

ARTFORUM

THE BLACK AND WHITE SHOW

A Portfolio by Lorraine O'Grady



OUTSIDE, EAST SECOND STREET between Avenues B and C in 1983 was Manhattan's biggest open-air drug supermarket. It was always deathly quiet except for the continual cries of vendors hawking competing brands of heroin: "3-5-7, 3-5-7" and "Toilet, Toilet." From the steps of Kenkeleba, looking across at the shooting galleries, you saw unreflecting windows and bricked-up facades, like doorless entrances to Hades. How did the junkies get inside? There was almost no traffic. Behind the two columns flanking Kenkeleba's doorway unexpectedly was a former Polish wedding palace in elegant decay owned by a black bohemian couple, Corrine Jennings and Joe Overstreet.

The gallery, invisible from the street, had five rooms—one, a cavern—plus a corridor, and dared you to use the whole of it. It was perfect

for an impossibly ambitious *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* event, thirty artists, half white, half black, with all the work in black and white. Achromaticity would heighten similarities and flatten differences. And it would be the first exhibit I'd seen in the still virtually segregated art world with enough black presence to create dialogue. A sudden opening meant only three weeks to do it. And of course, no money. But the Whitney Biennial's inclusion of Jean-Michel Basquiat as a mascot was salt in the wound. That, and the daily bravado needed to walk on that block where even the air was strange—dawn felt like twilight here—kept me going. Race would not be on the labels. Would it be on the wall? In what way? I wanted to see for myself.

Keith Haring had audited my Futurism, Dada, and Surrealism course at the School of Visual Arts. I called him first. Then contacted Jean-Michel, who could be reached only by telegram. Give that boy another chance! But after promising two new canvases for the show, Basquiat pulled out. Obligations to Bruno Bischofberger came first. Walking down East Second Street was like passing stacks of dreams in mounds. I asked muralist John Fekner to connect the inside with the outside. Downtown had a multitude of talents and trends, some being bypassed by the stampede to cash in. The show ended with twenty-eight artists, many still worried that cadmium red cost thirty-two dollars a quart wholesale. Each day as I approached the block, I wondered, "Where is my mural?" On the day before the opening, it was there. John had done it at 4 am, when even junkies sleep.

Lorraine O'Grady, "The Black and White Show." *Artforum* (May 2009), accessed online.

Inside the gallery, it pleased me that, even across so many styles, the images gave off language. But who would come? Compared with Kenkeleba, Gracie Mansion and Fun Gallery were like SoHo. The chasm between East Second and East Tenth streets might be too great to bridge. The answer was, friends and East Villagers who understood that people “in the game” leave “citizens” alone. Getting reviewers to the gallery was like beating your head against air. The show received a single paragraph in the East Village Eye, nothing more. Looking back, it’s clear the artists have had differing careers. A few became household names; more disappeared without a trace. Of some I’ve wondered, what might their work have become had money and critical attention been paid? There are so many coexisting tendencies in any given time. What is lost when the present reduces the past, ties it up with a ribbon so it can move on to the future? Is that result necessary? Is it real?

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