



# Introducing: Lorraine O'Grady and Juliana Huxtable, Part 2



Juliana Huxtable, *Untitled in the Rage (Nibiru Cataclysm)*, 2015, From the series *UNIVERSAL CROP TOPS FOR ALL THE SELF CANONIZED SAINTS OF BECOMING*, 2015, inkjet print, courtesy the artist.

Part two of a two-part discussion between artists Lorraine O'Grady and Juliana Huxtable. The dialogue took place by phone from O'Grady and Huxtable's respective studios in New York City. This is part two of a two-part discussion and the first time the artists have spoken.

---

**Lorraine O'Grady:** I have a feeling that you'll think it sounds strange, but the biggest compliment I can give you and some other young artists is that you make me feel afraid. [both laugh] Like when I come out with this new performance, "Oh my God, Juliana's

there"—I mean I realize you are capable of seeing it as retardataire, right? As totally backward, out-of-it thinking. Even in the short time I've become familiar with your ideas and your work in more depth, I feel they are already forcing me to become sharp my game, and that's a thrill. It's scary to have young artists capable of judging you, but it's also a thrill.

**Juliana Huxtable:** Well, that's a compliment. [laughs] I feel a burden of new proofs on my end constantly.

**LO:** Well, we're not in easy positions, either of us, it seems. I think that has to do with representing positions that are so new. It's interesting that, even though we may have come from different theoretical and aesthetic places, from different historical and cultural times, we've had similar attitudes in response to the difficult work we knew we had to make. I think one aspect of that position was a desire to make work that is beautiful.

**JH:** Mhm.

**LO:** To help make my case, I've often quoted the statement by Toni Morrison—I may be paraphrasing here—where she says she believes that art can be “resolutely political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time.”

**JH:** Right.

**LO:** When I was making political work in the early '80s, there was such pressure to make it ugly, I mean mostly from white people. [JH laughs] They seemed to feel that what announced the presence of political intention was ugliness, or at least a refusal of beauty. I don't know if that was because in the United States certainly—and the '60s were a very thin and short-lived exception—most white artists and critics had been raised in a culture of acceptance, not of refusal. They seemed new to protest in serious art, felt uncomfortable with it, or maybe they just didn't understand political art's nuances. I think it also had to do with a misunderstanding of black culture. For instance, I was at the March on Washington in 1963, and the thing about the march and the event later on the Mall is that it was family time, it was picnic time; it was have-fun-with-your-friends time. People marched with smiles on their faces and then picnicked on the grass with old and new friends. It was Sunday in the country. That night, watching the scene

reflected on TV via an all-white commentariat, then discussing it at work the next day with my virtually all-white colleagues and friends in the Federal Government, it was as if they'd been watching a different event from me. The consensus was that the black people and their white allies at the March could not be serious, can you believe? They all thought, if the marchers were having so much fun, they couldn't be serious. I kept saying, "You don't get it, you don't get it. Don't you realize that people can laugh and smile and be implacable at the same time?" I think the same thing is true of beauty. I don't see why black political artists would refuse one of the greatest arms we have, which is black style.

**JH:** Right.

**LO:** Twenty years later, in the early '80s, I found that a similar sort of uninformed and un-nuanced theorization would become a way of refusing the work—the aspersion that it was too beautiful.

**JH:** Right now, the idea that a work that distances itself or maybe even squanders an opportunity to deal in beauty is having a moment among younger, self-postured-as-critical and largely white artists. There seems to be a crisis of representation where they're so in a hole or at least so backed into this corner of questions around commodification and representation that the only art that can announce itself as having merit intellectually must deal in conceptualism. And so I feel, as an artist of color right now, that I have to actively fight against this inclination to see my work—which has some romantic inclinations aesthetically, or in my writing—as commodifiable, consumable—you know, aspiring to a Jeff Koons sort of position. It's been really frustrating to have to work against that but in a different context now. But maybe the same context actually, I'm not sure.

**LO:** I don't know. It could be the fact that you are so beautiful physically and that your work is made with romantic imagery, uses the imagery of romance, which accounts for the fact that, as you sense, you've been perhaps stuck in this location of the imagistic rather than the conceptual. What can one say? If they can, they will. [laughs] So that sort of bracketing is a way of not taking you seriously as a contributor and a critic of culture. For sure, the playfulness will always be there, in many different valences, sometimes pure, sometimes instrumental, and often occupying points in between. But

there is a need for others to learn that the playfulness is not a contradiction of the seriousness, to see that political moments are multi-faceted, composed of interdependent elements.

**JH:** Right, right. I'm really fascinated by your role as a writer because I've found that sometimes people encounter my work solely through its visual manifestations and then they find out about my writing, and there's this realization like, "Oh, whoa, now I can enter into the work."

**LO:** Well, that's obviously been the case with me, too. You know, there have been so many woefully inadequate responses to the visuals. I think, in some ways, people are still pretty far behind being able to understand the writing as well. But at least the writing gives a ballast, weight to the visuals so that people do get the sense that maybe they don't understand, and that sense of not understanding allows the work a bit of room to at least—I'm not going to say grow—but at least persist. I can't imagine what the ideal moment for growth in perception of the work would look like. But for now, at least, the work is able to hold on, to find its moment because of the writing. I do believe that's the function my writing has performed. It always seemed that nobody else was thinking like me. But I always believed I was thinking in a way others would eventually have to think, I just didn't know how long it would take. [both laugh] You know? Wrongfully, I now realize, I always thought I was the *first*. But other artists and intellectuals before me and during my time—few in number, to be sure—were saying similar things. But I thought I was the first, and being the first is an advantageous position, you're at least encountering things for the first time, not to mention that your audience is even newer to those ideas than you. You're on that edge where the culture hasn't quite figured out how to deal with you, and so its responses are a little less pat. You feel like the responses, even those of pure refusal, have not been rehearsed but are actually alive, you feel like you are at the live barrier, that you see where the actual limits are. I mean, I grew up like everybody else did, thinking that if only you work hard enough, if only you are good enough, if only you whatever, whatever...but in this situation, you realize that oh no, that is not what it's going to take. You see that the limit is real, it's not a figment of your imagination.

**JH:** [laughs] Yeah.

**LO:** You encounter these limit moments and then you try to pass on that understanding, but it takes a while for people to get it. So you start circling around, making the argument from different positions, using different methods. I think every bit of art that you have, including writing, can and should be used. I think that's one of the things that's drawn both of us so much to interdisciplinary work—knowing that we have to attack the arguments from many points of view.

**JH:** Right, and be able to subsume someone in it.

**LO:** That's right. I mean the more you can surround the argument, the more you strengthen it. Even so, it's never going to be so strong that it can't be attacked. But I do think one of the things that's been wonderful to me about seeing people like Kim Drew and Aria Dean is that I—well, I should confess that to sustain myself as an artist, I've often had to take ideas from people who may be fascistic in certain areas of their work but nevertheless give me concepts I can use, right, like [Carl] Jung, like [Martin] Heidegger. [laughs] I've read *a lot* of Heidegger. And Heidegger has said that work being made from a certain kind of truth would not necessarily be made for its immediate moment but rather for its "coming preservers," those who had acquired the tools to comprehend it. And so as I worked, I had to hold on to this idea—I mean this was something I had to hold on to for like thirty years—the concept that at some point in time, the preservers would come. So I have to say, I'm glad I've lived long enough to see some of them coming. When I see the way in which the work is able to echo with young women like Kim and Aria, you know, I feel, maybe they are the coming preservers. [laughs] Maybe they and others will be the next step forward, you know what I mean? For so long, I've felt like I've been walking in deep sand—I guess treading water is the right metaphor—but I finally feel that perhaps a step forward can be taken. Or rather, that the work will be permitted to step forward.

**JH:** What did people say to you when you first did the *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* performance?



[LORRAINE O'GRADY: "MLLE BOURGEOIS NOIRE GOES TO THE NEW MUSEUM" (1981),  
PHOTOGRAPH: COREEN SIMPSON, PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE ARTIST]

**LO:** I have to tell you: some of the hardest comments came from black people who thought the work was too confrontational, too harsh. They may not have wanted attention drawn to them in that way, I think. They may have been outside, but they didn't want attention to the fact that they were outside. I think they felt that only their work could get them inside. But I had already observed that no matter how good the work was, it couldn't get you inside. Later, what would open the doors in the end was only partially the work of the likes of Adrian [Piper] and David [Hammons]. In actuality, inclusion came primarily from the needs of a moment that had been created by Euro-American theory—both the perception and the reception of work by “others” were created and trapped in Euro-American theory.

**JH:** Right.

**LO:** So that's really not about being good enough. It's about being *needed* enough. And the art world and the academy needed—not changes to the theory or the rule—but exceptions to the rule. They needed isolated instances and artists that would show they were being inclusive, but not numerous or varied enough to challenge the validity of the theory itself. That may account for the totally illegitimate and untenable response of anointing two foreparents, Adrian and David—a foremother and a forefather—period. While at the same time, all knowledge of African American fine art history seemed to remain erased, and even other black fine artists, working contemporaneously, were left almost invisible for another two decades.

**JH:** Right.

**LO:** I mean, think of what other black avant-garde artists like Senga Nengudi, Jack Whitten, Melvin Edwards, and even Sam Gilliam went through.

**JH:** Mhm.

**LO:** So many were left invisible for decades after the first two were let in. Because it wasn't about our work, it was about *their* need. So the answer to your question—"What was the response to *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* by white people?"—would be that she was immediately ignored. Even the inclusion of Piper and Hammons in 1988 and 1989, I felt, only proved that the argument *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* had made seven or eight years earlier was still valid.

**JH:** And it's still valid in a lot of ways. I feel like I'm still dealing with something similar—this need for an exception that can be championed in a moment, but using that window of opportunity to inundate people with an idea. I was so paranoid because I've seen so many people have these moments of entry—whether it's into a biennial or a large group show that gets a lot of attention or whatever the circumstance is—and there's an entryway that happens, but the people who are structuring that entryway are not actually thinking about the artists necessarily in the full breadth of their work, they're kind of just doing it so they can perform the idea that they're [marginalized artists] included.

**LO:** Oh, yeah.

**JH:** It becomes about strategizing, you have to strategize a way to ensure that it's about you. I feel this way, at least. I have to consciously strategize to make sure that it's about me.

**LO:** You have to constantly strategize. But then again, there's a similarity at some level to the situation of black actors and actresses, the problem of "where does the next role come from?" There always are minority actors and actresses that break out in these wonderful, isolated movies or plays. And then they don't get the follow-up movies, the follow-up roles. As a result, they're not able to have the kind of careers where they can develop because there are always economic issues, concerns.

**JH:** Right, right.

**LO:** And then, those economic issues usually stem from psychological and sociological cultural fears: oh, we can't spend too much money on movies with black people because only black people want to see them. Up to now, that's really been just an excuse, a rationalization for what they don't want to do in the first place: they don't want to continue writing roles, producing movies and plays with black people in the round, with black people who are complete, when all they know, all they feel comfortable with is the stereotypes.

**JH:** Right, which is all they see.

**LO:** Yeah, so in other words for the black actor or actress or even screenwriter or director, you know, to get the next one, to be able to build on whatever they did previously, has been nearly impossible. Sometimes I think that's the situation in the art world as well. Over the decades, there have been a lot of black artists in biennials, and then nobody remembered who they were. They didn't get the next biennial, the next group show, and so on. A fundamental change would mean taking the artists seriously, letting their objects and their concepts enter and affect the dialogue. The situation may be changing with the breakthrough of certain artists of color into the biennial circuit, which has become its own sort of art world.

**JH:** Its own ridiculous world, yeah.



**LO:** I haven't examined it very carefully, so I'm still not exactly sure what the true presence of these artists in the world of the biennial and the art fair is. I'm not sure what that role is and how it is changing anything.

**JH:** Right. Well neither am I. [both laugh]

**LO:** You know what I mean?! It's just so hard to know. That's a long, long discussion. The effect has to be observed over longer periods of time. Then you could retroactively analyze what that role was.

But when I was making notes of what I would like to speak with you about, my notes didn't have any of this theoretical stuff, nothing about the nature of oppositional art, the role of black artists, the erasure of black art history. You know what I was thinking? I had notes that were so silly, like, "What does the sound of tolling bells mean to you?" [both laugh] The first thing you hear in that piece [*There are Certain Facts that Cannot Be Disputed*], right?

Juliana Huxtable | There Are Certain Facts That Cannot ...



**JH:** Yeah.

**LO:** Does it mean anything in particular?

**JH:** I don't even really know how to answer that right now.

**LO:** Well, that didn't stop me from interpreting it on my own. [laughs] I thought that in some ways the sound of the bell tolling is a sound of universality. Historically, it's sound that says "this applies to everyone," no matter who they are or what their station may be. I thought you were saying, "This may be about me, but it actually is about everyone." The sound made me think of—do you know John Donne, the English poet from the seventeenth century?

**JH:** I don't, no.

**LO:** Well, I can't say I know his work well, but I've read his *Meditation XVII*, the one they call *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. It seems that at that time—when people were dying—their family and friends would have the church bells tolled, so people would pray for them. So he's lying in bed, and he's sick, and when he hears the bells tolling outside his window, he wonders to himself, "Who are those for?" And then he gets this awful thought: "Oh my God, maybe my friends, maybe my family thinks I'm sicker than I think I am." [laughs] So they're having the bells tolled. [both laugh] But while he's lying there, he gets this second moment and he writes this meditation, the main line of which is, "Do not send to ask for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee." In other words, even if the tolling is not for him, it is for him.

**JH:** Right, right.

**LO:** It's calling him to live a new life, a conscious life. As recently as my own childhood, the tolling of the bells was a reminder of when to pray, of time passing. It's like a warning. That's how I read the tolling of your bells. I thought it fit in with the title of your piece in the Triennial, *The Self Canonized Saints of Becoming*, which I loved.



[JULIANA HUXTABLE, *UNTITLED IN THE RAGE (NIBIRU CATAclysm)*, 2015, FROM THE SERIES *UNIVERSAL CROP TOPS FOR ALL THE SELF CANONIZED SAINTS OF BECOMING*, 2015, /INKJET PRINT, COURTESY THE ARTIST.]

**JH:** Oh, yeah.

**LO:** I thought it was so great because that's what we are.

**JH:** That was sort of a moment where I felt, maybe in a similar vein, that the diaspora and people of the diaspora and the questions of identity and movement kind of creates and predates postmodernism in a lot of ways. Self-representation or the fantasies surrounding self-representation are a part of a nexus of ideas or ways of producing ideas of oneself. The way that black people have figured themselves, and have been forced to be their own saints—and partially thinking about and embracing theology—prefigured what everyone else has more recently thought of as novel and radical about visual culture on the Internet. I was thinking about Tumblr, for instance, because I was an avid user. I was frustrated because I felt like the way that net art as an active category of contemporary art was really brief and shallow and only about just the most uninteresting formal gestures from a really limited group of white artists. And so that piece came from a feeling of “I need to take this back.” [both laugh]

**LO:** I love that title. Also, I wanted to ask you how you connected the dots between [Raquel Welch's] *One Million Years B.C.* and Octavia Butler book covers.

**JH:** The inspiration for that series of images was writing that was produced in conversation with, you know, the type of household art that maybe for lack of a better word, you might think of it as kind of kitschy. Black household art, where it's the black Jesus that looks like Tupac or the persecution of Christ as kind of a diasporic metaphor.

**LO:** Right, yeah.

**JH:** Or like a black woman with leopard pelt tattered clothing in a shallow body of water and there are black panthers behind her. I've always been obsessed with those images, but I started studying them for the heavy subjects they navigated, and I think in a way they mirrored some of the ways that I try to approach my practice. It was an abstraction of really, really dense, really necessary sometimes political impulses. It was an effort to

take them and abstract them towards something a bit more symbolic than it is necessarily directly representational, but in a way that I felt was really poetic and beautiful. I also felt like it was coded and kind of subversive in a lot of ways, like the presence of literal black panthers in those images, and the linking of black women and weaponry with the panthers. I'm just thinking about the different levels and ways that black politics have been pursued since the introduction of crack in the 1980s and everything. So, Octavia Butler's book covers are a reflection of how her writing links the legacy of sci-fi culture to liberation theology, or even liberating sci-fi culture itself.

**LO:** That was what my next question was going to be—what is the connection between science fiction and theology that you're referring to?

**JH:** I think that, for me, science fiction is an alternative to theology. I think a more crass, maybe less interesting way to see it is as similar to the way that some people supplement or replace religion with astrology. Science fiction and its ability to construct these narrative worlds or myths—especially with Octavia Butler, something like *Earthseed*—is so religious to me. It's less in terms of the description of the world, but more in how it aspires to something similar to a liberation theology. It aspires to do the same thing, to take an aspirational canon or set of ideas and images and inject them with alternative potentials. The link between the content of Butler's books but also the covers as a reflection reminded me of TLC and the weird Hype Williams music video culture Afrofuturism that was happening in the late '90s and early 2000s. I really do feel like those images are directly a sublimation of a political desire—like you know, black women wearing men's cargo pants and military boots with these large hooped earrings. It's all a way of sublimating or abstracting an impulse that is truly about a really radical sense of black liberation while existing in the confines of a culture wherein expressing these desires directly is not tolerated or has actively been erased by really violent legacies.



**LO:** It's so fascinating. I'm just really glad I'm asking you these questions.

I have another question. I have to confess that I had never heard the word "cute" used theoretically before. [both laugh] I want you to know that's how far out of it I am, so my question is: are you cute and in what ways?

**JH:** Um, well, I don't necessarily think not hearing cute as a theoretical term is a sign of you being out of touch. At one point, I was originally planning on getting a PhD in literature. That was my plan when I moved to New York, and I sort of fell into art. So academia's theoretical paradigms and esoteric language at a certain point began to feel a bit unnecessary, or at least for what I was working through at the time. I felt incapable of doing what I wanted to do on those terms. In the same way that I imagine a lot of theorists create their own terms, whether it's piecing together these three hyphenated words together, taking "anarcho-" and "testo-" to use slang or terms that I would hear just being out in New York and in bar culture, club culture, whatever. These spaces and online Tumblr communities felt really rich to me culturally but weren't necessarily translated into a sort of theoretical context. I started to use and just insist on them. I insisted on them being the same way; so "cute" was a term that I started to use a lot, and I really liked the term "cute" because I think it describes how I'm posturing myself in relation to the way people perceive me. In my performances and in parts of my personal life, I know that when people look at me, they see a certain idea—there's a certain aesthetic, a beauty or a cuteness or a put-togetherness. I kind of use that as an

entryway to almost bait and switch or deceive people. It's sort of a methodology for my performances.

**LO:** Is it like a way of making yourself palatable?

**JH:** I don't think it is, actually. I think it's offering the illusion at one point that perhaps you're going to get something more palatable, and then refusing to follow through with that. I think the ambiguity of the ways that one can use the word "cute" are also reflective of that. Cute can be a really shady term; it can be a really nasty, loaded, shady way of suggesting, "Oh that's..."

**LO:** "That's *cute*..." Yeah.

**JH:** "Oh, that's *cute*." It carries with it all of the ways that cute can be used as a disguise for really sharp or caustic intents, meanings or significations. The idea of cuteness, almost like a ploy, is kind of interesting.

**LO:** I love it! It's all wonderful! It's all new. I'm having to think about it *a lot*, what can I tell you. But I have to say something else—I watched a DJ set that you did on YouTube, I didn't watch it all the way through, but I thought, "Oh my God, this is so funny." I mean, to me, it was funny. You had just got to this point where you just felt so free to do whatever you damn well pleased. [JH laughs] You started off with your spoken word. Here we are in the club, and you see—it's shot from behind the crowd, so you can see the people who are waiting to go on the floor and dance—and you're doing this spoken word bit, and then you go from that into classical music?! [both laugh] The crowd is just like, what kind of club mix is *this*?! And you don't care! Then they would hear a beat, and they would start to move and as soon as they did, then you would take it away from them quickly. Oh, I loved it. [laughs]



JULIANA HUXTABLE

WEIRD MAGIC MIX: THE AWAKENING

**JH:** I really love the idea of refusal as a sort of way to approach mixing.

**LO:** [laughs] When I saw that I thought this is all very interesting, the way the mix moves all said something about who you were and how you do things and I liked that.

It was, wow...I have to tell you, I'm amazed I've been able to carry on a conversation with you. [laughs] I was so woefully unprepared, and I also feel really tired—I was on a deadline and got about three hours sleep last night—and still it's been a wonderful conversation. But I can't be smart for another second, I mean I can't. I don't have one more thing that I can say or do that could possibly make sense. But, wow...I hope that we'll be able to continue this in some way.

**JH:** Yeah, that would be awesome.