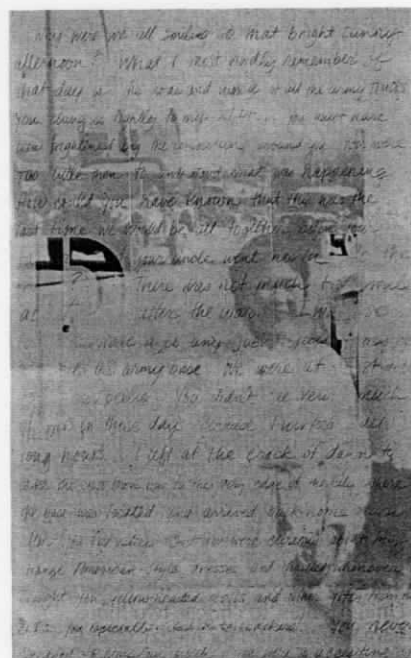
In her contemplative photographic series, *Gaze*, she depicts women and men, their torsos bare, their gazes directed outward. Within each image is a smaller likeness of the same individual that projects a vision of physical and metaphysical grace. The images capture an introspective diagram of inner self and outer forms; the models apparently stripped of their cultural presumptions and psychic bric a brac, inviting and communicative in some extra sensorial manner.

Young Soon Min

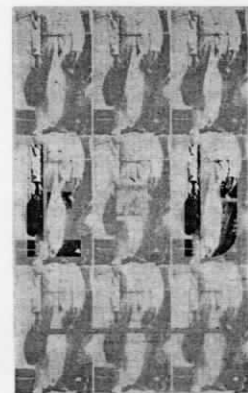
Min, born in South Korea but raised in California from the age of seven, addresses the process of identity and acculturation from the perspective of the immigrant. Not only the slow mutative effect of the transference of large cultural patterns over time, as in O'Grady's works, but also the psychic and political mechanism of modern colonization and neo colonization. Her works often mediate on the consequences of military power and mute, spiritual attachment. Her works project a layered atmosphere of bald declaration, muted by a serenely visual rumination on the nature of cultural amputation and foreign dispersal, the limbo-like existence of being between two cultures, neither one or the other, and a haunting, poetic reflection on return and reconciliation. Examining her work, and consequently her life, reveals the ways she addresses a volatile personal reality formed through her transplanted Korean family, and subsequently by the clash between her own idealized vision of Korea and the reality that she encountered upon her return to it. The work that resulted from that trip to Korea combines historical relevance and sense of place and connection; addressing, in particular, the empty representations of Asians and their Asian American progeny, typical of the west and recreating their images as neither inscrutable yellow peril nor model minority. The immigrant, the assimilated American, and the estranged homeland bound in a complex collection of sensibility, reunited with a historical Korean national continuum and transformed by it.

She uses a range of mediums for her wallpiece/installations, from photographs to sculptural and found objects. In her representative installation piece, *deColonization*, She turned the gallery space into a metaphorical/metaphysical space of physically realized narrative fragments. The installation addresses her return to Korea in the late 1980s and marks her search for an historical foundation to her own sense of Korean identity. Part of this search for her past encompasses her interest in contemporary Korean artists, in particular the politicized activist artist of the Min Joong movement, as well as the legacy of the Korean War, the American occupation, and the resonant force of an ancient civilization clashing with a colonizer, modernity, and the psychological aftermath of that

encounter. History, emotion, personality, social memory, physical reality, all come to play in a lyrical evocation of psychological empowerment and self definition. The works in the installation are varied, but in one section she cluster four panels of photomontage, each veiled with a translucent sheet. The word OCCUPIED is stenciled on the sheets, and below the panels, marked on the wall is the word TERRITORIES. This mediative work focuses on her concern with the hostile, psychic, physical, and transformative cultural occupation of post war Korea. The panels contain lyrically composed images of Korean women, American cars, army trucks, and most importantly, are inscribed with the language, the voices, of Korean women. These voices repeat the slang—or Min's imaginative recreation of it—the sexual propositions, the psychic recreation of Korean women by the servicemen they served. They call out to "Check Point Charlie" and "G.I. Joe," I'm your Susie Wong, I'm your first, your second, your third world girl.



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1

Young Soon Min
deColonization series
photographs (3 of 4)
42 x 25 1/2 inches each