

Cincinnati CityBeat



Karen Finley Does Jackie O

Performance artist brings her consideration of an icon of national trauma to UC

MATT MORRIS // MAR 8, 2010

Karen Finley, the New York-based performance artist who will be at the University of Cincinnati Wednesday to present her latest piece, "The Jackie Look," isn't satisfied with operating in a single field.

Her unique, wordy performances blithely overstep the lines between fine art, theater, literature and social anthropology. She's willing to try an idea or context on for size to see what a new activity might symbolize. Finley is a published author (among other things, *A Different Kind of Intimacy*), an exhibiting visual artist and in 1999 appeared in *Playboy* magazine.

But she's probably most discussed as one of the controversial "NEA Four," a group of performance artists who had their National Endowment for the Arts funding vetoed in 1990 and fought in court for three years to receive their promised grants.

Finley has been in Cincinnati this week for UC's Ropes Lecture Series, this year themed around "Early Modern and Post-Modern Performance." On March 9, Finley was scheduled to present a lecture entitled "Open Hand, Open Heart: Art and Trauma." March 10's "The Jackie Look" is also currently being staged in New York. Its premise is that Finley, as Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, presents a lecture to the Society of Photographic Education in Dallas, just blocks from the site where her husband was assassinated.



"I thought that this would work really well at the University of Cincinnati for part of the Ropes Lectures," Finley tells *CityBeat* in a telephone interview. "I'm appropriating the theatricality of the lecture. I will use the opportunity to consider the trauma of our nation's historical imagery and to be conscious of the healing power of

the transformation of our painful memory landscape into new images. I will speak as Jackie Kennedy looking back at her images and pictures. I will imagine our prior First Lady looking back and forward and to the present."

Finley also provided *CityBeat* with a copy of the script of "The Jackie Look" to get a better sense of what will be offered in her two presentations. "Jackie" begins with a montage of YouTube clips that Finley has gathered in homage to Jackie as both an icon of our nation's tragedy and a victim of our society's gaze. With upbeat music, the

clips run through shots of Fergie and also from Britney Spears' music video "Piece of Me," which pits the pop star against the relentless gaze of the paparazzi.

Enter Finley, dressed as Jackie. The clips transition to documentary footage of Nov. 22, 1963 and the days afterward.

"At this point, the audience is watching me watching those images," Finley explains. "That sets the tone. I want to let the audience know this is serious. It isn't going to be camp."

Finley's Jackie is in "emotional shutdown," ultimately getting to her point that "I am simply asking not to be your construction of a monument of grief."

The script for "The Jackie Look" exemplifies Finley's talent for rooting out possible symbols of political oppression, sexual liberation and the defining emotional tenor of the eras she addresses.

"Looking at the most photographed woman of her time," she says, "the performance considers the public/private place of looking, the gaze of trauma, the process of memory and documentation."

Near the start of her monologue, Finley's Jackie defines her relationship to her audience: "I stand before you as your stress test, your indicator of how much a person can endure in order to monitor and compare and go on with his or her own life."

While Finley portrays the former First Lady, the audience is increasingly cast as the consumers of photography, the gaze beyond the camera lens. Finley's research allows her to include apt details about Jackie to the camera. For instance, she was working as a photographer for *The Washington Times-Herald* at the time she met John F. Kennedy. Or as the character tells it in the performance, "This is how I met Jack. I was photographing him. I began my relationship with Jack by shooting him."

Finley's Jackie goes on in the performance: "The benefit of trauma photography is to regulate the emotional response and to make conscious our reactions. The photograph of trauma gives us a frame to focus, refine our poorly defined emotional resources. Viewing me in mourning provided the skills to process negative emotions and to be certain that they do not become overwhelming and out of place."

Performance art has the freedom to not only allow its artist to assume another identity on stage but to defy historical accuracy in search of larger truths. Thus Finley's Jackie is alive today, able to comment on the world around her as a trenchant, active observer. (The real Jackie Kennedy Onassis died in 1994 at age 64.)

In "The Jackie Look," she frequently, fluidly refers to the style and symbolism of the current First Lady, Michelle Obama.

"Many of you look at her arms as a signal of a new style," Finley says in the piece. "But our First Lady is signaling that it is time to be uncovered, to be exposed, on her own terms, to take the gloves off. I see your arms. Give me your arms. Lay down your arms."

KAREN FINLEY performs "The Jackie Look" at 7 p.m. March 10 at 450 Lindner Center on UC's campus. Attendees must use the north entrance of Lindner Center to get in.

<https://www.citybeat.com/arts-culture/theater/article/13015030/karen-finley-does-jackie-o>