

## FOUR DIPTYCHS\*

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The French feminist magazine *Petunia's* invitation to create a centerfold sparked O'Grady's piece in the 2010 Whitney Biennial, *The First and the Last of the Modernists*. The text documents her decision to contrast images of Baudelaire and Michael Jackson.

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**June 1, 2009**

For months I've planned to resume work on *Flowers of Evil and Good*, the photo-installation on Baudelaire and his black common-law wife Jeanne Duval and ultimately my mother Lena, which I began in 1995. I adore Baudelaire and taught his poetry for years at the School of Visual Arts here in New York. But as much as I love his poetry, I love him as a man because of Jeanne. Two decades! Longer than most couples I know, and without benefit of either wedding or kids. As a black woman who's had white partners, I don't have to speculate to say Charles learned a few things about his own culture he wouldn't otherwise have known. . . that kind of insider-outsider position makes a leap from romanticism to modernism look easy. Although Jeanne is present in every line of his poetry, even when he writes about Mme Sabatier, she is absent everywhere. Where is her own voice? It isn't until I hear her in the voice of my mother Lena, born 80 years later into a world which has not yet changed, that I can begin to know who Jeanne is. It is summer now, and I am eager to get back to work. But my computer

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\* Text in English on the genesis of *The First and the Last of the Modernists* in O'Grady's earlier work on Charles Baudelaire and his black common-law-wife, Jeanne Duval, *Flowers of Evil and Good*. Published in the French feminist magazine, *Petunia: magazine féministe d'art contemporain et de loisirs*, issue 2, Summer 2010, pp 43-46. Illustrated by black-and-white reproduction of "The Red Diptych: Charles and Michael."

crashes, and those early files are now buried in half a terabyte of data I must transfer from DVDs to a new external drive.

### **June 25, 2009**

Oh, it is boring! Transferring and organizing is taking weeks. To prevent my mind from numbing, I live on the internet simultaneously. When the news first comes through, for hours I don't believe it. But it's true, Michael is dead. And now I am bawling uncontrollably. How could that be? I have always been a Prince fan! Where do my tears come from? Soon I am plunged into Google, into fansites, into YouTube. I maniacally download videos while continuing my data transfer (because I suspect the videos will quickly disappear), pull thousands of images, and read seemingly every article written in the aftermath plus others going back dozens of years. I am dumbfounded. Those who thought he hadn't produced anything since *Thriller* had simply stopped listening and looking. MJ and Prince were so unlike, why did we feel we had to choose?

### **August 11, 2009**

Now the data transfer is finished, I've begun to put *Flowers of Evil and Good* in order. . . images of Mama, Aunt Gladys, Aunt Vy, and Jeanne on one side, images of Charles on the other. My friend Mary Beth has taken a place in Greenport, on the North Fork of Long Island, and invited me to stay. She rises early morning, I wake midday, we meet for walks along the harbor and dinner out. In between, there is time spent on organizing the old *Flowers of Evil and Good* files and on a new obsession I can only name "Michael." But the more I learn, the more he becomes conflated with Charles, the more similar the two seem—the pivotal turn each gave to his art form, the perfectionism, the absurd need to be different, the ambiguous sexuality. No one will aspire to greatness that un-ironically again. And if Picasso and Mozart had fathers who surrendered, Charles and Michael seem to share a father (and step-father) who cannot be overcome. In Greenport, an invitation comes to contribute to the French feminist journal *Petunia*. I say yes and hint that the piece "will relate to French culture." Michael has temporarily replaced Jeanne and my mother. There is a piece here. I don't know what

it is, but there is time for it to emerge. Two male lesbians.  
Brothers.

### **September 28, 2009**

Working on the mountain of files for *Flowers of Evil and Good*, I try not to think about the unnamed piece. But today, with only 10 hours notice, I am visited by the curators of the Whitney Biennial. "What will you do for the exhibit?" they ask. I answer spontaneously, as if I already knew: "Four diptychs on Charles Baudelaire and Michael." Later, the piece has to be named. I will call it *The First and the Last of the Modernists*. The name is a risk, of course. But peeling back the cultural assumptions of Europe will always be like scraping off a tattoo.