

the Stranger

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Two Photography Titans Are Coming to Seattle

Here's a Sneak Peek at the Upcoming *Dawoud Bey & Carrie Mae Weems: In Dialogue* exhibit at the Seattle Art Museum

JAS KEIMIG



An early portrait work from Carrie Mae Weems. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, AND SAM

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This fall, Seattleites will have the opportunity to view works from the two of the greatest living photographers: Dawoud Bey and Carrie Mae Weems. Both are artists of world renown who have meticulously told stories of Black people, Black history, and Black subjectivity in the United States since their careers began back in the 1970s. And, on top of it all, they are friends.

Originally organized by the Grand Rapids Museum of Art in Michigan, Dawoud Bey & Carrie Mae Weems: In Dialogue will make its stop at the Seattle Art Museum from November 17, 2022 through January 22, 2023.

Despite being friends for nearly fifty years, this show is the first time Bey and Weems have shown together. While their approaches to the medium of photography differ—Bey is often more documentarian while Weems focuses on the self and narrative works—both artists are fundamentally interested in reframing and challenging power dynamics in art.

“It feels almost as if the United States is catching up to the important work that these artists have been doing over five decades,” says SAM’s modern and contemporary art curator Catharina Manchanda, who is organizing the exhibition here in Seattle. “Whether it’s a celebration of the Black community, whether it’s a way of foregrounding power imbalances that are in the landscape... or histories that have been overlooked—these are all themes they’ve dedicated their entire careers to.”

Composed of over 140 pieces, Dawoud Bey & Carrie Mae Weems: In Dialogue will be split into five roughly chronological sections that move through the artists’ early work—the establishing of their perspectives, their interest in the Black history of America, and how landscapes appear and impact their bodies of work. This exhibition covers the half-century of their respective careers and contains photographs from Bey and Weems’s most well-known series.

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Carrie Mae Weems's *Untitled (Woman and Daughter with Children)* from *The Kitchen Table Series* (1990), gelatin silver print



Weems makes these narrative scenes so piercingly psychological. COURTESY OF ARTIST, JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, AND SAM

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Taking the more narrative route is Weems's Kitchen Table Series. In 1989, she set up a camera at her kitchen table and photographed herself acting out different fictional scenes. The setting of the series never changes—the wooden table and single triangle overhead light—but she does.

The woman sadly drinks alone at the table, shares a meal with a male lover, gets her hair brushed by a friend, does makeup with her daughter, looks directly at the camera. This photo essay portrays the life of a Black woman as she puts on different selves—a mother, a wife, a friend, a sister, herself—and the different psychological states those modes entail. While Blackness is certainly an element explored in this series, it also universally speaks to the experiences of women in their private lives. This particular body of work profoundly impacted the fine art world. Generations of artists who were her contemporaries or came after Weems described the Kitchen Table Series as foundational to their practice, reshaping their understanding of the medium of photography as well as Black representation.

CRITIC'S PICK

For Black Artists, the Great Migration Is an Unfinished Journey

At the Mississippi Museum of Art, Mark Bradford, Theaster Gates Jr., Carrie Mae Weems and others explore the personal legacy of the era-shaping movement from the rural South.



By Holland Cotter

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JACKSON, Miss. — Midday, midweek, in mid-90 degrees midsummer, the streets of a downtown historic district of this Southern capital are all but empty. They're like a film set, perfect in period detail but past-use and abandoned.

A patch of sidewalk embedded with the mosaicked words “Bon-Ton Café” marks the spot of what was, a century ago, Jackson's toniest restaurant. In the nearby King Edward Hotel, built as the Edwards Hotel in 1923 for travel swells, later a gathering spot for blues musicians, then derelict until a recent revamp, foot traffic is sparse. Across from it, trains regularly rumble into a Georgian Revival-style Union Station, but few passengers disembark or board.

Decades ago, transcontinental trains and buses leaving the old Art Deco Greyhound depot a few blocks away, did brisk business. And some of that business came from carrying Black Jacksonians northward, eastward and westward, out of a repressive and dangerous Jim Crow South, to what they hoped would be a safer and more prosperous life in cities like Chicago, Detroit, New York, Los Angeles.

This directed dispersal of some six million people, known as the Great Migration, is generally considered to have stretched from the post-Reconstruction late-19th century to the post-Civil Rights Act 1970s. And its history gets an important update in a richly varied exhibition called “A Movement in Every Direction: Legacies of the Great Migration” at the Mississippi Museum of Art here.



“Leave! Leave Now!,” a 2022 video installation by Carrie Mae Weems that looks back to the grim migration story of her grandfather, Frank Weems. via Carrie Mae Weems and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

A collaboration between the Mississippi Museum and the Baltimore Museum of Art, the show includes a dozen contemporary artists living across the United States. All the work, migration-themed, is new, commissioned in 2020 jointly by the museums and completed during a pandemic that brought most discretionary travel pretty much to a standstill. Some of the artists had access to detailed family histories of relocation from, or within, the South. For others, geographic paths were less easily traceable. For at least one participant, migration is personal and in progress, from north to south and to Jackson itself.

Several artists take a documentarian approach to their subject. Carrie Mae Weems, at 69 the senior figure here, is one. In a stage-like video installation titled “Leave! Leave Now!” she looks back to the grim story of her grandfather, Frank Weems, an Arkansas tenant farmer who, in 1936, was viciously assaulted by a white mob for union organizing and, only because he was left for dead, managed to survive. He made his way north on foot to Chicago and never returned home. Weems’s impassioned account of the familial turmoil his exile caused, and her call for retroactive justice in his case, constitute the exhibition’s most overtly polemical moment.

Akea Brionne, born in New Orleans in 1996 and the show’s youngest contributor, makes gentler use of archival material. Based in Detroit, she weaves photographic images of forebears who never left the South — a great-grandmother and three great-aunts — into icon-like tapestries glinting with sewn-on rhinestones. And Leslie Hewitt, a native New Yorker now living in Harlem, contributes three abstract floor pieces, each suggesting a house foundation and framing delicate pieces of glassware inherited from her grandmother who spent her life in Macon, Ga.



Akea Brionne’s “An Ode to (You)’all,” 2022, in which she weaves photographic images of forebears who never left the South into icon-like tapestries. Imani Khayyam for The New York Times

The Guardian

February 16, 2022
By David Smith

‘Brave people stepped up to the plate’: remembering the Black Panthers through art

A new group exhibition adds a contemporary lens to the work of the Black Panther party in the era of Black Lives Matter



‘I think of my father very much as a kind of collaborator and co-conspirator of this project’ ... Sadie Barnette, FBI Drawings Unknown, 2021. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist, Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco, and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Sadie Barnette’s work [honours her father’s time](#) in the Black Panther party, a political organisation founded in the tumultuous 1960s that tried to combine socialism, Black nationalism and armed defence against police brutality.

In particular, she takes as raw material a 500-page surveillance file on Rodney Barnette, compiled by J Edgar Hoover’s FBI, which [described the Black Panthers](#) as the “most dangerous and violence prone of all extremist groups” in America.

The latest in the series, a diptych using powdered graphite and coloured pencil on paper, is on display in [This Tender, Fragile Thing](#), a group exhibition at the Jack Shainman Gallery in upstate New York that offers a fresh look at the Black Panthers in the era of Black Lives Matter.

“I think of my father very much as a kind of collaborator and co-conspirator of this project,” says Sadie, whose parents filed a Freedom of Information Act request for the FBI file in 2011. “Eventually we received this document and were totally blown away by how invasive and intrusive and terrifying and extensive it was.”

Now 77, Rodney grew up Medford, Massachusetts, one of 11 siblings, another of whom worked closely with Malcolm X in Boston. In 1966 he was drafted into the army and sent to Vietnam, where he was wounded and earned a Purple Heart. He returned to the US and went to Compton, Los Angeles, to bury his nephew, who had been killed in the war.

Sadie recalls via Zoom: “He says he felt like he was still at war because of the police presence in the Black neighbourhoods in Compton and the military-style raids that they were doing.”



Rodney Barnette and Sadie Barnette. Photograph: Josh Edelson/The Guardian

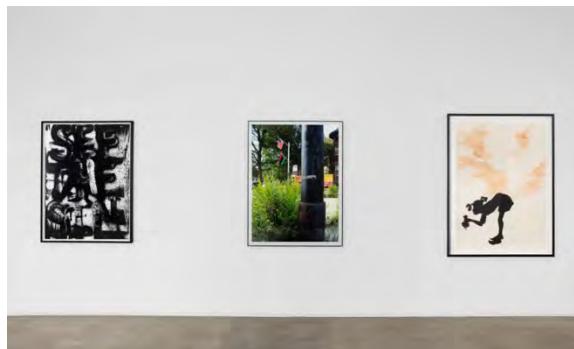
Rodney felt that he had to act and saw the Black Panthers as [a positive option](#) in the community. Sadie continues: “I’m always fascinated that what we see after almost every war in the history of our country is that a generation of Black and brown men (at that time, mostly men) come home from a war and haven’t earned any more rights or status or dignity in this country than before, and so you’ll often see this upsurge of political activism or organising.”

Rodney opened the Black Panther chapter in Compton before moving to the San Francisco Bay Area and joining activist efforts to defend leading activist [Angela Davis](#), whom he lived with during her trial on murder, kidnapping and conspiracy charges. “He says one of his most important tasks was getting her to court on time every day.” [She was acquitted](#) 50 years ago this June.

When Rodney finally obtained his FBI file, after haggling that took nearly five years, it was startling in its breadth and depth. There were his family members with their birthdates and other details, interviews with his old school teachers and a list of Black Panthers with “deceased” ominously written in parentheses after each name.

The file showed that the Black Panther chapter in Compton had been infiltrated by informants and agent provocateurs, hastening Rodney’s departure. It also made clear that the FBI had been responsible for getting him fired from his job at the post office for the supposedly unbecoming conduct of cohabiting with a woman to whom was not married.

Sadie, 37, says: “It was infuriating and chilling and we both felt he was very lucky to be alive. There are so many people who are [still incarcerated as political prisoners](#), even as it’s become somewhat fashionable to celebrate these moments. But people are still incarcerated. Families still haven’t received any type of reparation or compensation for lost loved ones. So my father felt lucky that he lived to tell and I felt lucky that I was born.”



Photograph: Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

The artist adds: “I felt a strong desire to use this material to do something other than it was intended to do, to make it live in my world and tell my father’s story, not in a sense that this is going to completely repair or fix something but just as a meditation on thinking about these issues. And of course connecting surveillance of the 60s in [\[the FBI programme\] Cointelpro](#) and surveillance now which, with all of the digital capabilities, is just even beyond.”

At first Rodney was surprised by the idea of turning his FBI file, a product of leaden bureaucracy with only one picture (his mug shot), into art. But when on one occasion someone asked him how it felt to see the pages blown up and displayed all over the walls; he replied that it made him feel free.

Sadie, who has been living with her father, mother and partner in Oakland, California, during the coronavirus pandemic, says: “If I can make my father feel free in this country, even for one moment, that really felt like a sort of mission accomplished as far as the possibilities of what art can do, even in a very particular context of the audience of one. For him to feel that way is really all I could ask for.”

Say Black Panthers to one generation and they might recall militants [barking at Tom Hanks](#) in the 1994 film Forrest Gump (he gets into a punch-up and says, “Sorry I had a fight in the middle of your Black Panther Party”). There have been more nuanced portrayals in movies such as Lee Daniels’ The Butler and Judas and the Black Messiah. Today fans of the Marvel superhero franchise might think instead of Black Panther starring the late Chadwick Boseman.

But the party’s revolutionary legacy is [complicated and elusive](#). Its members epitomised radical chic when patrolling the streets with berets, sunglasses, black leather jackets, rollneck jumpers and guns. Its support network offered clothes, self-defence classes, ambulance services and protections from eviction. [Its free breakfast programme](#) for children was described by Hoover as “potentially the greatest threat to efforts by authorities to neutralize the BPP and destroy what it stands for”.



John Simmons, Free Huey, 1968. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist

The corruption of the party’s leadership, however, was noted in a [New York Times article in 2016](#) that said: “Historians have detailed its mistreatment of female members, extortion, drug dealing, embezzlement and murder. At least 19 Panthers were killed in shootouts with one another, the authorities or other black revolutionaries.”

The way cultural perspectives shift over time is evident in This Tender, Fragile Thing, on view through 30 April, combining period materials relating to the Black Panthers with works by contemporary artists in a 30,000 square foot [former high school](#) in Kinderhook, New York.

The show includes photographs by [Gordon Parks](#) and John Simmons in the civil rights era, as well as by Devin Allen in Baltimore after the death of Freddie Gray in 2015, and by Ada Trillo at protests in Philadelphia that followed George Floyd’s murder in 2020.

[Theaster Gates's](#) immense sculpture *Walking Prayer* is a vintage cast-steel Carnegie library shelving unit housing more than 2,000 books on the Black experience. Gates rebound each book in black, with single words or phrases embossed in gold, culled from its contents in lieu of titles.

Gallery owner Jack Shainman says via Zoom: "The last couple of years, sitting working from home in the pandemic while everybody is watching every night another unarmed Black man gets killed by police, was mind-boggling and so it seemed a time to do this show and re-examine. There's no answers. It just shows the struggle, the battle, and it really starts with slavery and all those injustices."

Why the title *This Tender, Fragile Thing*? Shainman explains: "We never learned about the Black Panther movement in school; we learned such a weird version of the history of this country. But the point of the matter is these very brave, very courageous people stepped up to the plate and had to do something; it wasn't like a choice.

"The Black Panther movement always got demonised by white people but it was an amazing thing where they were educating, teaching, feeding people, et cetera. So using that title was about it being such a fragile thing because it takes all those people believing and trying to do something to change it."



Barkley L. Hendricks, Michael BPP (Black Panther Party), 1971 A. Photograph: Courtesy of the estate of Barkley L. Hendricks and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

[Jaci Auletto](#), associate director of the gallery, believes the Panthers have lessons for today, especially those made uncomfortable by Black Lives Matter's direct action. "I feel like the urgency when you're looking at the Panthers is so apparent and I don't know if it's because they did have this more aggressive way of dealing with things where they weren't really trying to sugarcoat things for everyone.

"It was a more matter-of-fact way of dealing with what their community and minority communities were dealing with and I think maybe that speaks to where we are today. There are so many things facing us that need urgency and we try and make it nice so that everyone wants to face it, and it doesn't necessarily always lead to as much action."

Towards the end of the exhibition, [Arthur Jafa's film](#) *Love is the Message, The Message is Death* brings together original and appropriated footage that juxtaposes police brutality with representations of Black pride and beauty. This and others works on display leave Shainman feeling pessimistic about the future.

But Auletto says the show makes her hopeful. “Yes, there is this history and these disturbing images and depictions of violence but at the same time it’s all intermixed with these beautiful songs and moments of joy. The fact that people are starting to have a conversation and pay attention and want to learn more and see the complexities of it – that’s encouraging.”

- This Tender Fragile Thing runs until 30 April at Jack Shainman Gallery, Kinderhook, New York

Art

Carrie Mae Weems Assesses History in Real-Time

A tenuous relationship exists in Weems's work between glamour and guts; yet neither attribute suffers on behalf of the other.



by Jasmine Weber
18 hours ago



Carrie Mae Weems, *The Shape of Things*, installation view (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

“One of the things that I’ve always been deeply interested in,” says Carrie Mae Weems, “is power.”

Gifted her first camera in 1973, Weems is revered as one of the most well-known photographers in contemporary art. Many artists have named her as an inspiration;

from Mickalene Thomas to LaToya Ruby Frazier few Black image makers, emerging or established, do not feel the gravitational pull of her legacy.

After decades, her star has not waned. In January, her exhibition **Down Here Below** opened at Jack Shainman, her longtime gallery in Chelsea, Manhattan. Prior

Avenue Armory from December 2 through 31, 2021.

At the Armory opening, we sat together, and I queried her about her unrelenting career and its motivations, and about seeing the floodgates open up for Black artists in her lifetime, after years of breaking open the doors by force.

“It’s the question of power,” she said. “And who has it. How is it used? How has it been manipulated? What is my proximity to it? How do I negotiate it? How do I build pathways around it since I don’t have any, right? And still managed to do that with integrity and honesty and truth and trust.”



Carrie Mae Weems, *Cyclorama – Conditions, A Video in 7 Parts*, installation view

At its core, her work addresses exactly these questions, and they are also apparent in her trajectory as an artist. She is a woman deeply concerned with power and its consequences: in art, in ancestry, in history. Throughout her career, she has approached painful stereotypes with humor and wit; she has confronted the alienation and sexism of art history; she has reflected on dehumanization and racism over centuries.

For many artists, her photographs were the ground on which we found our footing — we have discovered ourselves staring back in Weems’s images. Her ***Kitchen Table Series***, specifically, was the first body of artwork that I saw myself in. I pored over it as an undergraduate, enthralled by the artist’s mastery of light and composition as well as her firm grip on emotion, on *feeling*. Her self-portraits are not only revelatory about her inner world, but help us navigate Black womanhood, family dynamics, and history. A tenuous relationship exists in Weems’s work between glamour and guts; yet neither attribute suffers on behalf of the other.

Moreover, her compositions have so much *style*. They possess a graceful allure in their ability to present the mundane and the tragic through a striking lens, in which art, beauty, history, and politics are intertwined — as in life — beyond extraction.

Her website is among the most comprehensive of any artist I’ve ever encountered. I have spent many hours poring over the **project archive** over several years. On the site, a timeline of her personal and professional achievements is interspersed with major historical events, like the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. Also featured as major life events are her introduction to Marxism, the start of friendships with artists such as Dawoud Bey and Terry Adkins, and her co-founding of the Social Studies Collective with Deb Willis and Lonnie Graham. In 1999, she “Enters dark period,” while by 2013, she became a MacArthur Foundation Fellow.



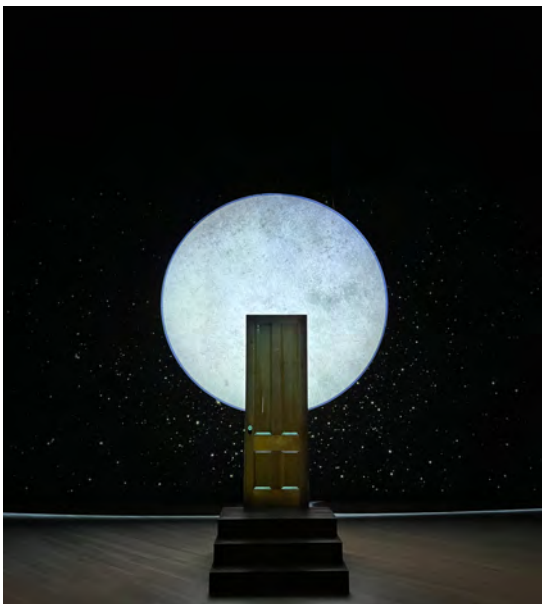
Carrie Mae Weems, *Cyclorama – Conditions, A Video in 7 Parts*, installation view

In December 2021, she achieved another first. “I am the first African American woman to show at Drill Hall,” she told me at the Armory opening. She repeated herself twice more, speaking slowly and assuredly, her words hanging in the room: “*I am the first African American woman to show at Drill Hall.*”

“This is 2021. That’s significant. It is important. [...] But I don’t have any illusions either.”

“Of course, I’m honored to be here,” she says. “[...] It’s important that I’m here. It’s important that I use this skin, as I’ve been using it for a long time, to advance our people, to advance Black people, to advance women. Really to use myself as a person who insists on advancing not simply myself, but what represent.”

What Weems said next rings in my ears, still. “They usually say the first one through the door is the most bruised, that you don’t do it easily,” she explains. “This bridge has been my back — and so I’m a little tender, I’m a little sore, I’m a little beat up. But I’m also happy that I’ve been able to chart a path of freedom for myself and for the people that I care about.”



Carrie Mae Weems, *All Blue — A Contemplative Site* (2021) installation view

One thing that has stuck in her mind, as of late, is how hard it is for “all artists [...] to be in these institutions. At the Armory, using the circus as a metaphor, she addresses the greater institution that looms over all of our heads: politics. The exhibition includes all of the drama and splendor of a decades-past carnival, with

none of the fanfare. At its center is Donald Trump, the ringleader, flanked by clowns of equal measure.

Drill Hall is a deep and depressing cavern. But tucked behind a veil is a lone doorway, a portal, foregrounding a glowing moon. The installation parallels a photograph from Weems's *Africa Series*, "[The Shape of Things](#)," and evokes the exhibition title. The photograph depicts the beautiful, soft facade of clay architectural structure. Its door leads toward blackness, into a room that we cannot see; above it is a small hole, or window. It recalls both a woman's figure and a smooth abdomen punctuated by a navel. Weems's reference to this photograph here reminds me of her constant conversations with politics, beauty, architecture, art, and her own oeuvre.

At the heart of the exhibition is a cyclorama projecting a seven-part, 49-minute film on a loop. It cycles through footage from the 19th century to today, alternating between calming yet invigorating imagery of people drenched by rain and snow and scenes of violent right-wing rallies; clips of 20th-century circuses; and a disturbing chronicle of anti-Black police violence. Despite its dire moments, the film reflects her instinct to seek beauty: it closes with a captivatingly glamorous snippet of the artist on a swing adorned with flowers, swathed in sequins and tulle, laughing as she sways.



Carrie Mae Weems, "It's Over — A Diorama" (2021)

Exiting the cyclorama, a door shimmering with golden lightbulbs guides visitors into an eerie hallway punctuated by framed images of the artist dressed in dapper suits and wearing animal masks. The hallways are lined by maximalist dioramas, including a memorial to dozens of victims slain by police officers, decorated with piles of stuffed animals, flowers, and helium-filled balloons, recalling a makeshift memorial you'd see on the side of the highway.

This vernacular expression of mourning, and of remembering, is critical throughout her career. In our conversation, Weems tells me one of the most important principles of her work is that it be “approachable”; grieving — and celebrating — should provide a means of connection to help us navigate power.

“I’m hoping that then somehow you see the work reflected back on yourself,” she says. “The work is really not about me. The work is really about you. Once you see yourself, then you’re able to move in a very, very different kind of way.”

“And the most important thing I believe, finally, is understanding,” she continues.

Reflecting on herself and her practice, what’s most important, she says, “is ‘Have I delivered on my own promise to myself as an artist, and a maker, and a woman, and a human? Have I told the story, or have I presented the ideas [...] that I’m most concerned with?’ Whether I do that at the Armory, or I do it on a street corner, it doesn’t really matter. You have to maintain, and be true, to the work. And that is the thing that carries you forth.”



Carrie Mae Weems, "It's Over — A Diorama" (2021)



Carrie Mae Weems, "It's Over — A Diorama" (2021)

MUSÉE

VANGUARD OF PHOTOGRAPHY CULTURE

January 26, 2022
By Angelica Cantù Rajnoldi

EXHIBITION REVIEW: CARRIE MAE WEEMS, DOWN HERE BELOW



Installation view, Carrie Mae Weems, *Down Here Below*, 2022 Jack Shainman Gallery, 513 W 20th Street, New York, NY
© Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

The New York Times has defined her as 'one of the more interesting artists working in the gap between art and politics' and thanks to her moral force and body of work, she is widely renowned as one of the most influential contemporary American artists living today.

Carrie Mae Weems has dedicated her life to the depiction of African Americans, playing a significant role in creating an identity awareness for the new generations since the 70s.

Themes such as race, injustice, family, identity, sexism, class, political systems, and the consequences of power are central to her artistic work – by the way she investigates them she is an 'artist engagée'.



Installation view, Carrie Mae Weems, *Down Here Below*, 2022 Jack Shainman Gallery, 513 W 20th Street, New York, NY
© Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

For her new solo exhibition, *Down Here Below*, the Jack Shainman Gallery – which continues to represent her since 2008 – displays several large-scale installations highlighting Weems’s decades-long engagement.

With the first two celestial works exhibited at the entrance to the gallery, *North Star* (2021) and *Down Here Below* (2019), the artist invites the visitor to create a necessary space for reflection.

From here, we are projected in the real reflection. What are the necessary tools and conditions for revolutionary change and protest? The seminal work *And 22 Millions Very Tired and Very Angry People* (1990-1991) provides an answer with fifteen unique large-format Polaroids, each presenting a quotidian but evocative subject captioned with short phrases, while the multi-part installation, *The Push, The Call, The Scream, The Dream* (2020), illustrates resulting moments of action.



Installation view, Carrie Mae Weems, *Down Here Below*, 2022 Jack Shainman Gallery, 513 W 20th Street, New York, NY
© Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Another large-scale installation makes us meditate on the phenomenon of ongoing racial violence and the depersonalization of its victims. *Repeating the Obvious* (2019) makes us realize just how much violence and its unreasonable motives are exhausting in their recurrence. An air of discouragement momentarily spreads in the exhibition space, but Weems reminds us with *Seat or Stand And Speak* (2021) that in response to this, the possibility of taking action and affecting change is physically possible.



Installation view, Carrie Mae Weems, *Down Here Below*, 2022 Jack Shainman Gallery, 513 W 20th Street, New York, NY
© Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Carrie Mae Weems's new solo exhibition *Down Here Below* will be on view at [Jack Shainman Gallery](#), 513 W 20th Street, New York, NY, from January 13 - February 19, 2022.

January 24, 2022
By Sarah Cascone

Editors' Picks: 13 Events for Your Art Calendar This Week, From Tarot Reading for Artists to Lucy Lippard on Central American Solidarity

Plus the great Nepalese Modernist Lain Singh Bangdel gets his first U.S. solo museum show.

Through Saturday, February 19



Installation view of "Carrie Mae Weems: Down Here Below" at Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. Photo courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

11. "[Carrie Mae Weems: `Down Here Below`](#)" at Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

For Carrie Mae Weems's fourth solo show with Jack Shainman, the artist presents large-scale installations that span some 20 years of her career. The 15 large-format Polaroids of *And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People* (1990–91) are being shown in New York for the first time since debuting at the New Museum in 1991, while more recent works include *The Push*, *The Call*, *The Scream*, *The Dream* (2020), a photography series inspired by the death of civil rights activist and United States Representative John Lewis.

Location: Jack Shainman Gallery, 513 West 20th Street, New York

Price: Free

Time: Thursday–Saturday, 10 a.m.–6 p.m.

With Armory Show, the World Is Catching Up to Carrie Mae Weems

“The Shape of Things” confronts current issues of identity and injustice that the artist has been exploring throughout her 40-year career.



By Robin Pogrebin

Dec. 1, 2021

In 1992, amid a spate of violence against Black men around the country, including Rodney King, the artist Carrie Mae Weems made a decorative dinner plate that read, “Commemorating Every Black Man Who Lives to See Twenty-One.”

In 2006 she began her “Museum Series,” standing in front of major cultural institutions with her back to the camera, challenging historical traditions of exhibition and collecting.

Ten years later, she inserted her own image on the sets of television shows that feature Black characters.

Now, of course, the entire nation is confronting issues of police violence against Black people; the exclusion of people of color from the museum canon; and the lack of Black and brown representation in Hollywood. But those who have followed Weems over the 40 years of her practice — through photography, video, installation, music and text — say the artist has always been ahead of her time.



Carrie Mae Weems during the installation of her new exhibition, “The Shape of Things,” at the Park Avenue Armory. “I thought a lot about the circus of politics,” she said, “and the history of violence and how to bring all of these ideas together.” Flo Ngala for The New York Times



Installation view of the Park Avenue Armory show, with “Seat or Stand and Speak” (2021) and “Cyclorama - Conditions, A Video in 7 Parts” (2021). Carrie Mae Weems and Jack Shainman Gallery; Stephanie Berger Photography, via Park Avenue Armory

Starting Dec. 2, in a strong indication that the world has caught up to her, Weems is taking over the Park Avenue Armory’s massive Drill Hall with “The Shape of Things,” billed as “the largest, most significant exhibition of her multidisciplinary artistic practice in the last decade.”

“She’s a 21st-century oracle,” said Sarah Elizabeth Lewis, an associate professor of the history of art and architecture and African and African American studies at Harvard University. “Carrie has been at the forefront of addressing issues to do with, not just our humanity, but the racial dimensions of it. You want to probe the history of injustice and redemption? You must understand the work of Carrie Mae Weems.”

In a recent interview — one that had to be conducted by telephone because of a Covid exposure scare (she later tested negative) — the artist, 68, emphasized her longstanding engagement with social justice.

“I’ve been working with these ideas for years,” she said. “They’re not trending for me.”



"If I Ruled the World" (2004). "With her sense of immediacy and mise en scène, she's created a mode of participation in which you are required to be present, to participate," says the curator Thomas J. Lax. Carrie Mae Weems and Jack Shainman Gallery

The reckoning around race now underway at museums in the wake of George Floyd's killing in part represents a "knee-jerk reaction to what happened in the last two years," Weems said, adding that people of color are suddenly being thrust into positions they should have always had access to.

But Weems — whose sonorous voice both lilts and lulls — said she is also hopeful about this juncture’s potential for lasting change. “I am excited by this moment, I’m also a little terrified by the moment,” she said. “I’m very much looking forward to seeing how institutions negotiate their futures and what that might mean, because I don’t think we really know yet. Right now we’re kind of swimming in the dark, just trying to figure out one day at a time how to move this ball up the hill without completely understanding how steep the hill is.”

It’s a reason her practice — as well as the Armory show — includes “convenings,” meetings of typically siloed experts talking to each other, which Weems sees as essential to progress. The Armory’s list of scheduled participants ranges from the painter Torkwase Dyson to the writer and curator Simon Wu.

“I’m interested in how you unite people across certain ideas and platforms,” Weems said. “One of the things that a lot of institutions say is, ‘We don’t know the African American artists, we don’t know the brown curators, we don’t know who they are.’ Well, here are 150 of them for you to choose from.”



At “The Shape of Things,” in the Armory’s Drill Hall, Carrie Mae Weems’s “Cyclorama - Conditions, A Video in 7 Parts.” Carrie Mae Weems and Jack Shainman Gallery; Stephanie Berger, via Park Avenue Armory

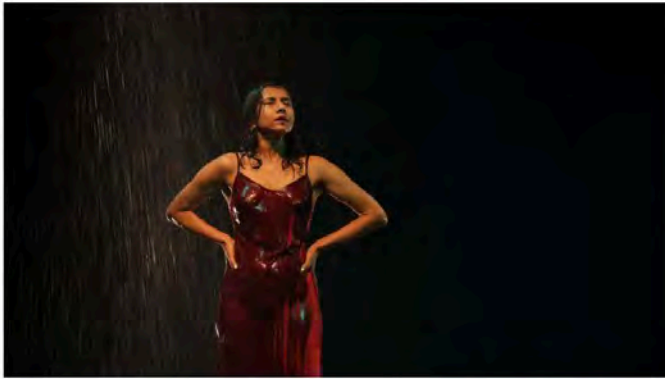
Perhaps best known for her “Kitchen Table Series” (1989-90), a succession of staged scenes featuring the artist that explore womanhood — raising children, negotiating a relationship — Weems has been steadily creating projects that critique the culture.

The culture, in turn, has acknowledged her contributions: In 2013, she was the recipient of a “genius grant” from the MacArthur Foundation, and the following year she became the first Black woman to have a retrospective at the Guggenheim.

Her idea for the Armory show was hatched after a daylong convening she organized there in December 2017, a little over a year after President Donald J. Trump’s election. “I thought a lot about the circus of politics and the politics of circus and the history of violence and how to bring all of these ideas together,” she said.

Trump’s presidency, along with what she saw as a clear backlash against President Barack Obama because of his race, made Weems want to unpack how the country is handling “the browning of America.”

“How will institutions negotiate this,” she said, “whether they are museums or galleries or institutions like the Armory?”



Images from “Conditions,” one of Weems’s video projections. Carrie Mae Weems and Jack Shainman Gallery



Carrie Mae Weems and Jack Shainman Gallery

Among the new works in the current show, which runs through Dec. 31, Weems has also sought to explore whether the signs of progress prompted by the Black Lives Matter movement will prove to be more than a passing crisis of national conscience. “To what extent is that sustainable?” she said. “How we now move forward is a very deep and important question.”

The show includes a series of large-scale installations, including a Cyclorama (a panoramic image on the inside of a cylindrical platform) of new and existing film footage, and her 2012 “Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me,” a digital video projection utilizing an optical illusion in which she considers Abraham Lincoln and the Gettysburg Address.

The Armory exhibition also features a performance series, “Land of Broken Dreams,” that starts Dec. 9 and includes artist talks, poetry readings, concerts and scholarly discussions.



The current salience of Weems’s questions “speaks to the cyclical nature of our history,” said Avery Willis Hoffman, the artistic director of the Brown Arts Institute at Brown University, who is participating in the Armory show. “We have to keep returning to some of these hard and challenging topics.”

In 1984, Weems said, she learned that the U.S. population would, over the next 20 years, become dominated by people of color, which prompted a spate of demographic research that she continues to this day — in part through public discourse.

“Carrie is doing some truth-telling when she is able to bring people into the room who she has learned from and who she has taught,” said Thomas J. Lax, the curator of media and performance at the Museum of Modern Art. “With her sense of immediacy and mise en scène, she’s created a mode of participation in which you are required to be present, to participate.”

Weems often explicitly uses her art as a form of activism. During the pandemic, she created a public art campaign to draw attention to the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on the Black, Latino and Native American communities. Called “Resist Covid/Take 6!” — a reference to six-foot social distancing — the art-focused messages appeared on billboards, shopping bags, buttons and refrigerator magnets.



“Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me” (2012), a digital video projection, is a meditation on the specters of history. It incorporates an optical trick. (The title refers to the American president and the artist and activist Lonnie Graham.) Carrie Mae Weems and Jack Shainman Gallery

“I see myself very much involved in attempting to deal with the issues of my time in the best way I know how,” she said.

She also tries to use her work as a way to cultivate and promote empathy, Weems said, to understand those she may oppose — even the white supremacist groups that marched on Charlottesville, Va., in 2017.

“When I think of these forces on the right, I have sympathy, because I’m human,” she said. “A change is coming that does not necessarily reflect who you thought you were — I understand that fear. Then maybe there is space for some dialogue, for some sort of progress.”

This effort to get to that humanity prompted Weems’s 2016 project “Grace Notes: Reflections for Now,” a theater piece inspired by a white gunman’s killing of nine people at a historic Black church in downtown Charleston, S.C., the year before, told through the story of a woman trying to bury her brothers.

“I have this beautiful recorded conversation with my mother talking about the meaning of grace as a deep space of compassion, understanding, charity and love,” Weems said. “It was through her answering that question for me that I was able to come to a certain level of clarity.”

Weems recalled another formative conversation with her mother, Carrie Polk — a former factory and domestic worker who is still living — from when she left home to make her way as an artist. “I was wondering what my mother thought of me, and one day she called while I was living in San Francisco and said, ‘I wish I had done with my life what you’re doing with yours,’” Weems said. “It gave me such confidence. Even though I was wild and crazy and living alone at a very young age, she encouraged me.”

Her father, Myrlie Weems, who died in 2002, was similarly inspiring. The owner of a salvage company called Speedy and Son, he also had a creative streak, having sung with his brothers on the same stage as Sam Cooke in the Mississippi Delta. “He told me from a very young age that I had a right to be in any room,” Weems said. “That great lesson anchored me in a very profound way.”

Born in Portland, Ore., in 1953, the second of seven children, Weems became interested in painting and drawing early on. “I remember rushing to the attic and pretending I was living somewhere else,” she said, “dancing around the living room, pretending I was a ballerina.”

At 16, she had a daughter, Faith C. Weems, who now works with children in California. The following year, she joined Anna Halprin’s experimental San Francisco Dancers’ Workshop and later moved to New York, studying photography at the Studio Museum in Harlem.

A boyfriend gave her a camera for her 20th birthday. “I took to it like a fish to water,” Weems said. “I just immediately saw it as a tool that would lead me into my life and through the world.”



Her exhibition will offer “convenings” bringing together experts talking to each other, which she sees as essential for progress. “I’m interested in how you unite people across certain ideas and platforms,” Weems said. Flo Ngala for The New York Times

She was also introduced to Black photographers, including Roy DeCarava and his Kamoinge Workshop. “I thought, ‘Oh,’” Weems said, “‘this is where I want to be.’”

After earning a bachelor’s degree from the California Institute of the Arts, Valencia, and an M.F.A. in photography from the University of California, San Diego, Weems studied folklore in the graduate school at the University of California, Berkeley.

In 1985, she married Jeff Hoone, who recently stepped down as director of the photography nonprofit Light Work. Weems described him as “my greatest understanding mate in the world.” They live in Syracuse, N.Y., but also have a home in Fort Greene, Brooklyn.

“Clearly younger artists today are descendants of Carrie Mae Weems, so it’s a great moment to show a large body of work and to show new work,” said Tom Eccles, who curated the Armory exhibition. “Some artists need a change of a moment when suddenly you realize how relevant that work is.”

Eccles, executive director of the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College, said he was surprised that Weems asked him to work on her show. “I said to her, ‘Hey, Carrie, I’m white,’” he said. “She said, ‘That doesn’t worry me.’”

The exhibition would seem to reflect the artist’s status as an exalted member of the establishment. But Weems said she will never feel that she has arrived or is finished.

“I see myself as an artist very interested in certain concerns, and those concerns have not yet been met,” she said.

“It is a lifelong struggle and it doesn’t end with the completion of a body of work,” she added. “It is a life.”

Carrie Mae Weems Sets the Stage and Urges Action

In “The Shape of Things” at the Park Avenue Armory, the artist tells us how we got to this political moment, and asks us to decide what comes next.

By Aruna D'Souza

Dec. 6, 2021

At the beginning of the seven-part film projected onto a cylindrical screen, a Cyclorama that forms the centerpiece of Carrie Mae Weems's walk-in installation at the Park Avenue Armory, we see the performer and choreographer Okwui Okpokwasili sitting in a chair with papers falling like leaves around her. Weems's voice, with its deep, round tones, tells us that to navigate the now, “she needs to look back over the landscape of memory.”

Incorporating work from throughout the artist's four-decade-long career, “The Shape of Things” has a strong retrospective quality — confronting the past in order to understand the present — without being a retrospective exhibition. The artist traces our current national predicament, with ever-present anti-Blackness and eroding democracy foremost among many woes, while reminding us that what we're seeing in our political landscape is nothing new. In fact, she's been telling us about it for decades. What is less present, sometimes frustratingly so, are ways to imagine a different future.

Weems is a MacArthur award winning photographer, performance artist, video maker, activist — and one of the most important image-makers working today. With her penchant for gathering artists and thinkers of all sorts to mull over urgent issues shaping our cultural climate, she is also an impresario of sorts. This show grew out of a daylong convening that she produced during her residency at the Armory in 2017, shortly after Donald Trump was elected president, in which she asked participants questions like “How do you characterize violence?”; “How can artists continue to work in the current climate?”; and “With terror pressing on us from so many angles, how do you maintain hope?”



Three years later, with Trump out of office but the specter of the Jan. 6 assault on the U.S. Capitol and murders of Black people at the hands of police and vigilantes fresh in our shared consciousness, Weems once again takes up the role of ringmaster. This exhibition has the structure of a circus, complete with side shows, 19th-century optical devices, and illusions that reveal the tragicomic spectacle of our recent and not so recent past.

Our entry is choreographed through the drill hall’s vast, darkened, 55,000-square-foot space, past a group of spotlighted wooden chairs and giant megaphones (“Seat or Stand and Speak,” 2020). Frustratingly, these ersatz invitations to speak out are only for show — they don’t contain any mechanism to amplify your voice, a strange message in an exhibition that is designed to spur us to take action.

Next comes the curtained space of “Cyclorama — Conditions, a Video in 7 Parts” (2021). The installation nods to the 19th-century proto-cinematic device, in which continuous mural paintings were shown on the walls of a circular building, allowing viewers a 360-degree view. Some of the most famous American examples depicted famous Civil War battles.

The 40-minute video projected inside grapples, sometimes poetically and other times in a documentary way, with what Weems suggests is a contemporary civil war, as a rising, unapologetic white supremacy is met full force by anti-racist activists and the movement for Black Lives. Consisting of found footage, video and still photos culled from her earlier work as well as newly-shot, and a voice-over narration by Weems that looks back on recent events — sometimes violent protest, immigration crises, environmental disasters, police and institutional violence — as if from a distant future.



In the Cyclorama, shadow puppets enact a scene of slave-owning from “Louisiana Project,” which Weems sets today against Amy Cooper’s call to the police. Stephanie Berger/Park Avenue Armory

Weems’s analysis of our current political landscape will be familiar to anyone who has been paying attention over the past few years — including, I would imagine, most of those who visit the show on Park Avenue. What is more compelling are the visual and historical connections she makes — often insightful, sometimes funny, and occasionally quite direct — and the way she remixes her earlier work.

In the Cyclorama video, we see two different clips projected on the curved surface: one, a group of white, pro-segregation marchers in 1960s Boston; the other, a group of Black anti-segregation marchers who confronted them in the streets. Weems had originally used the footage in her 2012 installation “Cornered,” installing each on adjacent walls in a gallery in a way that highlighted the confrontation between two sides. Here, we see not so much contrast as continuity — the endless racism and the endless need to protest that racism.

Later, Weems lifts a sequence from her “Louisiana Project” (2003) of shadow puppets enacting a scene of slave-owning ladies having a tea party on the porch of a plantation house. This she overlays with audio of Amy Cooper, who, when an African American bird-watcher asked her to leash her dog in Central Park, infamously called 911 to report him as a threat. The commentary — on the way white women benefit from white supremacy, in the past and in the present — couldn’t be more biting, or stark.

In another sequence, a video of a clown dressed in red, white and blue conducting a brass band is intercut with cable news images of the Jan. 6 pro-Trump insurrection at the Capitol and historical footage of an animal trainer leading an elephant around a ring. (Tom Eccles, the curator of the exhibition, cites the adage “Elect a clown and expect a circus” in his note on the show.)

Other associations are more subtle, and gratifying so, as when Weems alternates silhouettes of men in hoodies walking across the screen in a gridlike array with historical images of prisoners, and coal miners in elevators being transported deep underground, spinning a delicate thread that connects race, incarceration and capitalist exploitation.



In a side show to the main event, “It’s Over — A Diorama” (2021) includes a makeshift memorial to victims of police violence. Stephanie Berger/Park Avenue Armory

A door festooned with stage lights leads to a series of “side shows.” “It’s Over — A Diorama” (2021) juxtaposes a makeshift memorial to too many victims of police violence, including Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery, and strange natural history displays. The most interesting, “Missing Links (2 Different Bodies of Work)” from 2004, includes images of Weems sporting various masks (donkey, elephant, chicken, monkey — the full range of American politicians).

The second ring in the circus is “Lincoln, Lonnie and Me — A Story in 5 Parts,” a 2012 work that takes the form of a 19th-century optical illusion called “Pepper’s Ghost.” (The piece has just been acquired by the Smithsonian American Art Museum.) The conceit is fantastically simple: by projecting light on a pane of glass (here, a sheet of Mylar), you could create the effect of spirits.

Weems’s version is housed in a black box; the screen is framed by half-closed red velvet curtains. Images — civil rights protesters, a sparring boxer, a re-enactment of the Kennedy assassination (from the artist’s 2008 “Constructing History” series), Weems dressed in the top hat and striped pants of a vaudeville performer and as a Playboy bunny trying to squeeze into her costume — emerge from, and then dissipate into, the ether.



Carrie Mae Weems, "Lincoln, Lonnie and Me – A Story in 5 Parts," includes ghostly images that disappear into the ether. Stephanie Berger/Park Avenue Armory

Voice-overs contrast the challenge made by President Abraham Lincoln in the Gettysburg Address — “that these dead shall not have died in vain” — with a cleareyed, but ultimately pessimistic assessment of the state of the world by Lonnie Graham, a photographer, activist and Weems’s sometimes-collaborator, who talks about the futility of changing the attitudes of people who are steeped in preconceived ideas: “The curtains won’t fall apart, the lightning won’t come from the sky, the light bulb won’t illuminate,” he explains. Graham’s dedication is palpable, but so is his exhaustion, and I felt that exhaustion in my bones.

In a 2014 interview, Weems insisted that she wasn’t a political artist, and while that insistence has sometimes been hard to buy given her enduring engagement with the history of race and current events, her new project offers some insight into why this might indeed be the case. Throughout the show, and especially in “Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me,” Weems offers her analysis of the shape of things: a crossroads for democracy, in which white anxiety over waning power may well result in the end of our political institutions. Never, though, does she prescribe a path forward.



In the Park Avenue Armory, a multidisciplinary installation challenges the audience to act. Stephanie Berger/Park Avenue Armory

Instead, she creates opportunities for her audiences and collaborators to decide whether and how to take up the challenge of the moment. This may occur during a series of talks and performances here Dec. 9 through Dec. 11. In fact, at times I wondered if “The Shape of Things” functioned best as a stage set for the convening, where the real work of the exhibition might take place.

That point is also made manifest in “All Blue — A Contemplative Site” (2021), the last installation. Enclosed in a gauzy white scrim, on a stage bare as the set of a Samuel Beckett play, a door sits in front of a huge circular screen, onto which is projected the surface of the moon. It is as if Weems is saying to us: “I can bring you to the door, but only you can decide whether to walk through.”

Carrie Mae Weems: The Shape of Things

Through Dec. 31, Park Avenue Armory, 643 Park Ave. (212) 933-5812; armoryonpark.org.

ARTS

Carrie Mae Weems Considers the American Political Circus With Her Startling and Powerful New Exhibition

BY MARLEY MARIUS

December 3, 2021



Foreground: Carrie Mae Weems, *Seat or Stand and Speak*, 2021. Background: Carrie Mae Weems, *Cyclorama - Conditions, A Video in 7 Parts*, 2021. Photo: Stephanie Berger Photography/Park Avenue Armory

This week marked the opening of “The Shape of Things,” an exhibition of new and recent work by the artist Carrie Mae Weems at the Park Avenue Armory in New York. Spanning film, sculpture, and large-scale installation, the show comprises a deeply compelling—at moments even revelatory—exploration of our socio-political moment as interpreted by one of our greatest living image-makers.

As much an activist as a creative, Weems has a long and celebrated history of engaging social issues with her art. In 1984, her first show, titled “Family Pictures and Stories,” drew on the writings of Zora Neale Hurston and the photography of Roy DeCarava for its vibrant depictions of Black American life. In subsequent projects, Weems often inserted herself into the frame (as in her Kitchen Table Series from the early 1990s), centering issues of racism and sexism both in art and the world beyond it. As the critic and writer Megan O’Grady once described Weems’s 2016 series *Scenes & Take*, the artist appears “in flowing black, a specter of the black ingénue who arrived too early, who was ignored, who never even had the chance to be.”

In “The Shape of Things,” Weems uses one very pointed metaphor to discuss the American political arena: a circus. “I was very interested in the politics of the circus, and the circus of politics,” she explained during a press preview on Wednesday—but it wasn’t until the presidency of Donald J. Trump that she found her perfect ringleader. The centerpiece of the show, which occupies the Armory’s 55,000-square-foot Wade Thompson Drill Hall, is a towering cyclorama in which the seven-part video work *Conditions* (2021) plays. Popular in the late 19th century, cyclorama paintings—comparable to 360-degree murals—effectively placed viewers at the center of scenes like the Battle at Gettysburg, as captured by the French artist Paul Philippoteaux in 1884.



Carrie Mae Weems, *Cyclorama - Conditions, A Video in 7 Parts*, 2021. Photo: Stephanie Berger Photography/Park Avenue Armory

At the Armory, Weems re-creates that form as a cinema screen-in-the-round, where all kinds of inspired and startling projections play. In one moment, footage from the January 6 insurrection is spliced together with clips of clowns and circus troupes; in another, three silhouetted figures step endlessly, restlessly in place, moving neither meaningfully forward nor obviously back. Weems mostly narrates these vignettes, employing her richly resonant speaking voice to discuss, among other things, the ubiquity of police brutality (“Imagine the impossible. Imagine the worst of the worst. And know that it is always happening”). Remarkably, “The Shape of Things” was not postponed by the pandemic, but the events of this year and last have certainly left their mark on it. “Since we’ve been talking, of course, a lot has happened in America and in the world,” the Armory’s artistic director, Pierre Audi, noted, “and some of this work today is probably colored in a novel way from how [Weems] originally intended it.”



Carrie Mae Weems, *It's Over – A Diorama*, 2021. Elements courtesy of Dienst + Dotter Antikviteter. Photo: Stephanie Berger Photography/Park Avenue Armory

Elsewhere, in a darkened passage rather evoking a haunted house, *It's Over–A Diorama* (2021) doubles as a memorial to victims of anti-Black violence, like Breonna Taylor and [Ahmaud Arbery](#), filled with flowers, candles, balloons, and framed photographs; the darkly humorous portrait series *Missing Links (2 Different Bodies of Work)*, from 2004, blurs the line between man and beast; and in *The Weight* (2021)—flanked by tufts of what looks like cotton candy—miniature Black busts have big, pink helium balloons coming out of their heads, a precarious pressure objectified. Next, comes Weems's mesmeric *Lincoln, Lonnie and Me* from 2014 (a direct precursor to *Conditions*), which uses a “Pepper’s ghost” illusion to picture American history “as a racialized theater of deadly repetition,” as Huey Copeland [has written](#). The piece also collages a reading of the Gettysburg Address and remarks by the artist and activist Lonnie Graham with footage from busing protests, images of boxers and dancers and jokers, and other scenes.



Carrie Mae Weems, *Lincoln, Lonnie and Me – A Story in 5 Parts*, 2014, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. Photo: Stephanie Berger Photography/Park Avenue Armory

The final work in “The Shape of Things”—should you adhere to the prescribed route, and *you should*—is *All Blue*—A *Contemplative Site* (2021), a door before the moon. Is it a way out? A reprieve from our “time of murder, mayhem and mass protest,” per Weems? Or does it point, instead, to the fact that there *is* no way out; that our strange blue planet is all we know and all we’ve got?

The new show takes its name from a “convening” at the Armory that Weems staged in 2017, as an artist in residence. Then, she invited creatives and scholars, including the playwrights Lynn Nottage and Anna Deavere Smith, jazz pianist and composer Jason Moran, and artist Hank Willis Thomas for a series of conversations, readings, and performances—and she will do the same this year with “Land of Broken Dreams,” a summit lasting from Thursday, December 9 to Saturday, December 11. With Agnes Gund, Antwaun Sargent, Julie Mehretu, Deborah Kass, and Deborah Willis among its participants, the program will offer space for listening, thinking, learning, and most importantly, reflecting on work still left to be done.

“The Shape of Things” is on at the Park Avenue Armory in New York through December 31. For tickets and more information, visit [here](#).

SORROWS OF BLACK AMERICA

A show of leading Black artists at the New Museum powerfully channels emotional tenors that are true to the history—and the future—of race in this country.

By Peter Schjeldahl

February 22, 2021



Carrie Mae Weems's *"The Assassination of Medgar, Malcolm, and Martin,"* part of the series *"Constructing History,"* from 2008. Photograph courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery

“Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America,” which recently opened at the New Museum, is a terrific art show. I might have expected that, given a starry roster that includes Kerry James Marshall, Glenn Ligon, Lorna Simpson, Carrie Mae Weems, and Theaster Gates among its total of thirty-seven contemporary Black artists. But theme exhibitions normally repel me, shoehorning independent talents into curatorial agendas. What a difference in this case! “Grief and Grievance” is a brainchild of the Nigerian curator Okwui Enwezor, who, notably with his curation of the German mega-show Documenta, in 2002, and the Venice Biennale, in 2015, pried the international art world open for new art from Africa and Asia. He died of

cancer in March, 2019, at the age of fifty-five, while planning the present show. The New Museum's artistic director, Massimiliano Gioni, aided by Ligon and the curators Naomi Beckwith and Mark Nash, completed the task, faithful to Enwezor's conception, emphasizing interiority and the patterns of feeling that attend Black experience in America. There's grief, which is constant; grievance, which appeals, however futilely, to some or another authority able and willing to right wrongs; and mourning, the fate and recourse of the irreparably wounded. From this description, you might expect a litany of remonstrance. On the contrary, the show celebrates what artists are good at: telling personal truths through aesthetic form. The predominant result is poetic—deeply so—rather than argumentative.

It's worth noting immediately that there's little explicit address to white racism, white guilt, or, really, white anything, except by way of inescapable implication. Ta-Nehisi Coates, in a devastating essay in the show's catalogue, fills in the lacuna with his well-known, scorching pessimism about white mind-sets. What Coates would like from whites, though he does not expect it, is "a resistance intolerant of self-exoneration." The show was originally intended to open in October, amid the furors leading up to the Presidential election. The pandemic scotched that. But "Grief and Grievance" doesn't have a use-by date. It channels emotional tenors, from personal points of view, that are true to the history, and the future, of race in this country.



"Untitled (policeman)," by Kerry James Marshall, from 2015. Art work courtesy the Museum of Modern Art

Begin with two of the exhibition's few jokes, "Presumption of Guilt" (2020) and "7.5'" (2015), by Cameron Rowland. For the first, the front door of the museum has been rigged to set off a *ding* when opened, like that of a convenience store. The second flanks one side of the door with a vertical strip of height measurements—meant to aid in the identification of departing thieves by surveillance cameras. The ruler tops out at seven feet six inches, suggesting an absolutely colossal brigand. Rowland counts on stereotypical associations of Black men with convenience-store robbery, and of large Black men with menace. You admit to recognizing that if you laugh, as I did. Standup comedians push such buttons all the time, but the trope is beyond rare in serious

museums. Now proceed to a darkened room nearby and behold “Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death” (2016), Arthur Jafa’s much praised video montage with a rhythmic soundtrack of music and voices. It’s a masterpiece. Rapid clips from Black history and daily life, ranging from violent scenes of the civil-rights movement to children dancing, possess specific, incantatory powers. Their quantity overloads comprehension—so many summoned memories and reconnected associations, cascading. The experience is like a psychoanalytic unpacking, at warp speed, of a national unconscious regarding race. Irresistibly exciting and profoundly moving, the work will make you gasp, I guarantee, and will induce a heightened state of mind and heart to accompany you throughout the exhibition.

I think of Julie Mehretu and Mark Bradford as neo-Abstract Expressionists, what with her storms of kinetic squiggles in clouded atmospheres and his layered impastos of glowering color, both at majestically large scale. In the case of Mehretu’s “See Gold, Cry Black” (2019), the title befits a canvas on which orange-ish strokes seem to struggle for traction amid enveloping welters of black. In Bradford’s “Untitled” (2020), a brushy zone of red punches in among raddled expanses of less bold hues. This resurgence of American art’s modern breakthrough, after six decades in abeyance, was already apparent in the at once witty and volcanic neo-expressionism of Jean-Michel Basquiat, whose achievement looms ever larger in art of the late twentieth century. He is represented here by “Procession,” a painting from 1986, two years before his death, at twenty-seven. That was a period, for him, of illness and faltering confidence, but his originality still blazed. On a ground of boards painted yellow, four loosey-goosey black figures reel and stumble toward a tall man of undetermined race, dressed in red and blue, who brandishes a skull aloft with a gesture of withholding. The work might be a doom-laden allegory of addiction: junkies drawn to a dealer of, ultimately, death. But you rarely know with Basquiat. His teasing mastery of painterly form—he could seem incapable of making a dull mark—speaks, and sings, for itself.



“Fred Stewart II and Tyler Collins,” from the series “The Birmingham Project,” by Dawoud Bey, from 2012. Photograph courtesy the Rennie Collection

The Chicagoan Kerry James Marshall has become justly famous as a painter who deploys Blackness as a theme and black as a plangent color—hard to do if you’re not a Zurbarán, say, or a Goya. A Black cop seated on the hood of a police car radiates watchfulness. Interiors of middle-class homes feature banal furniture and images of civil-rights-era heroes that either hang on walls, like a portrait of Martin Luther King, Jr., bracketed by John F. Kennedy and his brother Robert, or hover as ghosts. Standing Black matrons include a woman who is equipped with angel wings. Another picture incorporates a list of departed Black

luminaries spelled out in glitter. Who told Marshall that you can get away with using glitter in an elegiac painting? It's one of many audacities that ignite his style. One interior is overlaid with vertical gray stripes and more glitter. Everything works. Marshall brings genres of domestic and history painting spankily up to date, achieving an aesthetic and sociological sublime. His art both stirs and mocks nostalgia, subjecting sincerity to irony in ways that intensify both.

There's a piquant backstory to Ligon's "A Small Band" (2015), which consists of the words "blues blood bruise" displayed in white neon letters high on the front of the museum. In 1964, New York police officers beat two Black teen-agers and then refused them medical attention because they weren't bleeding. One of the boys, Daniel Hamm, squeezed a bruise that he had incurred, forcing blood out. He explained later, with a slip of the tongue, that he'd "let some of the blues blood come out." Thus Ligon's beautiful short poem. "Blues" as a stand-in for "bruise" links Hamm's ordeal to a classically African-American way of processing sorrow. Your mind spirals down from an anecdote of police brutality to a sense of the inner life, the subjectivity, and the acculturated sensibility of a victim who is not reducible to victimhood. Ligon's work previews a psychosocial dynamic that abounds in "Grief and Grievance," which takes consequences of oppression and misfortune—grinding poverty, in the case of photographs by LaToya Ruby Frazier—as occasions for tours de force.



"Birmingham," by Jack Whitten, from 1964. Art work courtesy collection of Joel Wachs

The closest the show comes to protest art is Dawoud Bey's "The Birmingham Project" (2012), large black-and-white photographic diptychs recalling the bomb deaths, in 1963, of four Black girls at a church in the Southern city. Each pair portrays a child, male or female, at the age that one of the girls was on the day she was killed—three were fourteen, one was eleven—and an adult at the age that, had the girl survived, she would have been at the time of Bey's work. My first reaction was bemusement at the pictures' excellence as portraiture, sensitively framed and lighted and vibrant with the personalities of the sitters. How could such elegance serve as a memorial of murder? But gradually my reluctant aesthetic pleasure melted into the work's content, registering the distance between present high artistry and the thought, clawing at my mind, of once and forever destroyed young lives. As tranquil as the images are, the burning pain of the reference persists. I've tried to shake the spell that they cast but haven't yet.

Coming after a year of death and mourning as universal spectres, the show's lessons in strategies and tactics of emotional resilience, necessities for Black lives, resonate broadly. The art touches on shared human needs and capacities. It's a start. ♦

An earlier version of this article misidentified a painting by Mark Bradford and incorrectly capitalized a phrase in Glenn Ligon's work.

New Gagosian Director Spotlights Black Artists Involved in Social Change

In his first show at the gallery, Antwaun Sargent seeks to expand the ways people can engage with art.



By Robin Pogrebin

Published June 23, 2021 Updated June 24, 2021, 9:52 a.m. ET

In the past, the writer and critic Antwaun Sargent was often thwarted in his ideas for gallery exhibitions, told they were too costly or ambitious.

Then he became a director at Gagosian.

Sargent can dream big now, which he has with his first show, “Social Works,” opening Thursday at the gallery’s West 24th Street location in Manhattan. The exhibition he has curated features the work — most of it created over the last challenging year — of 12 Black artists, all of whom are actively engaged with their communities through efforts like food banks, mentorship and neighborhood revitalization.

“The whole thing is about art as a social act,” said Sargent, 32, in a recent interview at the gallery. “Given the last year of the pandemic and protest and the history in which Black artists operate, the work does more than just sit quietly on the wall. It really is about the social implications of what it means to be Black in this world and to move through this world and move through space and take space and create space and reimagine space.”



Carrie Mae Weems's “The British Museum,” from 2006. Her work in the show is drawn from her 2006 series of photographic self-portraits in which she stands amid monuments and institutions. Carrie Mae Weems, Jack Shainman Gallery and Gagosian

Carrie Mae Weems, who runs the community organization Social Studies 101, has work in the show drawn from her 2006 “Roaming” and “Museum” series of photographic self-portraits in which she stands amid monuments and institutions.

Gates, who is working to revitalize Chicago’s South Side, has an installation dedicated to the D.J. Frankie Knuckles, the “godfather of House Music” who died in 2014. The work features more than 5,000 records from Knuckles’s personal archive — many of which will be digitized as they play in the gallery — and a neon sign of the phrase, “Burn, baby, burn,” which was used by Watts rioters after being popularized by disc jockeys.

Adjaye, who designed the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture and the Studio Museum in Harlem’s new building, now under construction, has used New York earth to create a curvilinear maze that references West African architecture and feels like a rough-hewed Richard Serra.



VIA MIT PRESS

Carrie Mae Weems and the Long History of Collective Self- Institutionalization Among Black Radicals

Thomas J. Lax Considers the Artist's Emphasis on Convening

Feature image via the Museum of Modern Art Archives. Photograph by Mali Olatunji.

In 1995, when Carrie Mae Weems was featured in the Museum of Modern Art's *Projects* series, she kicked off the exhibition opening with a procession into the midtown museum. In doing so, she marshaled an expression of collectivity into a format typically reserved for the solemn recognition of a singular genius. In fact, her installation had already smuggled its context with it: she had transformed the institutional space into a domestic one by covering the museum's white walls with a bold graphic wallpaper and by placing an artwork on a folding three-paneled screen support in the middle of the floor as if the viewer had entered a stranger's living room. This spatial shift from museum to home was extended into real time and beyond the gallery walls during the evening's celebration as the performance connected the show with the city street. Jazz musicians and dancers occupied 53rd Street as the drummer Craig Harris played his didgeridoo while seated on the gallery floor. *Not only am I here*—Weems's installation proclaimed—*but we have arrived*.

Weems has continually considered the museum as a site to stage performative actions and to create unlikely occasions for her and others to stay awhile. In her black-and-white photographs from the *Museum Series* (2006–present), she stands stolidly—her back to the camera and wearing a full-sleeved, floor-length black dress—and looks at the world's leading museums and cultural institutions: the Galleria Nazionale D'Arte in Rome, the Pergamon in Berlin, and Project Row Houses in Houston. Her physical presence is emphatic and expectant, placed at once outside the seats of symbolic and cultural power and yet in immediate, majestic proximity to them. Each image suggests that meaning can be generated in the intimate slip between the veneer of an institution's architecture and the people who make its insides usable everyday.

In addition to museums, Weems has steadily focused her eyes on other vital sites of memorialization also presumed to be inert. In *Boneyard* from her *Sea Island Series* (1991–1993), for example, three photographs of graveyards taken off the coast of South Carolina are paired with a text that details African American customs for the deceased: *If people die waiting to see someone, they will stay limp and warm for days. They are still waiting.* Weems shows us that graveyards, like museums, are not only places where the dead are cared for; they are also ritualized spaces where the dead are still alive and where, in coming together, we commune with those who have come before.

VIDEO FROM LIT HUB:

John Lithgow reads William Maxwell at 92Y



*

In 2014, Weems co-hosted the pivotal convening *Past Tense/Future Perfect* with the musician and composer Carl Hancock Rux at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. Weems organized the event on the occasion of her retrospective (the first for a Black artist at the museum) as a refusal to occupy this impossible position and stand in as The Only One. Instead, she brought the rest of us into the museum with her. Weems's

convening was an assembly of interdisciplinary makers—musicians, poets, dancers, visual artists, and writers—that offered shared opportunity for study and inspiration aiming to create a space where “form is mapped and levels of invention are simply unpacked.” Since then, she has organized these events and nonevents in other august institutions such as the Park Avenue Armory, where in 2017 she organized *The Shape of Things*.

Importantly, she has also located these ensembles and choruses within self-made sanctuaries initiated by Black artists, including Theaster Gates and Eliza Myrie’s Black Artists Retreat on the South Side of Chicago, and Julie Mehretu, Paul Pfeiffer and others’ pastoral Denniston Hill residency that they founded in upstate New York. Each convening organized by Weems and refracted into other contexts creates an infrastructure that acknowledges both predecessors and heirs.

Weems has continually considered the museum as a site to stage performative actions and to create unlikely occasions for her and others to stay awhile.

While Weems’s exhibition at the Guggenheim may have been called a first, her emphasis on the convening positions it within a long history of collective self-institutionalization that has occurred within the Black radical tradition. During the second half of the 19th century, for example, African American women novelists such as Frances Harper and Pauline Hopkins paired their writing with opportunities for speaking in women’s clubs and congresses as well as abolitionist societies and social reform unions. And during the Great Depression, visual artists Augusta Savage and Gwendolyn Bennett formed the Harlem Community Art Center, a Works Progress

Administration-sponsored community space in operation from 1937 to 1942 that offered art instruction free to all, in particular children who famously included a young Jacob Lawrence.

Artists have continued to incorporate public teaching and group work into their aesthetic innovations, demonstrating how all creative genius is relational, processual, and takes time. Starting in the mid-1970s, Linda Goode Bryant organized “Brunch with JAM,” five-dollar meals that included lectures on art for non-specialists modeled on the Black Panther Party’s Free Breakfast for School Children Program at her Just Above Midtown Gallery in which collaboration, performance, and experimentation flourished. More recently, Simone Leigh along with Rashida Bumbray and Black Women Artists for Black Lives Matter have organized holistic health programs under the cover of art. There, women from schoolgirls to elders have screened their blood-pressure, closely read writing by Hortense Spillers and Saidiya Hartman, and taken modern dance classes. To convene, this history of women intellectuals and practitioners suggests, is to understand context and community as the condition of possibility for the making of form and formlessness.

*

On the appointed Friday afternoon at the end of April, poet Elizabeth Alexander grounded Weems’s *Past Tense/Future Perfect* by offering an invocation, appearing on high in the rafters of the museum’s new international style theater in a wash of purple light. She called roll of the names of artists who were with us, although some of them were no longer physically present. And then she read from her poem “Black Poets Talk about the Dead”:

After she left us, we felt Mom close
She had passed but not crossed—and those were good weeks
Her soup in the freezer, perfume in her handkerchiefs
Half-empty cups of her tea had grown cold

But bit by bit, she left and then was gone

They do that so we can mourn; they do that so we believe it

It is what it is: wretched work That we who the dead leave behind must do.

Over two and a half days, the participants performed more wretched work, basking in readings, performances, eulogies, and celebrations. What brought this interdisciplinary group together was perhaps best described in terms artist John Outterbridge offered in a recorded interview Weems had made with him in his Los Angeles home. “Some people pay dues and develop calluses,” he said. “We call them, sometimes, artists.” Artists develop calluses by smelling the perfumed handkerchiefs and eventually discarding the half- empty cups of tea in Alexander’s poem, Outterbridge described this work in his own words as scavenging objects and using them as a medium for crossing.

. . . the only thing I make is rearranging the debris of my burden. When I pick up rags, when I pick up metal that was in my father’s backyard, when I hear in the old engine run again that has a kind of audacity about it because it’s not supposed to run any more. It has a way of cranking itself and running itself. And my father rides along. . . . It’s difficult what they might have been because all those things are within us and beyond us.

When it was my turn to speak, I read from an interview I had conducted with my Aunt Marion: Marion Parsons, born Marion Brown, who was my maternal grandfather’s eldest-born sister. She had passed in the weeks preceding Weems’s convening and in reflecting on Aunt Marion’s beliefs in the hereafter, I recounted her skeptical experience of life’s cycle. In my oral history with her, she had spoken of the uncertainty out of which faith can be reborn, a paradox that seems both impossible and everywhere present.

I often wonder. I wonder if you are there in physical being, like we say I’ll see you in Heaven. I don’t know if we are re- formed or redeveloped into a body. I really don’t know. I would hope that it would be a place with no wars, where

people were friendly to each other, that you didn't have to worry about sickness and death. I would hope it's that way, but I really don't know.



Excerpt from Carrie Mae Weems, edited by Sarah Elizabeth Lewis with Christine Garnier
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CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Black Art and Poetry Elevate a Tribute to Civil Rights Leaders

In “The Baptism,” Carrie Mae Weems and Carl Hancock Rux find an abstract, elegiac voice in their video honoring John Lewis and C.T. Vivian.

By Maya Phillips

Oct. 27, 2020

During the last several months, between the scourge of Covid-19 and the spate of Black deaths resulting from police brutality, Blackness has become a concept loaded with fresh injuries. In “The Baptism,” a short, abstract video tribute to Representative John Lewis and the civil rights leader C.T. Vivian, Blackness isn’t divorced from the tragedies but carefully picked apart and examined through an existential lens. The result is a work that is freeing and radical in a way that Black art so often doesn’t get to be.

Commissioned by Lincoln Center, “The Baptism” features a three-part poem written and performed by the poet Carl Hancock Rux, and is directed by the acclaimed visual artist Carrie Mae Weems.

Though it is a memorial to two towering Black civil rights leaders, both of whom died on the same day this year — July 17 — “The Baptism” isn’t interested in particulars. Its style of eulogy is experimental and philosophical. As Mr. Rux reads his poem in the background, the video begins in black and white, with the sight of murmurations — myriad starlings pulsing and transforming into shapes in the sky — then visions of flowers and plants.

Mr. Rux’s piece, a meditative prose poem split into three sections, refers to Lewis and Vivian as “the sharecropper’s son” and “the boy from Booneville,” respectively. There are hints of death everywhere in the piece — a parable about japonica flowers that have “died in the frost,” the withering body, the decomposing tissue of the corpse, the inviting soil.



An image from “The Baptism.” Carrie Mae Weems

And yet “The Baptism” never feels grim, because in the text and video, Mr. Rux and Ms. Weems subvert these expectations of death and tropes of the dying Black body. When we speak of the Black citizen in America, we’re so often in conversations about the body, and usually a body that is injured or dead or dying: with bullets or with a police officer’s knee on a neck, or, during the civil rights era, with a torrent of water from a “baptism” by fire hoses aimed at protesters, as Ms. Weems herself has captured in her works. The Black body becomes a symbol of racial inequality and injustice.

But not here. “We do not die. We are always becoming,” Mr. Rux says in the voice-over, speaking of blood, membranes, enzymes and bacteria, breaking down the Black body to its elemental parts and considering them individually, as pieces of a larger marvel of nature, while Ms. Weems guides us through images of outdoor scenes. The video then brings us to Mr. Rux himself, sitting at a table (subtly evoking Ms. Weems’s famous “Kitchen Table Series”), reciting the work, intercut with black-and-white archival footage, then more recent color footage, of people simply walking down the street.

“The Baptism” recreates the Black body as the flower, as the field, as the seminal building blocks of life, even as architecture, as when Mr. Rux says, “Every being is a building with music — grace upon grace upon grace.”

Conceptually the piece feels like a cousin to Beyoncé’s recent visual poem, “Black Is King,” which also relished abstraction, drawing from sound and imagery and metaphor to define Blackness positively and holistically. Though plenty of Black movements have touted an essential theme of self-determination in their works — the Black Arts movement, Afrofuturism — it is still novel to have visible artwork that aims to dissect Blackness on an existential level, with lyrical ruminations. Of course, this has long been a hallmark of Ms. Weems’s photo installations, which are contemplative and stunningly poetic in their depictions of Black life. And it’s something white filmmakers have been so comfortable with in movies like “The Tree of Life” or even “Being John Malkovich,” philosophically interrogating humanity and human identity when whiteness is the default.

In an accompanying interview with Ms. Weems, Mr. Rux said he was inspired by figures like Lewis who “found a tongue, a language, a means of articulation, a way of speaking to the universe and through time.” Blackness is also universal — more than the tragedies, more than the images of bodies in the streets. That is part of our unfortunate reality in America, but Blackness also exists outside of that, in realms of abstraction like in the earth, in space, in the sea.

Walt Whitman was famously a poet of transcendental reach, writing himself as part of a universal sense of humanity and nature, fluid in all of its possibilities. “The Baptism” imagines something similar, but grants it to Black people; the most poignant part of the tribute is how it dares to think of Blackness as something transformative and eternal. In one of the final shots of the film, we look at a young Black man sitting still in the middle of a Black Lives Matter protest, mask over his mouth, while Mr. Rux’s voice says, with an emphasis that sounds like gospel, “They are over and over and never die.”

Maya Phillips is a poet and arts journalist and the inaugural Times arts critic fellow. She is the author of the poetry collection “Erou,” and her second book, “NERD: On Navigating Heroes, Magic, and Fandom in the 21st Century,” is forthcoming in summer 2022 from Atria Books. @mayabphillips

A version of this article appears in print on , Section C, Page 2 of the New York edition with the headline: A Tribute Plants Seeds for Everlasting Life

Carrie Mae Weems Says That's Enough of Trump

by Andrea Whittle

August 14, 2020 7:30 am



Carrie Mae Weems, *Remember to Dream*, 2020. Silk Screen print on rag paper, 23 x 28 in.

Earlier this week, the artist **Carrie Mae Weems** picked up the phone on her drive to work, which was taking a bit longer than expected. “Normally, I just take my one, direct route to my studio, and today I just decided to do something else,” she said, laughing. “I had, like, five detours this morning. I just can’t seem to get to where I want to go. Maybe this means I should have kept my ass at home.”

It's on commutes like hers that she hopes people will come across some of her new artwork, the latest defiantly political gesture in a career defined by them. Starting in October, billboards and signs designed by Weems and a collective of artists that includes Hank Willis Thomas, LaToya Ruby Frazier and Ed Ruscha will spring up along thoroughfares in Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin—all key swing states in the 2020 presidential election. The core message being sent by each one of them, in their own ways: “ENOUGH of Trump.”

The initiative, spearheaded by Weems and organized by the advocacy group People For the American Way, aims to encourage people to vote with a simple, galvanizing word, originally conceived of by Norman Lear, who founded PFAW. “It’s really a cumulative effect working multiple ways of something, weaving it through various items, over various mediums, platforms. That’s really the key. It’s not something that’s about finding one billboard in one neighborhood. It has to be really built on something that’s more systemic,” Weems said. “And hopefully it’s through that that we start to beg the question, ‘Have you had enough?’ And if you had enough, then it’s time to remove Trump from the White House.”

A Kickstarter campaign exceeded the fundraising goal of \$40,000 in 15 minutes, and has since reached over \$150,000 in donations, meaning the scope of the project will likely expand further. (It probably helped that rewards for backers included limited-edition signed prints by Weems, Ruscha, Shepard Fairey and Richard Serra.) Weems has also released canvas tote bags reading “ENOUGH!! DUMP TRUMP VOTE 2020” to benefit the project.

Given the very public nature of these artworks, is there anything that she's concerned about—vandalism, or perhaps inflammatory reactions from conservative media? “No, I’m rarely worried about those kinds of things. I always see things as being just things,” Weems said. “We should never be afraid of opposition. We should never be afraid that someone might take offense, or that someone might have a different set of ideas and opinions in a relationship. That’s what democracy is.”

stoking of fear, by this president himself, among the ultra-right,” she said. She pointed to the fact that one of the first things President Trump said about Kamala Harris after the announcement that she would be Joe Biden’s running mate was that she was “nasty.”

“I think there’s going to be some ugly stuff rearing its head this October and November as we get down to the finish line. The gloves are off. Nationalists are determined to maintain power, and progressives are determined to keep them out,” she said. “And the idea that we’re dealing with lies around the post office is threatening, confusing the post office and the mail to deliver ballots. We should all be more outraged, and we should already be infuriated, because this man is going to use every strategy he has not to leave the White House.”

As for Weems’ own views on Harris, she expressed some trepidation. “She wasn’t my first choice, frankly. Of course, it’s historic by any measure. It’s historic and wonderful, I think that the meaning of it cannot be overstated,” Weems said. “I’m very excited for her. I’ll send her a note, absolutely, and a tote bag,” she added, laughing. “She’s gotta have one black, one white.”



Tote bag by Carrie Mae Weems.

Weems would have wanted a Bernie Sanders-Elizabeth Warren ticket, she said, but she remains hopeful for the future. “One day, if we can get beyond race, then I think we’ve got a real shot at this project called democracy.”

Before hanging up and heading into her studio, Weems left us with one final statement. “If we want to hold onto the progress that we’ve made and then push that progress forward, I think this campaign around notions of enough really does matter,” she said. “We’re at a crossroads in this country, and I think we all have had enough of many, many different things. Norman was absolutely right when he used that word to galvanize it.”

NEWS

Artists Like Jeffrey Gibson and Carrie Mae Weems Encourage Voting With New Billboards

Jenny Holzer and Tomashi Jackson are also participating in “Art for Action,” the largest non-partisan public art campaign to raise voter awareness.

Valentina Di Liscia October 14, 2020



In Washington, D.C., digital screens project artworks by Carrie Mae Weems and Jeffrey Gibson as part of the “Art for Action” campaign. (all images courtesy Orange Barrel Media)

How do you reach hundreds of millions of potential voters three weeks before an election? Public art may be one way. As part of “Art for Action,” works by artists including Jeffrey Gibson, Jenny Holzer, Tomashi Jackson, and Carrie Mae Weems are on display on 350 digital screens in 16 cities across the US through Election Day, with seven additional artists showing on screens in Columbus and Cleveland, Ohio.

Approximately 3.34 million people will see them every day, totaling more than 106.7 million people throughout its month-long run, making it the largest, non-partisan voter awareness public art campaign. It’s a massive effort to counter voter suppression in the lead-up to one of the most anticipated and decisive elections in the country’s modern history.



In Atlanta, Tomashi Jackson's digital billboard retains the multilayered approach of her paintings, but delivers a clear message.

Organized by Orange Barrel Media (OBM), the project appropriates large-format digital screens and interactive digital “IKE Smart City” kiosks (those standalone touchscreen displays you can find on sidewalks, bus stops, and elsewhere), which are often reserved for commercial purposes. Now, these coveted public spaces will show artist-designed voters calls to action approximately once in each minute-long content rotation.



Though the works retain the distinctive visual elements of each artist's practice — Jenny Holzer's recognizable block letters; Tomashi Jackson's multilayered surfaces — the compositions are more practical than aesthetic. The messaging is meant to be straightforward and direct, not obfuscated or abstracted, so hurried passersby and distracted pedestrians can easily grasp it. Some of the participating artists are known for their activism and have a long history of inserting political and social messages both explicitly and subversively into urban spaces. Holzer, for instance, has used projections, LED lights, and even aerial banners to raise awareness of gun violence, AIDS, and other urgent issues.

The interactive kiosks also feature a real-time clock counting down to the election and offer several voting resources. People can use the touch-screen feature to view important upcoming deadlines and even register to vote through a QR code. The aim is for the artworks is to engage those who still have not registered or are undecided about voting this year, and make it easier for them to do so.



A billboard designed by artist Carrie Mae Weems for the "Art for Action" campaign.

"Art for Action" will run from October 3 through November 3, 2020, in the following US cities: Atlanta, Baltimore, Boston, Charlotte, Cleveland, Columbus, Coral Gables, Denver, Kansas City, Los Angeles, Norfolk, Pittsburgh, San Antonio, St. Louis, Tempe, and Washington, DC.

The national project is curated by Diana Nawi for OBM, while the local Ohio project is curated by Dionne Custer Edwards, Director of Learning and Public Practice at the Wexner Center for the Arts.

MORE FROM HYPERALLERGIC



Revisiting Carrie Mae Weems's Landmark “Kitchen Table Series”

Jacqui Palumbo Aug 19, 2020 10:20am



Carrie Mae Weems

Untitled (man smoking) from *Kitchen Table Series*, 1990
Phillips

In 1989, Carrie Mae Weems began setting up her camera every day in her kitchen, in front of a simple wooden table illuminated by a single overhead light. And from that table, a fictional life unfolds, with Weems playing the lead role.

Initially, there is the span of a romantic relationship: at first warm and intimate, then cold and wanting. Across the scenes, Weems changes roles as others join her in the room. She moves from lover to friend to mother and to herself, alone. She commands the stage—she plays a woman aware of the viewer, sometimes stealing a glance while others remain oblivious, at other times directly confronting the camera.



Carrie Mae Weems

Untitled, from The Kitchen Table Series, 1990
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA)



Carrie Mae Weems *Untitled, from the Kitchen Table Series, 1990-2010*
Light Work

The resulting body of work became “The Kitchen Table Series” (1990), both a landmark in Weems’s career and in the lives of others. “I can’t tell you how many people I’ve met in the art world—artists, curators, dealers—that point to ‘The Kitchen Table Series’ as the one piece that made them know they wanted to be...in the arts,” said Elisabeth Sann, a director at Jack Shainman Gallery, which is currently exhibiting the series in an online viewing room.

Weems’s black-and-white photographs are like mirrors, each reflecting a collective experience: how selfhood shifts through passage of time; the sudden distance between people, both passable and impassable; the roles that women accumulate and oscillate between; how life emanates from the small space we occupy in the world.



Carrie Mae Weems *Untitled*, 1994
ClampArt

But it was also a seminal moment for Black representation in art, influencing an entire generation of artists who rarely saw their own selves reflected back on museum walls. Still, the series is not limited to a particular perspective. “I think [the series is] important in relationship to Black experience, but it’s not about race,” Weems told *W* magazine in 2016. “I think that most work that’s made by Black artists is considered to be about Blackness. Unlike work that’s made by white artists, which is assumed to be universal at its core.”

“Everyone can relate to this work,” Sann said. “It’s not just Black women; it’s white women, Asian women. Men can see the women in their lives—memories from their childhood or scenes from their marriage or their family life. It’s so universal and yet representation like this is so rare.”



Carrie Mae Weems

Untitled (mother and daughter), 1990

Phillips



Carrie Mae Weems *Untitled (Woman and daughter with makeup) ...*
Phillips

Since photographing “The Kitchen Table Series” (Weems’s breakthrough project, though not her earliest), the Syracuse, New York–based artist has produced prolific bodies of photography and video work, earned a MacArthur “Genius Grant” in 2013, and became the first Black woman to receive a retrospective at the Guggenheim the following year. Though her output is multifaceted, Weems has continued to return to the “muse” figure first introduced in the intimacy of the kitchen—a woman who stands in for all women, guiding viewers through antebellum Louisiana or the vast exteriors of famous museums.

“This woman can stand in for me and for you; she can stand in for the audience, she leads you into history. She’s a witness and a guide,”

Weems told fellow photographer Dawoud Bey in a discussion for *Bomb* magazine in 2009. “Carrying a tremendous burden, she is a Black woman leading me through the trauma of history. I think it’s very important that as a Black woman she’s engaged with the world around her; she’s engaged with history, she’s engaged with looking, with *being*. She’s a guide into circumstances seldom seen.”



Carrie Mae Weems

Echoes For Marian, 2014

Guild Hall



Carrie Mae Weems *The Louisiana Project: Sorrow's Bed*, 2003
 Pippy Houldsworth Gallery

Though the entirety of “The Kitchen Table Series” is in the permanent collections of the Cleveland Museum of Art and the Detroit Institute of Arts, it is most often seen in parts, through individual scenes and rarely with its accompanying text: a story of the lovers told in vivid vignettes, from their meeting in the “glistening, twinkling crystal light of August/September sky,” through all the tests and balancing acts and storms of their relationship, until the woman finds solace in solitude.

“I added the text just as I was wrapping up, and it was wonderful,” Weems told *W* about the series. “A man had come to visit me, and we had this wonderful talk about men and women, about our relationships, and he left and then I took a long drive. I always drive with my tape recorder, and I started reciting this text. By the time I got home, it was done, and I went upstairs to my computer and transcribed it.”



Carrie Mae Weems *Untitled (Woman and phone) from the series The ...*
Phillips

In the beginning of the text are her lover's first words to her: "So tell me baby, what do you know about this great big world of ours?" "Not a damn thing sugar," she replies. Viewers may not be able to see the world outside of the kitchen's walls, but her characters are trying to navigate it all the same. Weems, playing the muse, embraces her partner, their arms forming a single spiral. She's alone, folding into herself, a half-empty bottle of wine in front of her. She laughs with her friends, their



Carrie Mae Weems *Untitled, from The Kitchen Table Series, 1990*
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA)

movement leaving spectral trails across the frame. She sits with her young daughter, both hunched over their writing, resting a weary head in her hand. In the final scenes, alone, she locks eyes with the camera. She finds pleasure, and comfort, with herself.

As she fired her camera shutter in her kitchen, Weems knew she was achieving something new in her work with “The Kitchen Table Series,” but she couldn’t have anticipated the power her daily performance would have three decades on: a series so universal and timeless, yet crucial in amplifying Black perspectives in art. “I knew that I was making images unlike anything I had seen before, but I didn’t know what that would mean,” she told *W*. “I knew what it meant for *me*, but I didn’t know what it would mean historically.”

Artist Carrie Mae Weems: “COVID-19 Is Not an Equal Opportunity Virus”

Her Resist COVID Take 6! public awareness campaign aims to get information into the hands of those most impacted.

BY ALISON S. COHN / AUG 17, 2020



PHOTO BY BRE'ANN WHITE, COURTESY CARRIE MAE WEEMS AND LIBRARY STREET COLLECTIVE

Referring to the recommended six feet of separation required for proper social distancing, artist Carrie Mae Weems’s Resist COVID Take Six! public awareness campaign aims to get information and resources to combat the spread of the deadly coronavirus into the hands of BIPOC communities via billboards, buttons, lawn signs, take-out bags, and other creative means. Activism and a belief that representation matters has always been central to the MacArthur Genius grant recipient’s work. In her iconic The Kitchen Table Series (1990)—currently on view at

Jack Shainman gallery's online viewing room—Weems herself posed as the self-assured main subject, using a kitchen table as her domestic stage, and she has consistently created images that insist on the worth of Black people throughout her more than four-decade photographic career.

Since its launch in April, Weems's grassroots campaign has reached 10 cities across the United States. Now, for Resist COVID Take Six!'s next chapter, she's partnering with Library Street Collective, a Detroit-based gallery that has developed and executed several impactful initiatives at the intersection of art and social justice since the onset of the pandemic. They include selling artist coloring books to raise money for child hunger; supporting artist Jammie Holmes's *They're going to Kill Me* sky media demonstration, which flew George Floyd's last words over five American cities; and launching a new charitable auction platform, Alliance.

Here, we speak with Weems and Library Street Collective's cofounder Anthony Curis about their shared mission.

What was your inspiration for the Resist COVID Take 6! campaign?

Carrie Mae Weems: It really arose out of a conversation with a very close friend, Pierre Loving, about the impact of COVID-19 on people of color and what we could do about it. COVID-19 is not an equal opportunity virus. The numbers are staggering. For example, there was a report from Chicago in early April that 72 percent of people killed in that city by the coronavirus were Black, despite making up less than a third of its population. I understood immediately that our mission was to create an artist-driven public awareness campaign that attempts to get information into the hands of the most impacted.

**BECAUSE OF INEQUITY,
BLACK, BROWN & NATIVE PEOPLE
HAVE BEEN THE MOST IMPACTED BY COVID-19!**

**THIS MUST
BE CHANGED!!!**

CARRIE MAE WEEMS

**WASH YOUR HANDS, COVER YOUR FACE,
KEEP A SAFE DISTANCE & GET TESTED!**



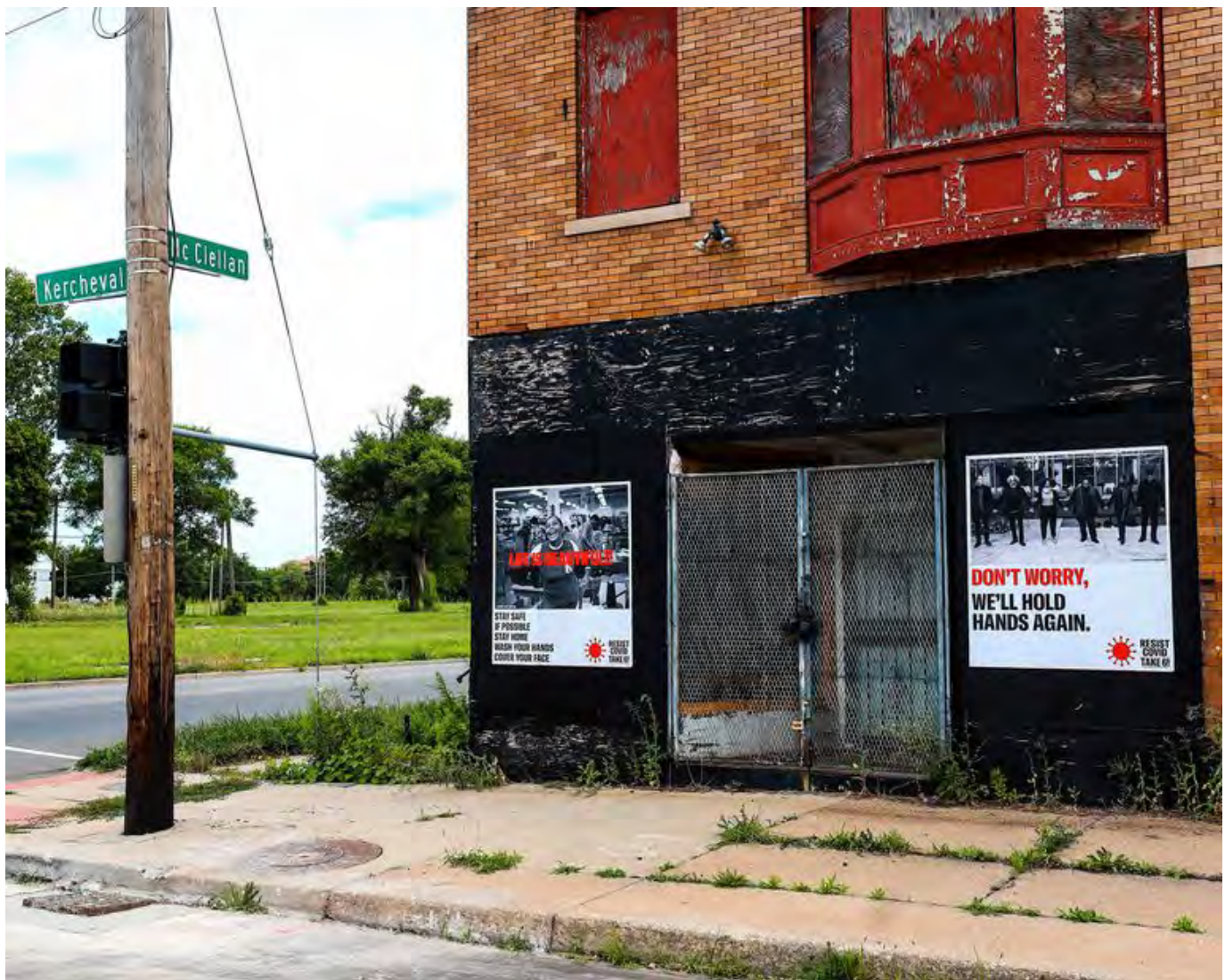
**RESIST
COVID
TAKE 6!**
A NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR PROTECTING
YOUR COMMUNITY

Resist COVID Take 6! poster.
COURTESY CARRIE MAE WEEMS

What was your process? Obviously, there are unique challenges to doing photo shoots during a pandemic.

CMW: Well I'm fortunate that I've been working for many years, so I have thousands of photographs in my own archive that I could choose from. I've been photographing people and places forever. One photo that I think is particularly impactful, and that I've also used in relation to Black Lives Matter, features a double entendre: a young boy in a hood. People are aware of what a *hood* means. There's a history to that.

Another photograph that I selected features a group of people in dialogue with one another. It's based on past events at MoMA's sculpture garden that rarely included people of color. So I invited a diverse group of people to hang out with me in the garden and have a series of conversations there.



Resist COVID Take 6! posters in East Village, Detroit.

PHOTO BY BRE'ANN WHITE, COURTESY CARRIE MAE WEEMS AND LIBRARY STREET COLLECTIVE

Could you explain the role that text plays in these works?

CMW: Text is often an important part of my work as it was here. I asked myself, “What is it that I need to hear first and foremost?” Should a poster read, “Sadly people of color have been the most impacted by COVID-19”? Or should it be, “As usual, the most impacted by COVID-19 have been people of color”?



We are debunking the myths, the fantasies, and the fake
news around COVID-19.

So I was pounding away on my computer, generating statements, and then just sort of slowly editing them down. We want to alert people of color that they have to wash up and they have to mask up and they have to back up. Those are the things. Also that COVID-19 is not a hoax, which is very, very important given what the president was saying. He’s only backed off of the idea that COVID-19 was a hoax and that it was going to disappear very recently, after 167,000 Americans have died of COVID-19 and five million have been infected, right? We are debunking the myths, the fantasies, and the fake news around COVID-19. I wear a button every day that says, “COVID-19 is Not a Hoax.” I’m hoping that I can have a whole dress made stating that fact.



Resist COVID Take 6! button.

COURTESY CARRIE MAE WEEMS

How did you choose the distribution channels for your messages?

CMW: Every city is different, which is why we put together a selection of materials—including lawn signs, billboards, wheatpaste posters, buttons, masks, magnets, tote bags, and shopping bags—and then each city can then decide what they actually need and how they can best serve their communities.

In Syracuse, New York, where I live, we focused on lawn signs. I wanted them to be beautiful, thoughtful, and engaging. Something that people would want to see. Syracuse is four hours from New York City and two hours away from Albany, right? But the median income here is lower than that of the state of Mississippi. Homes are collapsing, and many stores are boarded up, right? There's no visual language, right? There's nothing of beauty. There's nothing to excite the imagination. We put the first signs up at the beginning of April, and what I'm very excited by is that so many of them are still there. I drive around and I look for them.

What other cities have signed on to be part of Resist COVID Take 6?

CMW: It's really taking on great traction. It's in New York City, Philadelphia, Atlanta, Savannah, Miami, Sarasota, Nashville, Dallas, and Chicago. And we're really excited to now be partnering with Library Street Collective to bring the project to Detroit.



Resist COVID Take 6! posters in East Village, Detroit.

PHOTO BY BRE'ANN WHITE, COURTESY CARRIE MAE WEEMS AND LIBRARY STREET COLLECTIVE

Can you tell us more about what you're doing together in Detroit and why this partnership is so meaningful?

Anthony Curis: We were immediately drawn to Carrie's project by its message, but also the means in which the campaign could be translated on a very personal scale.

Library Street Collective is based in Detroit, a city with a nearly 85 percent Black population. Although COVID-19 is a global issue, it can be very localized by the severity of its impact on specific populations. So cities like Detroit have been disproportionately affected by the disease, and we felt that it was a really compelling and important project to bring here. Also, obviously, the chance to work with the great Carrie Mae Weems was an honor that we couldn't pass up!

We thought that we could make the most impact by concentrating our efforts in a very singular geographic area of the city, East Village, which is a neighborhood about 10 minutes outside of downtown. We've installed wheatpaste posters on a number of commercial and residential buildings throughout the neighborhood. And these will range in scale from, modest in size to some being larger than billboards. One of the benefits of keeping the posters in close proximity is that residents will have an opportunity to safely walk past them and view the entirety of Carrie's message.

How will you be partnering with local businesses and nonprofits to further spread the message?

AC: There are two really incredible nonprofits in the area that we're going to be partnering with, the Empowerment Plan and Downtown Boxing Gym. Empowerment Plan is an organization that is working to break the generational cycle of homelessness through employment. They hire low-income minority, single parents from local shelters and train them in sewing and manufacturing. And they actually produce sleeping bags that double as coats for the homeless and those in need. Downtown Boxing Gym is a free after-school academic and athletic program for Detroit students ages eight to 18. Both organizations will be distributing Resist COVID Take Six! tote bags, stickers, and buttons.

And separately in the neighborhood, we're partnering with a number of small businesses like restaurants who can serve as another vehicle to help promote the message. We're providing free paper bags with the campaign's messages, which they can use for take-out.



Resist COVID Take 6! poster in East Village, Detroit.

PHOTO BY BRE'ANN WHITE, COURTESY CARRIE MAE WEEMS AND LIBRARY STREET COLLECTIVE

Where would you like to see Resist COVID Take 6! go next?

CMW: At the end of the day, we're just all making little drops in the pool, and it has a certain kind of reverberation. Cities and governments are still sitting at the table trying to decide if the design of a door hanger is appropriate. Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot, bless her heart, she's one of the mayors that's been out there the longest, right? They *finally* were able to get up a billboard recently. The level of bureaucracy at this moment is tragic.

Maybe there are still some issues with the message of our campaign. Maybe it's not all crystalline and perfect, and hasn't been worked on by 90 people making \$200,000 a year, right? But we've done something. And I know that it's impactful. I know that it's meaningful. In fact, the city of Syracuse is now using our materials on their website. With luck, we'll all get to the other side of midnight.

Carrie Mae Weems on Kitchen Table Series: 'Not Simply a Voice for African American Women, but More Generally for Women'

by VICTORIA L. VALENTINE on Aug 13, 2020 - 6:58 am

No Comments

IN A NEW ONLINE VIEWING ROOM, [Jack Shainman Gallery](#) is showcasing **Carrie Mae Weems's** iconic Kitchen Table Series (1990). The photographs feature succession of staged scenes that explore female identity, experiences, and relationships in the context of a traditionally female domain.

Employing visual performance, image making, and a compelling narrative text, the powerful series provides a lens through which to view a woman's life. Not the artist's life, but that of the female subject.



CARRIE MAE WEEMS, "Untitled (Woman standing alone), 1990 (gelatin silver print, 28 1/4 x 28 1/4 inches (framed)). | © Carrie Mae Weems, Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery

Weems casts herself in the images, serving as an archetype in a gendered space that is both sanctuary and battleground—for moments of solitude and internal dialogue as well as gathering, participation, and shared experience around family dynamics, friendship, and the war between the sexes.

There are 20 images and 14 text panels in the series. Weems produced the body of work in 1990 at home, at her kitchen table, with a single light source—a hanging pendant lamp. At the time, she was teaching photography at Hampshire College in Amherst, a small college town in Massachusetts. She worked at odd hours, late at night and early in the morning, whenever she could claim time for her own practice. She was 38.

"I had been really thinking a lot about what it meant to, what it meant to sort of develop your own voice and so I made this body of work, the Kitchen Table Series," Weems told Art21. "It started in a curious way as a kind of response to my own sort of sense of what needed to happen, what needed to be, and what would not be simply a voice for African American women but what would be a voice more generally for women."

"I had been really thinking a lot about what it meant to, what it meant to sort of develop your own voice... It started in a curious way as a kind of response to my own sort of sense of what needed to happen, what needed to be, and what would not be simply a voice for African American women but what would be a voice more generally for women." — Carrie Mae Weems

CARRIE MAE WEEMS, "Untitled (Playing cards / Malcolm X)," 1990-1989 (gelatin silver print, 28 1/4 x 28 1/4 inches). I © Carrie Mae Weems, Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery

THE PHOTOGRAPHS SPEAK VOLUMES on their own. Adding the text gives dimension and specificity, a call-and-response with the visual narrative. At one point in the first half of the series, accompanying images of Weems with a male counterpart, the text reads:

She insisted that what he called domineering was a jacket being forced on her because he couldn't stand the thought of the inevitable shift in the balance of power. She assured him that the object of her task was not to control him, but out of necessity—freedom being the appreciation of necessity—to control herself. She went on to tell him that in the face of the daily force she understood his misgivings. But they were in a 50-50 thing. Equals. She wasn't about to succumb to standards of tradition which denied her a rightful place or voice, period. She was trying to be a good woman, a compadre, a pal, a living doll—and she was working. How could he ask for more!! She was really gettin tired of him talkin out of both sides of his mouth about the kinda woman he wanted. Fish or cut bait.

In 2016, Weems spoke to T: The New York Times Style Magazine about the series upon the publication of a book dedicated to the body of work. The artist said she had already completed the photographic project when she decided to introduce the text. Hillary Moss reported how the two elements came together:

The corresponding story, a cross between a bildungsroman and a beat poem, came to her, unplanned, about a month after she'd finished shooting. She had been talking to a friend, then embarked on a long drive and recited the words to herself in one sitting. "You circle around the idea, move around the idea and it doesn't come home—and suddenly things start to click," she says. "It seems to me that the most important thing an artist can do is to get out of the way of the work. The work tells you what it needs, where it needs to go; even if you don't understand why, you should follow it. So to this extent, at a certain moment, the text seemed to come together effortlessly." And so, "Kitchen Table" became an image-and-text piece. "I don't necessarily need the text with the photographs," Weems says, "and I don't necessarily need the photographs with the text, but nonetheless together they create an interesting dynamic and interplay."

Examining the performative aspects of Weems's practice, Franklin Sirmans considered the significance of the text elements of the series in the exhibition catalog "Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video."

He wrote: "With its concise, poetic writing that recalls the vernacular and oral narration in the language of Zora Neale Hurston, the tragic narrative of blues music, and the cadence of jazz vocals, Weems's Kitchen Table Series is now a hallmark of the era a defining piece of the late 1980s and early 1990s history of contemporary art."

AT JACK SHAINMAN, the online exhibition presents a multimedia overview of the Kitchen Table Series. It's a veritable digest. Photographs and text panels from the series are featured along with quotes from interviews with Weems and articles about the work. The passages frame the series and highlight critical reactions, the artist's intentions, and her influence on a younger artist (Xaviera Simmons). A video of Weems speaking about the series in 2018 at the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C., is included. Installation views of the series on display at the Art Institute of Chicago and Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum are showcased.



The gallery notes that the entire Kitchen Table Series is in the collections of the Cleveland Museum of Art (acquired in 2008) and Detroit Institute of Art (acquired in 2017), and individual works are owned by at least eight more museums. The viewing room also offers a selection of photographs from the Kitchen Table Series for sale.

The project is the subject of a dedicated volume "Carrie Mae Weems: Kitchen Table Series," (the book Moss was writing about for the Times), where the body of work is published in its entirety for the first time, alongside essays by curators Sarah Lewis and Adrienne Edwards.

"How are women going to image themselves? This was Weems's guiding question during the earliest moments of conceiving the Kitchen Table Series as she reflected on the corpus of photographic images of women up to the 1980s and what wasn't there. We have images of women in states of arresting beauty—a force of a certain kind; women in states of maternal focus—another form of authority. Yet there are few images that depict the journey towards an inner sanctum," Lewis writes in the foreword.

"The Kitchen Table Series remains one of the few narrative works in the history of photography to cast a black female protagonist in a journey towards utter empowerment." **CT**

"Carrie Mae Weems: Kitchen Table Series" is on view online at Jack Shainman Gallery

WATCH MORE about the Kitchen Table Series, from Carrie Mae Weems in a short video for Art21.



CARRIE MAE WEEMS, "Untitled," 1990-2018 (50 x 50 inched (image) 69 1/2 x 60 inches (print)). I © Carrie Mae Weems, Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery



CARRIE MAE WEEMS, "Untitled (Woman with friends)," 1990 (gelatin silver print, triptych: 27 1/4 x 27 1/4 inches (each print)). I © Carrie Mae Weems, Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery



CARRIE MAE WEEMS, "Untitled (Woman and Daughter with Make Up)," 1990 (gelatin silver print, 27 1/4 x 27 1/4 inches (print); 28 3/8 x 28 1/4 x 1 1/2 inches (framed)). I © Carrie Mae Weems, Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery



CARRIE MAE WEEMS, "Untitled (Woman feeding bird)," 1990 (silver print, 28 1/4 x 28 1/4 inches (print); 28 7/8 x 28 7/8 x 1 1/2 inches (framed)). I © Carrie Mae Weems, Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery

How Carrie Mae Weems Rewrote the Rules of Image-Making

Perhaps our best contemporary photographer, she creates work that insists on the worth of black women — both in art and in life.



Carrie Mae Weems, photographed in New York City on Aug. 7, 2018.
Photograph by Mickalene Thomas. Styled by Shiona Turini

By Megan O'Grady

Oct. 15, 2018



ON CARRIE MAE WEEMS'S deck in Syracuse, N.Y., locusts are buzzing about the space like doomsday portents, emerging from the ground after 17 years only to drown boozily in our cups of rosé. It's a warm day in late June, and a summer languor — or maybe it's a news-cycle-induced torpor — is in the air, but Weems, perhaps our greatest living photographer, is juggling so many projects that when we were emailing to work out the interview logistics, she warned me, "We'll need all your skills on this." She is simultaneously working on a trio of shows: a retrospective at Boston College's [McMullen Museum of Art](#) this fall, an installation for Cornell University and a group show she's curating, "Darker Matter," which will include a new series of her own, at the Park Avenue Armory around 2020 — a follow-up to the creative think tank of artists, musicians and writers she organized at the venue last winter titled "[The Shape of Things](#)."

But first, she wants to show me her peonies. A few weeks before we meet, she emailed me a JPEG of a flower in full bloom, a still-life hello. Frothy white with a bright yellow center, it wasn't just any peony, but the W.E.B. DuBois peony, which was named for the civil rights activist after Weems called up the American Peony Society with the suggestion. (As she tells it, they happened to have a new variety in need of a name.) The flower was to be the centerpiece of a memorial garden for DuBois at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst — a small but characteristically thoughtful gesture from an artist who has made her career creating spaces for contemplation in the place of absence, rooting a troubled present in a painful past with projects that feel resolutely forward-looking and idealistic.

See all six of the 2018 Greats issue [cover stories here](#).

[Weems](#), 65, who won a MacArthur Fellowship in 2013, the year before she became the first African-American woman to have a retrospective at the Guggenheim, has for some time existed in the cultural mythosphere. Her many admirers reserve an intense, almost obsessive affection for her that is rarely extended to visual artists: She is name-checked in a lyric on the new album by Black Thought and appears as herself in Spike Lee's new Netflix series of "[She's Gotta Have It](#)." Her iconic 1987 picture, "Portrait of a Woman Who Has Fallen From Grace" — a photo that depicts Weems sprawled on a bed in a white dress, cigarette dangling from one hand — is on the cover of Morgan Parker's poetry collection "[There Are More Beautiful Things Than Beyoncé](#)." (Speaking of Beyoncé, Weems has been cited as an influence on the videos for "Lemonade.") Any day now, surely, someone will name a flower after her.



Weems's photographs and short films have gone a long way toward resetting our expectations of pictures. **Bottega Veneta** dress and belt, (800) 845-6790. **Cartier** earrings, (800) 227-8437. **Van Cleef & Arpels** bracelet, vancleefarpels.com. **Manolo Blahnik** shoes, (212) 582-3007. All clothing and jewelry price on request.

Photograph by Mickalene Thomas. Styled by Shiona Turini

Canonical, yes — and yet, in many ways, it feels we barely know her apart from the persona we see in her work, in which she often appears, staring down the camera lens, or with her back turned to it, inviting us to see things through her eyes. She's as arresting a presence in real life. In conversation, she has a magnetism that's almost planetary; she is mellifluously voiced and funny, with a habit of repeating "Right? Right?" as she makes her points, which move from critical theory to an anecdote about her Pilates teacher, who tried to break up with Weems because she was too demanding. She's like that friend who sees right through you and who you trust will set you straight, because she's just as undeluded about herself.

Her photographs and short films, as gimlet-eyed and gutsy as they are visually compelling, have gone a long way toward resetting our expectations of pictures and challenging our assumptions about her largely African-American subjects. A gifted storyteller who works accessibly in text and image, she's created new narratives around women, people of color and working-class communities, conjuring lush art from the arid polemics of identity. The desire to create images has never not felt powerful, something Weems understood from the first time she held her own camera. She was 20, and it was a birthday present from her boyfriend, Raymond, a Marxist and labor organizer. "I think that the first time I picked up that camera, I thought, 'Oh, O.K. This is my tool. This is it,' " she tells me.

Originally from Portland, Ore., Weems now divides her time between an art-filled midcentury-modern home in Syracuse, where she moved in 1996 to be with her husband of 23 years, Jeffrey Hoone, the executive director of [Light Work](#) — an organization that awards residencies to artists — and a pied-à-terre in Fort Greene, Brooklyn. But much of her family remains on the West Coast, including her mother, also named Carrie, her daughter, Faith, and many aunts, uncles and cousins. They appear in Weems's early work from the late '70s, when she was still mostly in documentary mode — work that became her first show, "Family Pictures and Stories," shown in 1984 at a gallery in San Diego. Inspired by Zora Neale Hurston's writing and Roy DeCarava's depictions of Harlem in his book with Langston Hughes, "[The Sweet Flypaper of Life](#)," the black-and-white images revealed a loving, fractious, deeply connected clan and were a glorious rebuttal to the infamous 1965 Moynihan Report's assertion that African-American communities were troubled because of weak family bonds.

Soon she was turning the lens on herself to address questions of representation. It would be hard to overstate the impact of "[The Kitchen Table Series](#)" (1989-90), which combines panels of text and image to tell the story of a self-possessed woman with a "bodacious manner, varied talents, hard laughter, multiple opinions," as it reads. It's the series that made her career and inspired a new generation of artists who had never before seen a woman of color looking confidently out at them from a museum wall, and for whom Weems's work represented the first time an African-American woman could be seen reflecting her own experience and interiority in her art.



Weems was 20 when she first held her own camera; it was a birthday present from her boyfriend. **Oscar de la Renta** dress, oscardelarenta.com. **Pomellato** ring, pomellato.com. **Christian Louboutin** shoes, christianlouboutin.com. Weems's own earrings and ring. Photograph by Mickalene Thomas. Styled by Shiona Turini

Weems is also a nimble satirist — a bride with her mouth taped shut in “Thoughts on Marriage” (1990), a mock fashion show for “[Afro Chic](#)” (2009) — but her humor is generally of the more unsettlingly pointed kind, aimed directly at our smug aesthetic foundations. In a 1997 series, “[Not Manet’s Type](#),” she plays a muse, her negligee-clad reflection in front of a bed, beheld and objectified — or simply invisible. “It was clear I was not Manet’s type,” the accompanying text reads. “Picasso — who had a way with women — only used me & Duchamp never even considered me.” [In 2016](#), she revisited the idea with “Scenes & Take,” shot on the sets of television shows like “*Empire*,” “*How to Get Away With Murder*” and “*Scandal*,” which feature the kind of multifaceted and genuine-feeling black characters that for years weren’t widely enough seen outside of Weems’s own work. Weems appears in flowing black, a specter of the black ingénue who arrived too early, who was ignored, who never even had the chance to be.



Images from the artist's most famous and arguably most influential work, “The Kitchen Table Series,” left to right: “Untitled (Woman and Daughter With Children),” “Untitled (Man Reading Newspaper)” and “Untitled (Woman and Daughter With Make Up).” Photographed between 1989 and 1990, the images depict black identity — in particular the woman at the center of each photo, portrayed by Weems — in intimate, remarkable detail.

From left: Carrie Mae Weems, “Untitled (Woman and Daughter with Children),” 1990; Carrie Mae Weems, “Untitled (Man Reading Newspaper),” 1990; Carrie Mae Weems, “Untitled (Woman and Daughter with Make Up),” 1990. All images © Carrie Mae Weems, Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

In the art world, too, Weems has always been before her time, and this has made her a singularly eloquent witness to the shifting landscape of race and representation. This is not the enviable position it may seem to some: One wonders if the reason her work hasn’t inspired quite the same volume of ink as, say, her contemporary Cindy Sherman is that critics have simply been too afraid, or too unimaginative, to engage with it. Georgia O’Keeffe once said, “Men put me down as the best woman painter. I think I’m one of the best painters.” This marginalization, being categorized as “black artist” or “woman artist” rather than simply *artist*, is something Weems has dealt with her entire career. In fact, much of Weems’s most powerful work has examined, with piercing moral clarity, a past that’s very much

shared, whether she's casting herself as Sally Hemings for "[The Jefferson Suite](#)" (2001) or recreating moments from the civil rights movement in "[Constructing History](#)" (2008). She is a master at appropriating historical images: For her extraordinary pictorial essay "[From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried](#)" (1995-96), she used found sources, including a cache of 1850 daguerreotypes commissioned by the Harvard scientist Louis Agassiz. The sitters are African-Americans, former slaves, many of them depicted naked or half naked, as anthropological specimens. Weems reproduced the images, staining them blood-red and encircling the subjects so that they appear to be held captive by the lens. Providing a context for understanding the historical use of those photographs and then subverting it, she restores tenderness and humanity to the subjects. Even the way the series has been received illustrates the glacial pace of progress: Harvard, which initially threatened to sue Weems over the use of images from its archive, later ended up acquiring a portion of the series for its collection.

Photography can enslave and revictimize, Weems has shown us; it can also, potentially, set us free from our inherited bias and expectations. A 2006 Rome Prize from the American Academy made possible a line of work called "[Roaming](#)," challenging the idea that an African-American artist couldn't have international resonance: Looking at Weems's ghostly alter ego dressed in black outside historic sites in the Italian capital, one wonders who could possibly better understand the architectures of power. In "[The Museum Series](#)" (2005-6), the spectral figure appears again outside the Louvre, the Pergamon and the Tate Modern, the kinds of institutions that, feeling their authority increasingly in question, now call upon Weems to tell them how they might remain relevant. The figure — a testament to exclusion, longing for admission — challenges the idea of art made by white men as being the only art in Western culture capable of speaking to our common humanity.

If there's a bitter irony in the way in which historically white museums have turned to socially engaged black artists to help solve their problems — asking the victim, in essence, to become their savior — Weems has responded with characteristic optimism. Her "convenings," which she held at the Guggenheim during her retrospective (mordantly named "Past Tense/Future Perfect") and more recently at the Park Avenue Armory, suggest that keeping the old model while simply swapping out the content isn't going to work. *Her* model, rather, is about curating a flexible, conversation-oriented space that reflects the community, in which real civic engagement might happen. She has so much more work to do, she says: "I feel like I'm racing against the clock."



Daddy and I have a special thing going, and to this day I use his lap as my private domain. He says, "See Carrie Mae, what I like about you is you can talk that talk to them white folks, and you's smart too, just like your daddy."

Weems's earlier portrait series, "Family Pictures and Stories," begun in 1981, depicts friends and relatives, as in "Dad and Me," which shows the artist with her father.

Carrie Mae Weems, "Dad and Me" (detail), 1978-1984. © Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

OVER THE LAST two years, even those of us who might have once been able to delude ourselves into thinking that structures of power don't really affect us have been made to see otherwise. For Weems, who grew up in one of the few black families in Portland, the child of a large (she is the second of seven children), close-knit family of sharecroppers who had migrated from Mississippi, that was never the case. Her paternal grandfather had organized tenant farmers on the Sunshine Plantation, one of Mississippi's first cooperative farms with black and white farmers; Dorothea Lange, she recently discovered, photographed her favorite uncle, Clarence, in the 1930s. Weems's childhood was a very happy one, filled with caravan trips to the beach and Mount Hood. It was defined in large part by two men: her handsome father, Myrlie, who she says resembled Muhammad Ali — "he was just a really charismatic kind of guy, funny and wonderful and warm, polite, open" — and her maternal grandfather, who employed most of the family. "He was Jewish, Native American and black, but looked very Jewish, and he knew that basically he was passing for white and that he could do things that we couldn't so easily. So he used all of that to make sure that his family was taken care of." He ran a janitorial service and later owned a popular barbecue restaurant.

Weems was 8 when her parents divorced, and because the family remained in some ways intact — her father lived around the corner — she told herself for many years that it hadn't affected her. It was only years later, while talking to one of her aunts, that she realized the divorce marked the point at which she'd stopped drawing and painting. Other memories of that time in her youth have come back, too: of arriving home from school to find her mother weeping in front of the television after Kennedy was shot; of reading Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech over and over again with her father, following King's assassination.

Over the years, Weems has revisited in her work the age she was then — 8, 9, 10, a girl still in the process of becoming herself, with a dawning adult awareness of the world and a self-assurance made all the more poignant with the knowledge that it won't survive adolescence wholly intact. A 1978 portrait of her daughter, Faith, at 9, is radiant with Faith's innocence and Weems's love. A nostalgic 2002 image, "May Flowers," hangs prominently on the wall in Weems's home. It depicts three girls at that age dressed in vintage dresses and flower crowns. The girl in the center, whose name, Weems tells me, is Jessica — Weems noticed her on the streets of Syracuse with her mother and approached them to ask if Jessica might model for her — looks directly out at us, warily, fearlessly. It is, like much of Weems's work, a kind of slanted self-portrait.



Alice is the oldest and as the oldest—when momma wasn't home—cooked our food, washed our clothes and us, cleaned the house, when necessary even whipped our bellends. She's a no give kinda woman, taking no slack from nobody for no reason. And the thing I like about her is her profound commitment to family. Girl will do whatever to hold it together. Tough cookie.

Another photograph from the "Family Pictures and Stories" series, "Alice on the Bed," which is of Weems's older sister.

Carrie Mae Weems, "Alice on the Bed," 1978-1984. © Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

In one of the indelible images from “The Kitchen Table Series” — possibly the most famous picture Weems has ever taken — a young girl and her mother are looking in matching mirrors while applying lipstick. It’s the kind of effortless-seeming image that complexly plays with ideas of feminine subjectivity, recalling the Impressionist painter Berthe Morisot’s 1875 painting “[Woman at Her Toilette](#)” in the way in which it shows a private act that anticipates public exposure. In Weems’s version, a young girl is also learning, perhaps unwittingly, what it means to be a woman, and what it means to be looked at by men. “What do women give to one another? What do they pass on to one another?” says Weems, recalling the girl who modeled for the picture, whom she spotted in her neighborhood in Northampton, Mass., where she was living and teaching at the time. “I just thought she was the perfect echo of me as a young person. The same intensity and the same kind of hair.”

After her parents’ divorce, Weems moved with her mother and siblings into a large house owned by her grandfather. She would pirouette down the long wood-floored hallway and look out the attic windows, wearing her mother’s work smock, imagining she was a dancer or an actress. “I was simply becoming interested in this idea of being an artist in the world in some sort of way, not knowing really what the arts were,” she says. “I had these great, grand visions that I would move to New York City and that I would always arrive fabulously dressed, and I would always arrive late, and I would always leave early and everybody would want to know who I was. ‘Who is she?’ That was my fantasy.” After a visit from her drama teacher, her mother agreed to send her to a summer program in Shakespearean theater, freeing her from having to earn money by picking strawberries with the other kids in her neighborhood — giving her permission, essentially, to create. The program led her to other opportunities in theater and street performance, “dancing at the crossroads at night to bring up the gods,” she tells me.

Her father gave her another, equally crucial kind of permission. “My earliest memories are of my father picking me up and setting me on his knee. I was about 4 or 5. He looked at me, and he said, ‘Carrie Mae, always remember that you have a right. Right? That no matter who messes with you, you pick up the biggest stick that you can, and you fight back with it.’ This was a great gift. He would say, ‘There’s no man greater than you. You are greater than no other man.’ This is the bedrock of my understanding, the bedrock of my belief system that really was instilled very, very early in my life, and repeated throughout my life, this idea that we had a right to be there. So, if I arrive at some sort of big, fancy gala, I always feel really comfortable. It just doesn’t really matter who is in the room.”



Weems's "May Flowers," featuring in the center a model, Jessica, whom she has recently begun working with again after 15 years.
 Carrie Mae Weems, "May Flowers," 2002. © Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

IT'S A COMMON fallacy in talking about an artist's formative years to imply that it was all inevitable, that A led simply to B. But nothing was straightforward for Weems, who left home at 17, following her best friend, the film director Catherine Jelski, to San Francisco, where the choreographer Anna Halprin invited her to join her modern dance company. Later, Weems earned degrees from California Institute of the Arts and University of California, San Diego, where she lived with the artist [Lorna Simpson](#), another longtime friend, and she also studied folklore at U.C. Berkeley.

But equally, if not more essential, was a different, more intuitive kind of education gleaned from self-study, reading and youthful misadventures, including a memorable trip to East Berlin where she was mistaken for Angela Davis. Weems first moved to New York in 1971 "with a baby on my back and a cardboard suitcase," as she puts it, only to return quickly to San Francisco. It was too soon; she needed work and child care. Faith, who was born when Weems was 16, was raised mostly by Weems's aunt and uncle. Weems and Faith are very close (they vacation together in Martha's Vineyard), and a handful of Weems's pictures are nearly definitive artistic representations of motherhood — the emotional intensity, the moments of ambivalence — but she doesn't see the subject as central to her work. "I've never really been a real mother," she says. "I think my daughter and I are more friends. Of course, there's an element of mother and daughter, but because I didn't raise her, we have a very different kind of relationship."

Looking through the Black Photographers Annual, she saw her future in artists — mostly men — who looked like her, who were doing the kind of work she wanted to be doing, and in 1976, she tried New York again. “I came to New York to be with them, to see them, to talk to them, to interview them, to study with them, to become their friends, to see their exhibitions,” she remembers. While studying photography at the Studio Museum in Harlem, she made money as a Kelly Girl — a kind of temp worker — and later as an assistant to the photographer Anthony Barboza. She found a community in the Kamoinge Workshop, an organization of black photographers, and a friend and mentor in the photographer Dawoud Bey, who taught her at the Studio Museum, and who recalls her “humility and passion” as a student. Both were influenced by Roy DeCarava’s Harlem Renaissance-era images merging rigorous craft and “the lives of ordinary black folk,” Bey says. “We also both shared a sense that our very presence in the world, as human beings who were also black, demanded that we live lives and make work that somehow made a difference, that left the world transformed in some way, and that visualized a piece of that world that was uniquely ours and that participated in a larger cultural conversation inside of the medium of photography.”



In our 2018 Greats issue, *T* celebrates 50 people who have inspired us to forge a different world of our own. [See more.](#)

Alessandra Michale

Carrie Mae Weems

George A.R. Martin

Solange

Bruce Nauman

Viggo Mortensen

Literature, too, helped her imagine her way into the world — I notice books by George Saunders and Mario Vargas Llosa on her reading table. Hurston was an inspiration for “[Family Pictures and Stories](#)” (1981-82) — representing a black experience that was vital and real, fractious and deeply loving and humanly imperfect. But by the 1980s, fueled in part by Laura Mulvey’s landmark 1975 essay on gaze, “[Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema](#),” art was in a more reflexive mode, and Weems was exploring her own sense of herself in relation to a visual culture in which black women scarcely appeared at all. Unlike other female artists who have used their own bodies to play characters that challenge representations of women — think of Sherman’s cribbing of Hollywood

tropes in her early photographs, or Francesca Woodman's near-gothic self-portraits — Weems had to invent largely out of whole cloth, forcing her to confront more private feelings about femininity and relationships. "I think artists are always trying for, struggling for, clamoring for, unearthing, digging for what is most authentically true about their understanding of the world and how they fit in it," she says. "And the one thing that I did know was that the ways in which women had photographed themselves up until that moment for the most part really didn't interest me. I was also deeply concerned about the lack of representation of African-American women generally."

She was teaching at Hampshire College in Massachusetts in the late 1980s when her concern became impossible to ignore. "I always had an exercise in self-portraiture in my classes. Invariably, all of the female students were in some way covered. They were always slightly behind the thing, whether it was their hair or an object or a piece of clothing," she says, raising her hands in a gesture of coy femininity to her face. "They were always sort of hidden. They were never square. They were always doing something to obscure the clarity of themselves. Because women were always sort of interested in being objects, because we've been trained to be objects. We've been trained to be desirous in some sort of way, to present ourselves in that sort of way."

In "The Kitchen Table Series," Weems stares out at us in a way that insists we not simply look at her but really see her — a charged exchange, but also a beautifully leveling one: Here we are, human to human, across the table from one another. She plays a character: friend, parent, breadwinner, lover, a woman who resists classification, a woman of the world, of political conscience. These are roles that transcend race, but behind her, on her wall, we see a photograph of Malcolm X, his fist upraised, reminding us of an inescapable precedent of imagery, of a larger conversation that black women had been missing from.

As Weems tells it, the idea of making a series of tableaux vivants about a woman's life began with an evening with a man and a chance shot at her kitchen table, the expository triangle of light demarcating a kind of domestic stage. In 1989 and 1990, she worked on it obsessively. The narrative, which explores the life cycle of a romance, unfolds over nearly two dozen photographs and accompanying text panels. In one panel, she writes, "In and of itself, being alone again naturally wasn't a problem. But some time had passed. At 38 she was beginning to feel the fullness of her woman self, wanted once again to share it all with a man who could deal with the multitude of her being." In the final image, she's playing solitaire.



Weems's recent "Blue Notes" series (2014-15) features blurred and obscured images of black icons. Here, the dancer and choreographer Katherine Dunham.

Carrie Mae Weems, "Slow Fade to Black (Katherine Dunham)," 2009-2011. © Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

“‘Kitchen Table’ is about really unpacking these relationships, about unpacking monogamy, the difficulty of monogamy, the trumped-upness of monogamy, this sort of ideal that never seems to pan out,” Weems explains. “Life is pretty messy stuff. Can we use this space, this common space known around the world, to shine a light on what happens in a family, how it stays together and how it falls apart? What women have to be and what men have to be, because you’re always struggling for equilibrium. Somebody always has the upper hand. Every once in a while you get stasis. If you’re lucky.”

As if on cue, Weems's husband arrives at home and comes out to say hello. They first met in 1986, in the darkroom at the Visual Studies Workshop, where she had a residency. She had seen his name on an announcement for a black caucus in support of the Society for Photographic Education. "I was like, 'Hmm, Jeff Hoone, that's an interesting name for a brother. I don't know any brothers named Hoone.' So I wrote him this note, thinking that he was a black man: 'It's very nice to know that a brother is in charge over there, running this organization at Syracuse University.' " A mutual friend told her he would be stopping by the darkroom that day. "And Jeff walked in, and I was a little taken aback. I think I was probably embarrassed because of the letter that I had written. He walked in, and I looked at him, and I thought, 'Oh my God. This is going to be my husband.'"



Another photograph from "Blue Notes." Here, the artist Jean-Michel Basquiat.
Carrie Mae Weems, "Blue Notes (Basquiat): Who's Who or a Pair of Aces #1," 2014. © Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York



The singer Eartha Kitt.
Carrie Mae Weems, "Slow Fade to Black #1 (Eartha)," 2009-2010. © Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

FOR A LONG TIME, her father's womanizing made Weems wary of commitment. "I thought, 'Well, I really don't want to have any serious relationships with men.' I see what my father is doing, and I love him. So I was really pissed off at him for a while. It's like, 'Daddy, you really need to understand the impact you've had on my life. It ain't all been good.' At a certain point, I had so deconstructed my father that he almost became ash. That was pretty scary. So, I came to understand one day that I had to accept that he was a man and not a god." She was in her 40s when she decided to throw a sleepover party for the two of them, flying out to Oregon, taking him to the beach, shopping for matching pajamas, gambling, talking the entire time. "We just worked through some things.

You can't do this on the phone for five minutes. It's touch-base time, Dad." She ended up taking him to a recording studio to do an interview, in which he talked about his childhood in the South and his love for her mother. "It was just one of the great conversations of my life," she says. At his funeral in 2003, Weems played excerpts from the interview.

Burying her father also gave way to a new appreciation for her mother, "this dynamic, powerful woman." These days, #MeToo has her thinking once again about gender and power, about color and power and the ways, subtle and not, in which private relationships can reflect larger structural imbalances. She touches on the bravery of her friend, the author Tanya Selvaratnam, who recently went public with claims that her ex-partner, the former New York attorney general Eric Schneiderman, had abused her. She recounts her own experiences on the board of a major arts organization in which her suggestions were sidelined, even after other women in the room supported them, only to be put forward after a man voiced support. No one is immune to this kind of unconscious bias: Recently, a female assistant confronted Weems with the fact that a male assistant was being paid more. "Really, Carrie?" she says, recounting her disgust with herself.

We still live in a world in which the highest price ever paid for a work of art by a woman (in 2014) was Georgia O'Keeffe's "[Jimson Weed/White Flower No. 1](#)," for \$44.4 million, while dozens of male artists sell in the hundreds of millions. Of her own work, Weems tells me, "It is not embraced in the marketplace. And this is a sustained problem across the board, in the ways in which the work of women is valued and the work of men is valued. This is a real problem. And it's worse for women of color, for sure. And I make a fine living." Recently, her work was up for auction around the same time as the artist Kerry James Marshall's. "And it was fascinating. My work sold for \$67,000 and his sold for \$21 million. Kerry Marshall and I became artists together, we were friends together, we were lovers together, we participated in this field together. On the social value scale, we're equal. But not in the marketplace," she says. The numbers are stark and shocking, but Weems's real value is reflected in the vast scope of her influence, visible in the intimate photographs of Deana Lawson, the her influence, visible in the intimate photographs of Deana Lawson, the transhistorical portraits of Henry Taylor and the subdued longing of Kara Walker's silhouetted paintings.



A person's — and people's — worth has always been a through line in Weems's work. Dior top and skirt, (800) 929-3467. Cartier earrings, bracelet and ring.
Photograph by Mickalene Thomas. Styled by Shiona Turini

A person's — and people's — worth has always been a through line in Weems's work, which has become more explicitly concerned with contemporary violence, from the countless cases of police brutality targeting African-American men to violence within black communities. She is interested in the conditions that give rise to this violence, the corrupt power systems that perpetuate it — both subjects of her recent short films from 2017, [“People of a Darker Hue”](#) and [“Imagine if This Were You.”](#) The camera has long had a fraught relationship with the black body, but the way in which we as a culture are exposed to the atrocities of systemic violence has changed the stakes of this relationship: How, I ask Weems, does an artist operate within a visual culture in which videos of black men being murdered regularly go viral — on the one hand, forcing us to witness injustice for ourselves, on the other, presenting black death with a terrible, numbing casualness? Weems immediately brings up Philando Castile, who was shot and killed by a Minnesota police officer in 2016 during a routine traffic stop. His girlfriend, Diamond Reynolds, filmed the encounter from the passenger's seat. “I mean, I will never understand how she was able to do that,” Weems says. “I see a deer hit, and I’m completely — I can’t do anything but just hold my head. But this is crucial. I’m always thinking, ‘How do I show this? What do I show? And how do I contextualize it?’” A camera has become more than just a journalistic or artistic tool, but a kind of weapon itself — one that reveals the truth. Two years ago, she saw a trio of young black boys being stopped in the middle of the road by a white police officer. She pulled out her camera, and another car, driven by a white man, stopped to block her. “And then I move back, and he moves back. And then I move forward, and he moves forward. Just a citizen decided that, whatever this is, you’re not going to photograph it, I’m not going to allow it.”

ONE EVENING, as the sun begins to drop, Weems gives me a driving tour of Syracuse, a city that has sunk, like so many postindustrial towns, into poverty and violence. In 2002, Weems co-founded [Social Studies 101](#), which mentors local youth in creative professions. In 2011, after a 20-month-old black toddler named Rashaad was shot and killed in crossfire between two gangs, the same group collaborated on Operation Activate, an anti-violence campaign, putting up billboards and signs around the city and distributing matchbooks at bars and bodegas with slogans like “A man does not become a man by killing another man” and “Contrary to popular belief, your life does matter.” Recently, a community activist told her about a young man who’d kept the matchbook on his nightstand, totemlike, for two years. “There are days, especially when we’re editing, when we just leave the studio in a shambles, or we’re just too mentally exhausted to look at another image of someone being shot,” she says. “But as much as I’m engaged with it, with violence, I remain ever hopeful that change is possible and necessary, and that we will get there. I believe that strongly, and representing that matters to me: a sense of aspiration, a sense of good will, a sense of hope, a sense of this idea that one has the right, that we have the right to be as we are.”

Part of that involves mobilizing others. This year, out of the blue, Weems received a phone call from Jessica, the young girl — now a woman — who once modeled for Weems in “May Flowers.” Jessica now has a daughter of her own, and a partner, a woman who also has a child. They’re struggling to make a go of it. “I just decided, ‘You’re going to be the subject of a whole project. It’s just going to be you,’” says Weems. “What happens to a black woman who is her age, who drops out of school but has ambition. Who is trying to do the right thing, who is raising children, who’s decided that she’s also gay.” For the project, Jessica will also be self-documenting, telling her own story. Weems gestures as though she’s presenting a gift, passing it on matter-of-factly. “I said, ‘Here’s a camera.’”

At top: **Valentino** top, (212) 355-5811. **Tiffany & Co.** earrings, tiffany.com. **Van Cleef & Arpels** bracelets. **Manolo Blahnik** shoes.

Hair by Nikki Nelms. Makeup by Yumi Lee at Streeters. Stylist’s assistant: Mayer Campbell. Hair assistant: Krysten Oriol

Frieze

'Black People Work from the Position of "We"': An Interview with Carrie Mae Weems

BY RIANNA JADE PARKER

25 OCT 2019

The lauded photographer of Black American life discusses community, cooking and Aretha Franklin with Rianna Jade Parker



After three decades of image-making, Carrie Mae Weems reigns as one of the most highly regarded American artists. Since the 1980s, Weems has produced more than a dozen photographic series, overlapping text and audio-video work to construct delicate and deeply considered portraits of Black American life. Upon receiving

her first camera at 21, she began taking pictures, developing a slow and contemplative practice that led to such landmark works as her famed 'Kitchen Table Series' (1990) and a MacArthur Fellowship in 2013. In 2014, she became the first Black artist to have a retrospective at New York's Guggenheim Museum.

This year, Weems closed the Serpentine Galleries' annual Park Night series in London with *A Meditation on the History of Violence*. A collaboration with the artists and musicians Nona Hendryx and Carl Hancock Rux, the evening of readings and performances testified to Weems's continued dedication to social activism and her growing concern for the widespread state violence impacting Black American men and their families.



Carrie Mae Weems, 2019. Courtesy: Serpentine Galleries, London; photograph: ©David Broda

RJP I had a very specific question for you because I was thinking about how much money I spend on everything else but cooking. When you were making 'The Kitchen Table Series' did you get to sit and actually eat at the kitchen table?

CM (Laughs) I cook every day I'm home. I think I use it as a segue between my workday and my evening. It's something that pulls me out of the studio. I go upstairs and prepare some meal for me and my husband.

RJP What do you like to eat?

CM I eat all kinds of food, but my favourite food is really good food. I love oxtails. And since I can't make really good food every day because I'm too busy to do that level of shopping, I keep telling my husband, 'I think we're going to have to do something about this.' It's time for a change.

RJP What are you reading at the moment? I chose Saidiya Hartman's *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* (2019) as my summer read but, admittedly, I have not yet finished it. She has such an impressive and poetic ability to weave together very complex histories of Black women in 20th-century America with miniscule fragments of material overlooked in the archives.

CM I know, I'm so excited. She just won a MacArthur Fellowship. I think that's fabulous. I made a photograph of her long ago, so it's really lovely.

I'm currently reading a biography of Aretha Franklin, which is extraordinary. It's an official biography, because Aretha had very specific ideas about how she wanted to be represented. She was a very closed woman. The only thing that she ever gave up was in her song. That was where you discovered her – her meaning, her message, her life.

There's a section of the biography where the writer, I can't think of his name at the moment, goes to speak with her sisters and brothers. They say, 'We're really hoping that maybe she might open up to you, because she's never spoken to anyone about her life, including her sisters and her brothers.'



Carrie Mae Weems, *Untitled (Woman playing solitaire)* from 'The Kitchen Table Series', 1990. Courtesy: © the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

RJP Very interesting, she was exercising her right to opacity.

CM There's a theme in most people's life, there's a theme in my life, that we come back to over and over again. How do I talk about Blackness now, for instance? You talked about it in one way 15 years ago, you talked about it in another way ten years ago and you talked about it in another way last year: you come back to that theme over and over. There's something about that that I find extraordinary. That there is a single theme, or two, that run through your life, that you attempt to unpack.

RJP I find self-archiving important because I want to have some say in how people remember me.

CM It's an interesting thing isn't it? I save invitations. I'm just collecting it all, because I think some of it is fascinating. I'm interested in what people ask me to do and how they ask: what the requests are and how the request is made. I've been saving all this material and, occasionally, when I have a moment, I build it into a diary.



Carrie Mae Weems, *On the Verge*, 2016. Courtesy: © the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

RJP Amazing! We will appreciate that in days to come.

CM We'll see. The thing that I'm most interested in is actually what people are doing in the world. My connection with other artists and what those artists are doing and how they're doing it; how they're building it, how they're making it. I'm interested in what Theaster Gates is doing through his Dorchester Projects, what Mark Bradford might be doing through Art + Practice, what Rick Lowe might be doing with Project Row Houses.

These are deep practices that bring together hundreds of other artists. The ideas of generosity that are embedded in that kind of work are amazing and, in a lot of ways, unique. There are not a lot of Anglo artists who work in this way, because the position of 'I' has been so totalized there. Black people are working from the position of 'we'. We talk about community much more. We talk about who we are as a people emerging out of a situation.

We participate differently around the question of social and artistic responsibility and then social possibility. And so, mapping that is something I'm deeply interested in and that I've been doing for a very long time.

But let me ask you about your own curatorial practice (as part of the collective Thick/er Black Lines). I'm really happy to be in London – I haven't been here for maybe 10 or 12 years, or something. The last time I was here I actually made photographs at the British Museum and at the Tate. I flew in, I shot them and I left. The thing that I'm noticing on this trip is what seems like an unprecedented rise of young Black British artists, curators, historians, writers, critics, etc. But there is very little crossover between artists working here and artists working in the United States.



Carrie Mae Weems, *Slow Fade to Black*, 2019, installation at Metro Hall, Toronto. Courtesy: © the artist, CONTACT and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York; photograph: Toni Hafkenscheid

RJP This is very true!

CM They are a world apart. There's a tiny group that cross over, but not very many. John [Akomfrah], David Adjaye, Isaac Julien etc. But I can't really think of a single Black woman artist of their stature who is also operating in the United States. Why do you think that is?

RJP I attended the press conference for the opening of Kara Walker's (Tate Modern Turbine Hall commission), *Fons Americanus* (2019). The work is a grand reiteration of the Victoria Memorial in front of Buckingham Palace. The Tate director and curators described the work as a 'joyous' and 'liberatory' monument 'taking on Britannia'.

CM I've never seen Kara's work as joyous.



Carrie Mae Weems, *Heave, A Theatre Room*, 2018, installation at Cornell University, New York. Courtesy: © the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

RJP Right! But this is exemplary of how UK institutions are very particular about who they provide with highly visible platforms. Although race and gender are frequent themes, these are made a lot more palatable and issues of responsibility are relinquished when historical connections to the UK are shrouded. It's less grating to have someone pointing the finger from further away.

The most recognized Blackness – by which I mean the most cited, the most 'real' or 'authentic' Black voice – is American. Whilst home talent like Lubaina Himid has only become widely recognized since winning the

Turner Prize in 2017, at the age of 64, after a very active career of addressing the British Empire. Himid is easier to ignore than Walker is.

CM I understand what you're saying, the distant view. That's a very interesting take. Ultimately, it gets back down to a similar question, probably for both your generation and mine, which is: How do you build connections across the diaspora? Of course, I'm always interested in knowing who's who and what's what. Who is being lauded, who's being heralded as the next great? Who is fabulous and interesting and dynamic?

I'm also interested in people like you, who are working and asking the deep questions that allow us to advance and progress deeply in the significance of the art and therefore in the significance of our humanity? What does it mean to be Black? What does it mean to be a woman? What does it mean to be a creative thinker? It seems to me that those are some of the questions that you're also unpacking. And I'm very interested, ultimately, to know how you're going to answer them in the future. It's lovely to meet you.

Main image: Carrie Mae Weems, Heave, A Case Study: A Quiet Place?, 2019. University of Toronto. Courtesy: ©the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York; photograph: Dominic Chan.

RIANNA JADE PARKER

Rianna Jade Parker is a writer, critic and researcher based in London, UK. She is a founding member of interdisciplinary collective Thick/er Black Lines and is a contributing editor of *frieze*.

8 Artists on the Influence of Carrie Mae Weems

LaToya Ruby Frazier, Laurie Simmons and more reflect on how the photographer helped them see things differently.

By Zoë Lescaze

Oct. 17, 2018

The art of Carrie Mae Weems is as subtle and sublimely elegant as it is uncompromisingly political. One of the six cover subjects of T's 2018 Greats issue, she is among the most radically innovative artists working today. In a career spanning nearly five decades — working across photography, video, installations and public art campaigns — Weems has laid bare the historical biases that guide our own actions and shape our perceptions of others. Take, for example, her series “Museums” (2006–present), in which the artist stares down the pyramidal glass portal to the Louvre, the sinuous curves of the Guggenheim Bilbao, and the august colonnade of the British Museum, as though to challenge the institutions that have long determined what counts as culture and beauty. In this project, and in the dozens more that comprise her practice, Weems addresses questions of power, violence, exclusion, access and authority — especially as they pertain to race and gender — and dares her viewers to do the same. The pathos in all of her works, from intimate photographs of her family to series involving archival images of enslaved Africans, unites her subjects and viewers in a common humanity.

Here, eight contemporary artists reflect on Weems's art and activism. To some, she is a teacher or mentor, to others, a lifelong friend. To all of them, she is an icon.



Carrie Mae Weems, “Blue Black Boy,” 1997.

© Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

LaToya Ruby Frazier, born in Braddock, Pa., in 1982

Carrie Mae Weems, who was my teacher and mentor at Syracuse University, and whom I now consider a dear friend, continues to be a source of inspiration and significant influence. Carrie's practice teaches me to hold myself accountable at all times, to raise questions from my own perspective and, most of all, to leave the door open and keep a seat at the table for others when given an institutional opportunity. Her unwavering support for all artists and her courage to confront the inequities of our time never cease to amaze me. Take, for example, how she generously used her position as the first black woman to have a major retrospective at the Guggenheim in New York in 2014 to create "Carrie Mae Weems LIVE: Past Tense/Future Perfect," a gathering and platform for black artists, historians, critics and curators to speak truth to power.

I was first introduced to the work of Carrie Mae Weems nearly 20 years ago, in my undergrad photography class at Edinboro University in Pennsylvania. As the only black female student in the classroom, I was struggling to speak about the portraits I was making with my mother and grandmother. My teacher pulled me aside one day and handed me a catalog titled "Carrie Mae Weems" (1993). The cover of the catalog struck me deeply, it was the portrait "Blue Black Boy" (from the "Colored People" series of 1989-90), and in that moment, I knew I was participating in a collective dialogue about race, class, gender, innocence, humanity and power with a community of black artists scattered throughout the world — with Weems at the helm. From bodies of work like "Family Pictures and Stories" (1981-82) in which Weems challenges and disrupts the ideology of Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who blamed "the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society" on a weak family structure, to "Colored People," in which she confronts the oversimplification of skin tone, how the black community internalizes colorism and how America uses it against us, Weems has found compelling and expansive ways to challenge how we think about race and class in America.



Carrie Mae Weems, "Untitled," 2009-10.
© Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

I had the honor and privilege of studying with Weems in her course Social Studies 101 while pursuing my master's at Syracuse University in 2005, and it was this encounter with Weems that would have a profound impact on my understanding of what role artists play in our society. Carrie taught me that I was not simply a photographer making beautifully framed objects but rather an artist who articulates creative thoughts and ideologies that dismantle institutional and systemic racism, injustice, hierarchy, violence against black bodies, and crimes against humanity. In one semester, I would witness Carrie Mae Weems take to task academic politics at Syracuse in numerous lectures in various departments, in which she gracefully defended ideas and concepts in her work; I would participate in her interviewing and questioning the inclusivity and diversity within the administration, curatorial staff, board and membership at the Museum of Modern Art; and I would witness Carrie Mae Weems speak with residents at the Southwest Community Center on the South Side of Syracuse about their public school education system and how the community grieves for the violent loss of black and Latino men. These endeavors led to Carrie's Institute of Sound and Style for high school students, the art collective Social Studies 101 and her public art campaign to combat gun violence, Operation: Activate. These, to me, are monuments embedded in the social fabric of Syracuse, New York.

The artwork and art practice of Carrie Mae Weems impact American culture at large because she shows us how an artist and a citizen ought to be: selfless, caring, loving, empathetic and passionate about the work we do in the face of political corruption, bigotry, white supremacy and grave inequality. And for this, in my eyes, Carrie Mae Weems is a national treasure.



Carrie Mae Weems, "Untitled (Nude)," 1990, from "The Kitchen Table Series." © Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Laurie Simmons, born in Queens, N.Y., in 1949

I've only met Carrie Mae Weems a few times, but I remember intensely her energy and warmth. It felt like a huge hug (although I can't remember if we actually hugged).

I love her work and have often thought there were overlaps in our subject matter. Not to sound simplistic, but I would call our shared terrain "women in interior space." Carrie Mae's photographs and videos take women as their central subjects and delve into their interiors, drawing out experiences of friendship, motherhood, memory and race in order to make visible the near invisibility and lack of understanding and documentation of the domestic lives of women, in particular women of color.

Her black-and-white photo series of a bare kitchen table shows a round robin of characters appearing and disappearing, forcing us to contemplate what body language and facial expressions intimate about relationships. My favorite video, "Italian Dreams" (2006), includes a moment that shows the back of a woman sitting alone at a desk in a darkened room with only a high single window, through which we can see blue sky and falling snow. In that single image, Carrie Mae captures the loneliness that possibly every artist experiences as we face the task of trying to make something new.



**LOOKING INTO THE MIRROR, THE BLACK WOMAN ASKED,
"MIRROR, MIRROR ON THE WALL, WHO'S THE FINEST OF THEM ALL?"
THE MIRROR SAYS, "SNOW WHITE, YOU BLACK BITCH,
AND DON'T YOU FORGET IT!!!"**

Carrie Mae Weems, "Mirror Mirror," 1987-88.

© Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Lyle Ashton Harris, born in the Bronx, N.Y., in 1965

Carrie Mae Weems is, for me, the Ida B. Wells of the contemporary art scene. Her work is unflinching and has been for decades. She remains a vital force in the art world, but also in the world at large, thanks to her precise, critical language and her uncompromising ability to speak to power with finesse, brilliance and clarity.

I first saw Carrie's work in the "Black Male" exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1994, although I had been exposed to some of it as a master's student at CalArts, where she had also studied. It's important to recognize now, when identity politics are in vogue, that Carrie Mae was making this work 20 years ago, at a time when these issues were not so accepted by the art world. The "Kitchen Table Series," for instance, is so deeply elegant and affirmative of the "black familiar" decades before this subject matter was in museum shows. That series feels universal and highly culturally specific — grounded in black life — which is no easy accomplishment.

The piece that has really always stood out to me, though, is from the "Ain't Jokin" series (1987-88), the one with a woman looking into the mirror ("Mirror, Mirror"). It's a work whose sting resonates today as much as it did 25 years ago, when it was made. And it's funny because it's formally not the most elegant of her works, but its succinct, matter-of-fact language — the way the reflection in the mirror cuts through so many of the excesses of beauty and fashion and culture, through notions of beauty that are the foundation of Western art — registers deeply.

Carrie's influence is wide, and not just in terms of the work being made by young artists who admire her. Her event "Carrie Mae Weems LIVE" at the Guggenheim was the most important cultural conference of that caliber since the Black Popular Culture Conference at the Dia Center for the Arts in 1991. This conference was the trigger for me to investigate my own photographic archive of Ektachrome images, which documented many of our first encounters, and resulted in the book "Today I Shall Judge Nothing That Occurs." Her presence and work pushes other artists to reflect on ourselves and interrogate our histories.

She doesn't make concessions and that is part of what makes her a legend. She has never been seduced by fame or prizes or museum exposure. In fact, she occupies those financial and cultural spaces and opens them up to others. Her retrospective at the Guggenheim in 2014 — that could have very easily just been a midcareer exhibition of Carrie Mae Weems. It's a very different thing to use that opportunity to crack open the edifice of whiteness, if you will, and bring necessary voices into that space.



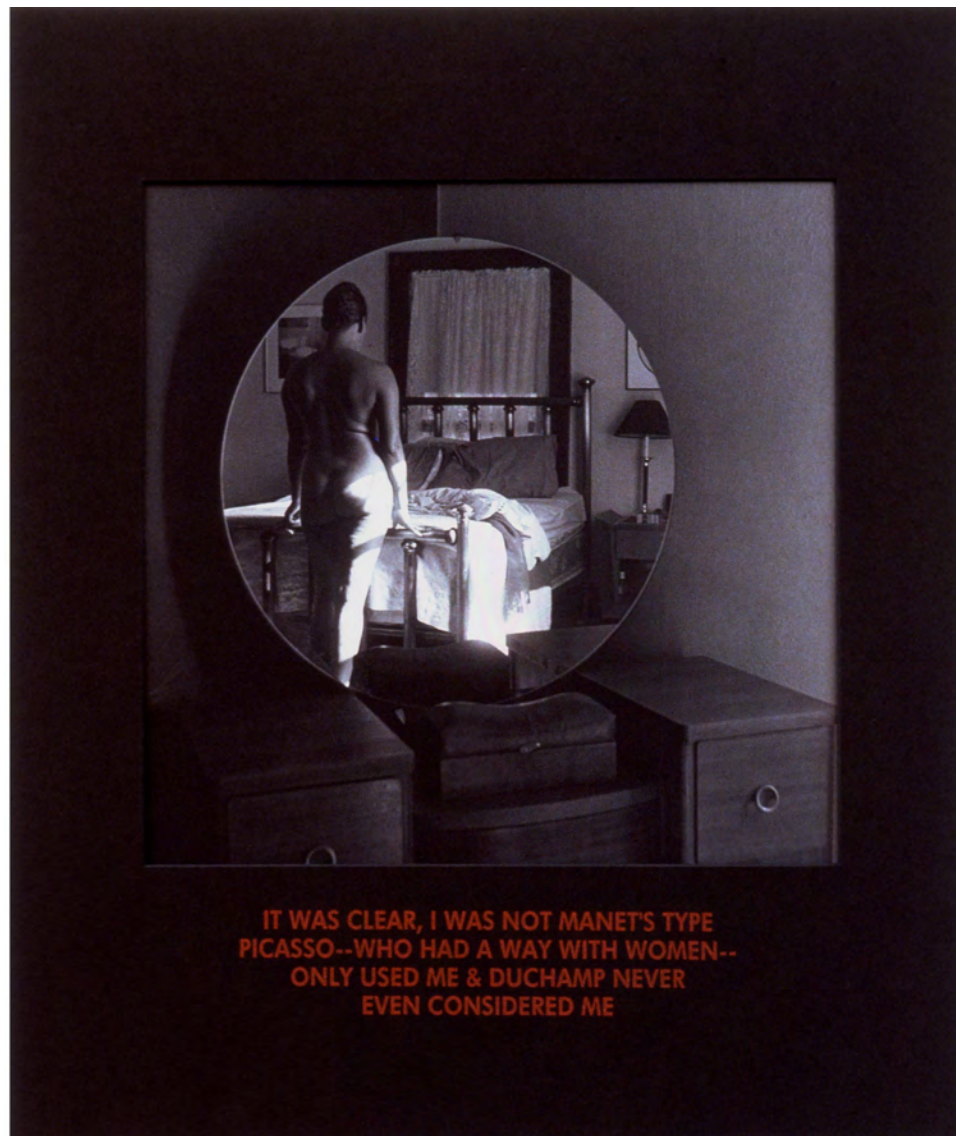
Carrie Mae Weems, "Untitled (Woman Brushing Hair)," 1990, from "The Kitchen Table Series." © Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Kalup Linzy, born in Clermont, Fla., in 1977

My first encounter with the work of Carrie Mae Weems was in 2002, when I saw her iconic “Kitchen Table Series” from 1990 in an exhibition titled “The Field’s Edge: Africa, Diaspora, Lens” at the University of South Florida Contemporary Art Museum in Tampa. During that time, I was completing my M.F.A., which included my 2003 thesis video “Conversations Wit De Churen II: All My Churen,” in which I play all the members of a black Southern family. As I looked at her photographs, I remember reflecting on my personal experiences with my own family, and on how many important conversations happened around the kitchen table, which was the central location in our home.

Being an artist of color, I knew there would be challenges and potentially pushback to sharing these kinds of stories in a museum context. Seeing Weems present staged domestic moments in a museum had political and cultural implications — I felt I, too, could present my work here — even as certain other works by Weems confirmed there would be obstacles. Photographs from her “Ain’t Jokin” series come to mind. One picture is captioned: “Looking into the mirror, the black woman asked: ‘Mirror, mirror on the wall, who’s the finest of them all?’ The mirror says: ‘Snow White, you black bitch, and don’t you forget it!!!’”

Her work still resonates with me and continues to be relevant. Although I hadn’t met Weems until recently, I have always felt close to her through her work. I was ecstatic when she told me she was also a fan of mine!



A panel from Carrie Mae Weems's "Not Manet's Type" (1997). © Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Shirin Neshat, born in Qazvin, Iran, in 1957

Carrie Mae Weems is one of the most influential artists of our time and certainly one of the most inspiring artists on my list. The evolution of Carrie's work, from photography to film to performance art, and her longstanding and unapologetic conviction in targeting issues of race, political injustice and feminism, have resulted in a remarkable career.

Carrie is a pioneer, an artist who stayed the course at a time when the art world was oblivious to artists of color, particularly if their art was politically charged, and she helped pave the way for a new generation of African-American artists who are flourishing today.

What I'm most impressed by is how Carrie has continued to reinvent herself and her relationship to her audience. With the use of her powerful voice and position as an artist, she has turned into a cultural activist, bringing various communities together on a grass roots level to engage in discourse about the role of art and artists today. Her call for dialogue seems particularly timely in the current political climate in America.

It's my opinion that artists like Carrie are rare in how they mobilize and inspire other artists who may have fallen into a state of despair, questioning the place of art in a moment in history when we are faced with growing threats of fascism, and an art world that is primarily concerned with market value. Artists like Carrie Mae Weems elevate the role of artists within the cultural and political landscape, and reinforce the concept of art as a catalyst for hope and change to come.



Carrie Mae Weems, "Welcome Home," 1978-84.

© Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Catherine Opie, born in Sandusky, Ohio, in 1961

As a woman artist, there has never been a moment in my life that I haven't followed the artistic brilliance of Carrie Mae Weems. The word "Bravery" instantly comes to mind when describing her work: It is brave to be bold and to call out the wrong within the world. Critically important, her photographs speak to the rawness of racism in American culture. I thank Carrie Mae Weems for making us all better artists through her dedication and ever-questioning eye.



Carrie Mae Weems, "Untitled (Man reading newspaper)," 1990, from "The Kitchen Table Series." © Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Xaviera Simmons, born in New York, N.Y., in 1977

My first recollections of Carrie's work are of viewing parts of "The Kitchen Table Series" in 1994, at Thelma Golden's critical "Black Male" exhibition at the Whitney. I can vividly remember the wave of excitement I felt as a young person laying eyes on those images, which were like nothing I had seen in my high school art history courses. All of the emotions embedded in that rich, mysterious project formed questions in my mind: Who was this artist, what were her motivations for picturing these characters and how could each individual photograph contain so much complexity? From that moment, I have followed Carrie's work and watched it continuously mature, awed by her formal engagement with photography and her ability, as an artist, to be an image maker, performer, director, producer and actor.

Carrie Mae Weems is breathtaking, a brilliant intellectual whose presence is viscerally felt. As a student at Bard College, where I studied photography, I came to appreciate the nuance with which she shapes image, narrative and history in her work. To experience the many facets of her practice — its formal, textural, narrative, critical, artistic and social historical layers — is to witness a stunning, intensely critical mind. Her work has had an enormous impact on my understanding of the formal qualities of photography, of art historical concerns and of the relationship between art historical and present-day practices. Carrie's work lays bare the responsibility of the artist to document, portray, construct and innovate through images.

Carrie Mae is a committed champion of photography and its ability to pierce the sociopolitical landscape. Her work holds the key to visually linking many aspects of our collective American history, especially those parts that can slip beneath the wave of cultural amnesia. The artistic exploration of history and its bearing on the present requires the skilled hands of a master. Carrie is one of those masters.



A billboard by Carrie Mae Weems for Hank Willis Thomas's For Freedoms project, entitled "With Democracy in the Balance There is Only One Choice," Cleveland, Ohio, 2016. © Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Hank Willis Thomas, born in Plainfield, N.J., in 1976

I've known Carrie Mae Weems my entire life. She's not only a peer, but has been one of my mother's best friends for over 30 years. My mother is a curator, and she included Carrie Mae's work in exhibitions all over the country and abroad, and they collaborated on certain works together, so she and I go way back. I was always in awe of her — Carrie Mae is a person that you don't forget. She's incredibly charismatic and thoughtful and on point about so many things — she's an inspiration, a fabulous person making strong, powerful and beautiful statements.

Carrie Mae is one of the first artists I knew to use images and text, and to use archival materials in the making of her work, and that shaped my vision when I chose to become an artist. My world was formed by her series "Not Manet's Type" (1997), in which she challenges the aesthetics of beauty in Western art. "The Kitchen Table Series" has also always stuck with me; it's both intimate and an enigma. Her use of language and sense of justice is extraordinary. We recently did a billboard together, for instance, for my project For Freedoms, which read, "With democracy in the balance there's only one choice." She made a print for People for the American Way, an advocacy organization that defends constitutional values under attack, in 1996, that says, "Tell me, I beseech you, when I casted my vote to you, did I cast it to the wind?" There's this amazing poetry to her work, both visually and textually, that I think keeps her in a league of her own.

Her career has been a marathon. Her work was not honored for a long time in the way that many of her peers were, but she just kept at it. Now, I think her influence is everywhere, from the conference she staged at the Guggenheim in 2014, to the project she just did at the Park Avenue Armory, to projects she's done at the Kennedy Center. She's tireless and relentless, and you can't be in her orbit without being in some way shaped by her. I think people miss how much a mentor she has been to so many artists like Deana Lawson, LaToya Ruby Frazier, myself and many others. I'm not sure if I've succeeded, but I'm trying my best to follow in her footsteps.

TRUE COLORS

Former model and *Vogue* columnist
Audrey Smaltz reflects on how a
once-marginalized community is redefining
the beauty industry.

I was born in 1937, bred, toast-
ed, buttered, jellied, jammed,
and honeyed in Harlem. Now,
when people introduce me and
they try to say that, they get it
all mixed up. But that's who I
am. I still put my foundation on
with my fingers and I blend, like
I was taught in charm school
when I was sixteen, even though
everybody's using a sponge now and watching tutorials.

Back then, there was really only one woman making cos-
metics for black skin. She was based in Detroit, and her name
was Carmen Murphy. We would press and curl our hair with
a hot comb and an iron so it was straight, like a white girl's,
and we would buy Carmen Murphy's foundations direct
from one of the instructors at the Ophelia DeVore School
of Charm. If we couldn't get it, we would go downtown to
buy Max Factor from a shop in the Theater District where
the makeup artists used to buy pigments for the actors on
Broadway. And we would just keep mixing one, two, or three
different shades until we got the color we wanted. You can
imagine my surprise when I went to Sephora the other day
for my granddaughter, who is eighteen, and every cosmetics
company seemed to have a range of shades from black to
black-brown to "maple"—a far cry from what we had when
I started modeling. You had to take care of yourself because
the options were so limited.

Most magazines didn't start using black models until
the sixties, so I mostly worked for companies such as Dixie
Peach and Camel cigarettes. I got a job as a model in the
loungewear department at Bloomingdale's and became an
assistant buyer before moving to

CONTINUED ON PAGE 174

EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED

For decades, women of color have called for makeup
that reflects the full spectrum of skin tones. With a new generation
of inclusive products and brand founders, the market is
finally catching up. *Untitled (Putting on make up)*, by Carrie Mae
Weems, from the artist's Kitchen Table Series, 1990–1999.



CARRIE MAE WEEMS, © CARRIE MAE WEEMS, *UNTITLED (PUTTING ON MAKE UP)*, 1990–1999.
GELATIN SILVER PRINT. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK.

TIME

ENTERTAINMENT • CULTURE

The Story Behind TIME's Spike Lee Cover



Photograph by Carrie Mae Weems for TIME

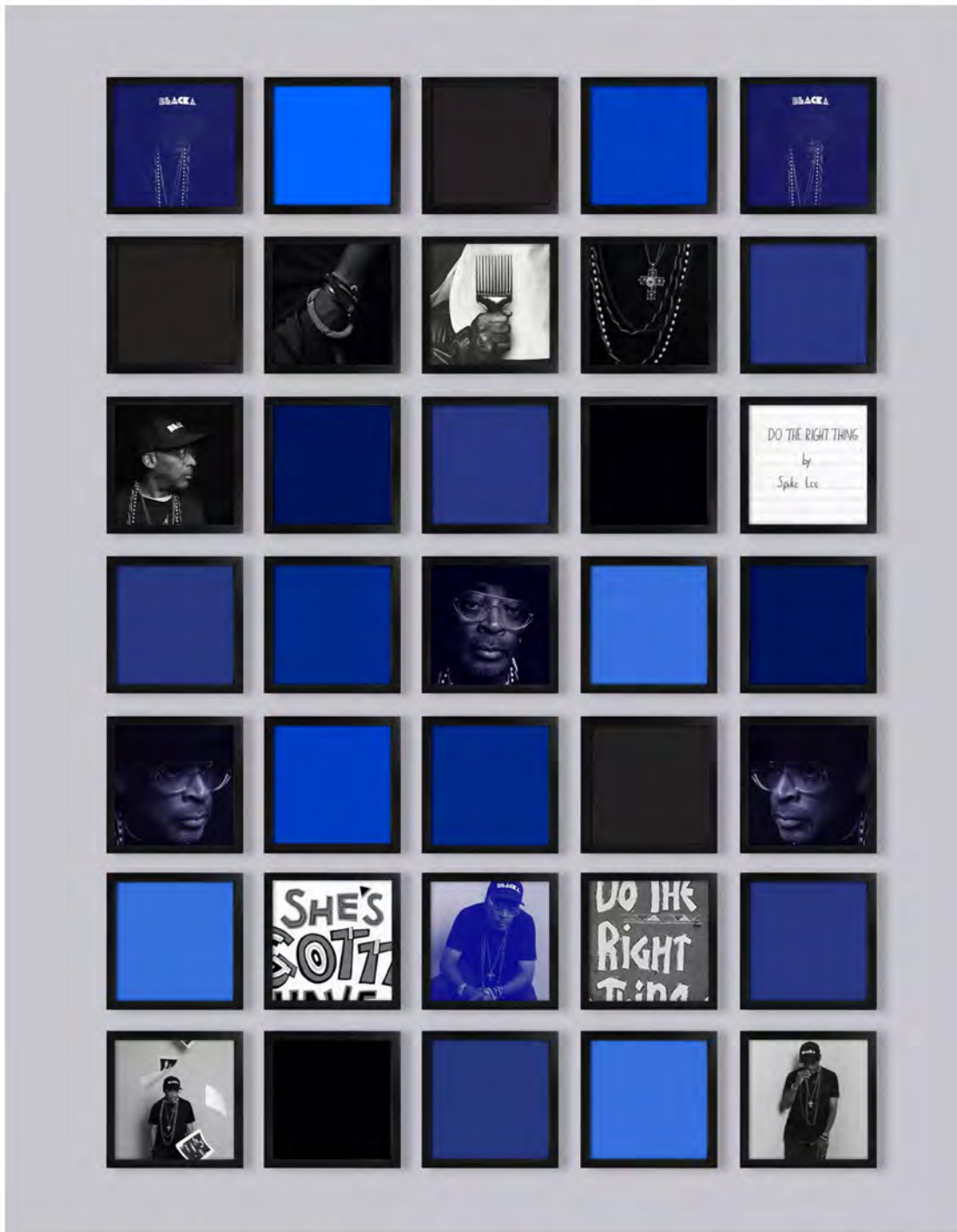
By **OLIVIA B. WAXMAN** August 9, 2018

For the **Aug. 20 cover**, TIME asked artist Carrie Mae Weems to photograph director Spike Lee, whose latest film *BlacKkKlansman* — based on the true story of a black detective who infiltrated the Ku Klux Klan in the 1970s — hits theaters Friday.

Both are artists who aim to, through their work, shine a light on people who have been overlooked in American history.

The photoshoot is not the first time that Weems, a 2013 MacArthur “Genius” grant winner and Lee, the Oscar-nominated director, have crossed paths. Prints from her iconic *Kitchen Table series* appear in a scene from *She’s Gotta Have It*, his 2017 *Netflix* adaptation of his 1986 feature film. A photo on his Instagram feed recently *hinted* that the two are collaborating for the show’s second season.





Artist Weems created a grid to celebrate Lee's 30-year career as a filmmaker, beginning with breakouts *She's Gotta Have It* (1986), *School Daze* (1988) and *Do the Right Thing* (1989). He has always tackled issues of race and identity in culture: "One of the constant criticisms for *Do the Right Thing* was that Spike would not provide the answers for racism," Lee says. Carrie Mae Weems for TIME

Perhaps her best-known work, *Kitchen Table* (1990) is a series of photographic vignettes of Weems playing a woman engaged in various activities at the kitchen table.

“It’s a mock biography of one woman’s journey as she contemplates and negotiates what it means to be a contemporary woman who wants something different for herself,” Weems **once described** the work. “Even though it’s anchored around a black woman, my hope was always that it would be understood as a condition of women.”

It came out right as the national conversation about a woman’s place at the table — in the family, in the workplace — hit a boiling point in the early ’90s. It would be amplified by other milestones such as the release of *Thelma & Louise* and law professor **Anita Hill** testifying that she had been sexually harassed by Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas — both in 1991.

Like Lee, Weems often uses art as a way to reflect on history. As photo historian Deborah Willis **described her approach** to TIME in 2012, she “confronts historical depictions and restages them with ‘what if...’ questions,” citing *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*, her red-tinted re-imagination of daguerrotypes of slaves by J.T. Zealy, commissioned by a Swiss naturalist Louis Agassiz to prove the racial inferiority of blacks to whites.

In fact, the blue-tinted grid of Spike Lee’s greatest hits in the latest issue is inspired by her 2009-2010 *Untitled (Colored People Grid)*, pictures of black adolescents in different color tones. That piece, which challenges viewers to keep an open mind about color, was on display at the **Guggenheim Museum in New York City**, where Weems was the first African-American woman to have a retrospective show in 2014.

Such themes are all part of the self-described **“cultural diplomacy”** that she is pursuing. As she summed up her **approach** to making art in 2016, an artist’s “obligation” is to “make what you want to see in the world.”

The Boston Globe

At BC, Carrie Mae Weems throws open windows inside history

By Cate McQuaid

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT OCTOBER 04, 2018



IMAGE COURTESY OF THE MCMULLEN MUSEUM OF ART

An image from the series “From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried” from “Carrie Mae Weems: Strategies of Engagement.”

In the midst of the conflict over Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh, I went to see “Carrie Mae Weems: Strategies of Engagement.”

It was after Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell had sworn to “plow right through” and referred to Rachel Mitchell, the prosecutor Republican judiciary committee members hired to hide behind, as a “female assistant,” but before the hearing itself. I was already rattled.

Weems is an artist for this moment. She examines how society has structured privilege: how we keep the status quo in place using stories, images, and ideas so embedded in our discourse we barely see them. She principally addresses race, but often touches on gender, gently dissecting the ways the dominant culture shapes and quashes people of color and women.

Her open-hearted and penetrating exhibition, at McMullen Museum of Art at Boston College through Dec. 13, demonstrates the artist's cunning use of formats, from photo to video to installation, to expose the fusty, encrusted belief systems that maintain hierarchies.

It was impossible to step into the museum and leave the news behind. Seeing Weems's art is no tonic. We are in an ongoing state of urgency with regard to these issues. But her clear-eyed look at them is exactly what we need. She waves a magnifying glass, not a cudgel, calling out to all of us — look! Look more closely, and look again.

History is easy to flatten. In her examination of the past, Weems reveals something nuanced and hard to fix into one simple shape — a shifting, shadowy history ripe with violence, longing, hope, and humility.

The show opens with the photo series “Constructing History: A Requiem to Mark the Moment.” Weems worked with students at Savannah College of Art and Design to reenact familiar scenes surrounding assassinations. John and Jackie Kennedy in their convertible in Dallas; a kind of group pieta in “The Assassination of Medgar, Martin, Malcolm.”

Photographs craft history. To dismantle their iconography, Weems staged them on a classroom set, with two windows and a clock on the wall, lighting and camera riggings evident in each shot. In order to look critically, she builds distance into archetypal images. A little space goes a long way.

Her acclaimed series “From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried,” examines 19th- and early-20th-century photographs of black people. Photos like some of these were used to develop racist classification systems. Weems tints them blood red and places them under glass, upon which she etches text; its shadow can read like a brand on the skin of the subjects.

Two blue ones frame the rest, depicting a regal Mangbetu woman, the “I” of the title, witnessing a scope of African-American humanity that includes the squelched, the striving, and the courageous: A bare-chested old man emblazoned with “A NEGROID TYPE,” Josephine Baker — who performed a “danse sauvage” in a banana skirt at the Folies Bergeres — reading “YOU BECAME AN ACCOMPLICE.”

Weems doesn't rewrite history. She goes inside it and throws open windows to air it out. The early photographs are straightforward subversions. “Ain't Jokin,” a series from the late 1980s, features deadpan illustrations of racist jokes, stereotypes, and cultural erasure.

In more recent, lushly layered works, the artist herself, who came up in the [Pictures Generation](#) alongside Cindy Sherman, slips into roles. As muse and trickster, she shrewdly deepens her exploration into the psychology of oppression. White society imprinted its shadow material on blacks. Fear, desire, and creativity dwell in that psychic muck.

In the sobering, penumbral video installation “Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me: A Story in 5 Parts,” Weems uses a 19th-century technology, projecting imagery upward onto a slanted screen to appear three-dimensional and ghostly

between scarlet curtains. Characters include a dauntless boxer, a soft-shoe dancer, Abraham Lincoln reciting the Gettysburg Address, and artist and activist Lonnie Graham declaring, “I’ve given up hope on making serious change.”

Weems appears, attempting to squeeze herself into a tiny Playboy Bunny outfit. Oh, how we labor to fit the needs of the powerful! Then she’s a sinister trickster in a top hat and tails, hissing, “I’m gonna shred you. I’m gonna kill you. I’m gonna brand you.” The story of “Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me” is slippery; like “From Here I Saw What Happened,” it’s threaded with fury, terror, desolation, and hope.

The recent video “People of a Darker Hue” returns us to the classroom of “Constructed Histories” — a way station for history; a place to try to rewrite it. Black men run on a treadmill there, never getting anywhere, in scenes intercut with videos of the beating of Rodney King and the deaths of Eric Garner, Philando Castile, and other blacks at the hands of police.

“The man was killed,” Weems intones. She invokes the raw grief and the power dynamics of “Antigone”: “The body laid in the open, uncovered and exposed.”

“For reasons unknown,” she continues, “I rejected my own knowledge and I deceived myself by refusing to believe that this was possible.”

We do that all the time. To stave off cruelty and violence with hope, to believe in change, to believe that those silenced may now speak. That it will matter.

Maybe the silenced will be heard, and the invisible will be seen. All we can really do, as Weems does again and again with breadth and poetry, is shine a light.

CARRIE MAE WEEMS: STRATEGIES OF ENGAGEMENT

At McMullen Museum of Art, Boston College, 2101 Commonwealth Ave., through Dec. 13. 617-552-8587, www.bc.edu/mcmullenmuseum

Cate McQuaid can be reached at catemcquaid@gmail.com. Follow her on Twitter [@cmcq](https://twitter.com/cmcq).

Carrie Mae Weems challenges systematic violence against black men in "The Usual Suspects" at the LSU Museum of Art

BY ROBIN MILLER | ROMILLER@THEADVOCATE.COM MAY 5, 2018 - 6:30 PM (1)



Carrie Mae Weems' 'All The Boys' 2016 series, part of the LSU Museum of Art exhibit, was a response to the killings of young African American men by authorities.

PROVIDED PHOTO BY THE LSU MUSEUM OF ART

The usual suspects in Carrie Mae Weems' photographs are black men, who, she says, are subjected to systematic violence.

And that violence, she says, is wielded through the power of authority.

It's the theme of her exhibit, "Carrie Mae Weems: The Usual Suspects," running through Oct. 18 at the LSU Museum of Art.

The exhibit includes photographs and video from her "All the Boys" and "The Usual Suspects" series, along with photographs from other series sprinkled among works in the museum's permanent collection exhibit, "Art in Louisiana: Views into the Collection."

But it's the gallery solely dedicated to Weems where her message has the most impact, questioning sustained violence against black men.

She spoke candidly in her gallery talk to open the show.

"The work, the work that's in this room, the work that's dealing with this sustained level of violence, the sustained level of threat to the body, to the black body, to black men, to black women, to people of color, to women — the sustained history has been sustained for a long time," she said.

"And so, the images that are on these walls are images that we all know one way or another," she said. "We will all grapple with them one way or another. You've seen them on the news one way or another. And we've decided to look one way or another or we've decided not to look one way or another."

Weems is considered one of the country's most influential contemporary artists. She has investigated family relationships, cultural identity, sexism, class, political systems and the consequences of power through a complex body of art employing photographs, text, fabric, audio, digital images, installation and video.

She's probably best known for her 1990 "Kitchen Table" series of photos exploring women's relationships to each other and themselves. That series is showing through May 18 at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

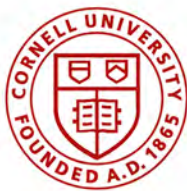
Earlier this year, Weems spoke at LSU, where she is the 2017-18 Nadine Carter Russell Chair in the LSU College of Art and Design, which is co-hosting the exhibit.

At LSU, she talked about "the systematic, brutal authority of the state that is systematically directed against black bodies and black men." And she questioned the criminal stereotypes of those men.

One of them, Lequan McDonald, was shot by a Chicago police officer on Oct. 14, 2014. Weems has blown up five frames from surveillance video of the shooting, which is the first thing seen by visitors in the gallery.

Three officers eventually were charged in McDonald's shooting, and Weems commemorated his death in her talk, along with that of Alton Sterling, who died on July 5, 2016, in a police confrontation in Baton Rouge.

"The material and the ideas have been there," Weems says. "And so I've made this work, and it's been complicated to make the work. ... It's painful to have to deal with this work constantly, but it's also painful to deal with this life constantly. And the threat constantly. And the challenge constantly."



CORNELL CHRONICLE



Nija Whitson, left, will perform "Meditation on Tongues" in September as a CCA Biennial guest artist.

Scott Shaw/Provided

2018 Biennial on 'Duration' to feature major artists

By Daniel Aloï | May 17, 2018

Internationally known artists Carrie Mae Weems and Xu Bing will join participants from across the university this fall in the Cornell Council for the Arts (CCA) 2018 Biennial.

With the theme "[Duration: Passage, Persistence, Survival](#)," the Biennial opens Sept. 27-29 on campus with a conference, public lectures by Weems and Xu, and participating faculty members and students joining artist panels and leading gallery and installation site tours.

Most Biennial artwork and performances, from five invited artists and at least 11 Cornell collaborative projects, will be presented from mid-September through Dec. 1, with others "staggered throughout the semester," said CCA Director Timothy Murray, the Biennial curator. Additional projects and programming will be presented in the spring, he said.



Carrie Mae Weems

A still from Carrie Weems' 2012 video installation "Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me."

Weems is the featured Biennial artist. Her multimedia installation on the history and duration of violence opens Sept. 20 in a temporary structure on the terrace of Olin Library, facing the Arts Quad.



Carrie Mae Weems

“Carrie Mae Weems is one of the most prestigious American artists there is; she will create new work for the Biennial,” Murray said. “What’s interesting is how receptive a vast number of Cornell participants and departments were to this theme. It seemed to speak to them. We have partnerships across the campus, which is very exciting for the Biennial and enhances the CCA’s mission.”

Xu is participating in conjunction with his [A.D. White Professor-at-Large](#) appointment. A three-channel projection of his animated film “The Character of Characters,” Aug. 11-Dec. 23 at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, will be installed alongside historic scrolls from the museum’s Asia collections.

The Biennial creates an environment for intersecting discourses, according to Murray.

“One is around persistence and survival, vis-a-vis contemporary issues of identity, immigration, migration and critical racial studies. Another is the crisis of sustainability, both cultural and ecological,” he said. “Passage and duration are fundamental structural elements of artistic representation and performance, so it worked out really well.”

W

The Art Issue

Mary J. Blige
by Carrie Mae Weems



ANOINTED

plus
Cindy Sherman
Anne Imhof
Deana Lawson
Wolfgang Tillmans
Nobuyoshi Araki

Crowning Glory

The artist Carrie Mae Weems pays homage to the R&B legend and *Mudbound* star Mary J. Blige.

Long before female empowerment became a nationwide rallying cry, the artist Carrie Mae Weems and the singer-songwriter Mary J. Blige had their work cut out for them. Weems, who is now 64, first picked up a camera at the age of 18 and over the decades has recast the ways in which black women have been portrayed in images. Early on she realized that she couldn't count on others to make the pictures she wanted to see. In her seminal work *The Kitchen Table Series* (1990), she ruminates on race, class, and gender in an unfolding domestic story in which she appears as the protagonist. Shot in black and white, with alternating images and panels of text, the series shows the artist at her kitchen table, alone and with others, seated under a hanging lamp, playing cards, chatting with female friends, and hugging a male partner.

Since that career-defining project, Weems, who lives in Syracuse, New York, has been honored with a MacArthur Foundation "genius grant," a medal of arts from the U.S. State Department, and numerous museum solo shows, including a retrospective in 2014 at New York's Guggenheim—the museum's first-ever survey of an African-American female artist. More recently, in her 2016 series *Scenes & Take*, she photographed herself standing on the empty stage sets of such TV shows as *Empire* and *Scandal*, contemplating the cultural climate that gives rise to commanding black heroines onscreen.

In Mary J. Blige, the queen of hip-hop soul, best known for her raw, openly autobiographical songs of empowerment, Weems found a towering ally. Like Weems, the Bronx-born Blige, 46, is a storyteller, and also began her career at 18, when she became the youngest female recording artist to sign with Uptown Records. Her Puff Daddy-produced 1992 debut, *What's the 411?*, went multiplatinum, as did many of the hits that followed; so far she's won nine Grammys. Now she is generating Oscar buzz for her breakout performance in director Dee Rees's critically acclaimed *Mudbound*, about two families in the Mississippi Delta during and after World War II, divided by the racism of their Klan-addled community. Blige is quietly devastating as the wife of a sharecropper and matriarch of a struggling brood; while shooting the film, which debuted November 17 on Netflix, Blige was dealing with the dissolution of her own marriage. In 2016 she filed for divorce from her husband of 12 years and manager, and emerged with her 13th studio album, *Strength of a Woman*, which serves as something of an anthem for her life. *The New York Times* called it "her most affecting and wounded album in several years."

Both Weems and Blige command the spaces they occupy: Weems with her camera and incantatory

style of speech, Blige with her presence and voice. For this project for W's Art Issue, the two teamed up in a landmark 1920s-era bank building in Brooklyn, making pictures that reference Weems's *The Kitchen Table Series* and 2010 *Slow Fade to Black* series, and Blige's continuing reign. DIANE SOLWAY

CARRIE MAE WEEMS: Long before I picked up a camera I was deeply concerned with the ways in which African-Americans were depicted, and, for the most part, I didn't like what I saw. So one way of dealing with it was to step in and rethink how black women, more specifically, need to be represented. That's been the guidepost; I'm always on that track. And today I was just looking at another woman, somebody I've admired, whose music has been a backdrop to my life. Mary, I see you as an extraordinarily beautiful woman who needs to be defined, described, articulated in an authentic way that celebrates the complexity and depths of your beauty and your internal self. From the moment you walked in, I wanted to greet you personally and invite you into a space of welcome with the understanding that I see me and you.

MARY J. BLIGE: Thank you. Same here. A lot of women don't do that. I don't see women getting along a lot. In my own circle, I see it because that's what we do. We want to love on each other, and we want to build each other up, and we want to let each other know what you said just now: We see each other, and we see each other in each other. So I felt protected today, and I felt you cared, which is not always the case in most photo shoots—they just want the pictures. I thought, Okay, I'm going to have to do exactly what she did in order to make this hot. [Both laugh.]

WEEMS: Those last photographs! Child! I mean, that puppy was smokin'. It felt like the whole day we were ascending. I'm not in the commercial world—I spend 99 percent of my time in my studio by myself—so we were building each thing like interlocking circles so we could go to the next plane. I could feel it coming into a certain kind of flow, and then it became easy. And I thought, Let's just have fun. There's a wonderful saying: "Within seriousness there's very little room for play, but within play there's tremendous room for seriousness."

BLIGE: I didn't realize how vain I was until I started working on *Mudbound*. Once I saw how my character, Florence, lived [in a shack on a farm in Mississippi], I thought, Wow, I'm really a vain person. When I went to the movie set to do the first day of fittings, I was Mary J. Blige: I had just done a tour and a show, so I was all, you know, I had wigs and weaves and all sorts of things going on, and Dee Rees was like, "No! We want to see you. You can't have a perm, you're going to have minimal,

minimal makeup." And I was like, "What about lashes?" And she said no, and I was like, "Really? Florence doesn't have lashes?" That part was a lot! A lot! But once I tore away and sunk into the character, Florence actually gave Mary—me, the so-vain person—a little more confidence so that Mary didn't feel like she needed to depend on all of that. I cut my hair really short. Florence really liberated me. Just committing to and trusting that character kind of helped to save my life. I could also relate to her because she reminded me of my aunts and my grandmother who lived in the South. My mom used to send us to Savannah every summer. My grandmother had her own garden, chickens, cows; so I've seen chickens slaughtered, I've been on a farm.

WEEMS: You have this film, this history in music. Where do you see yourself going, and what do you want now?

BLIGE: I want, at some point, to not have to work so hard. I want peace of mind and acceptance of self, totally. I know that's an ongoing process, so every single day I'm working on that, and it's been hard ever since this challenge I'm having with this divorce. It was such a terrible thing. It made me see myself as "I have to be better than this": I was never good enough; I was never pretty enough, smart enough. And there was someone chosen over me. It was like, I can't stay, but it really let me see, Mary, you are better than that. You have to continue to grow.

WEEMS: We've all been through stuff. And the pain is so deep, but the place it takes you—right? The level of self-reflection—it's all in the process. Working through that process brings you to a deeper and more profound understanding of who you are and your meaning to yourself.

BLIGE: Exactly.

WEEMS: I'm older than you. I work hard every day, and I'm always trying to figure out how not to. But there's something that's a part of my DNA that's about this constant, persistent level of examination. I'm always thinking about the craft, the art, about how to step in, not for the world, but for myself; these are the issues that concern me, and I can't expect anybody else to deliver on my promise. Right? We were talking about this earlier. No matter what, you're going to come home by yourself.

BLIGE: That's done right now. I'm by myself.

WEEMS: Mary, I was telling you earlier about this beautiful image I have of [singer] Dinah Washington, who, too, is crowned. The act of crowning is about giving it up, it's the act of recognition. For this project, I knew that I had to participate in crowning you as a gift and an homage. You are in it, and leading the way. Checkmate.

BLIGE: Checkmate, yeah! ♦

Styled by Paul Cavaco.

Mary J. Blige wears an Alberta Ferretti cape; Joseph coat; Djula earrings; vintage crown from Early Halloween, New York.



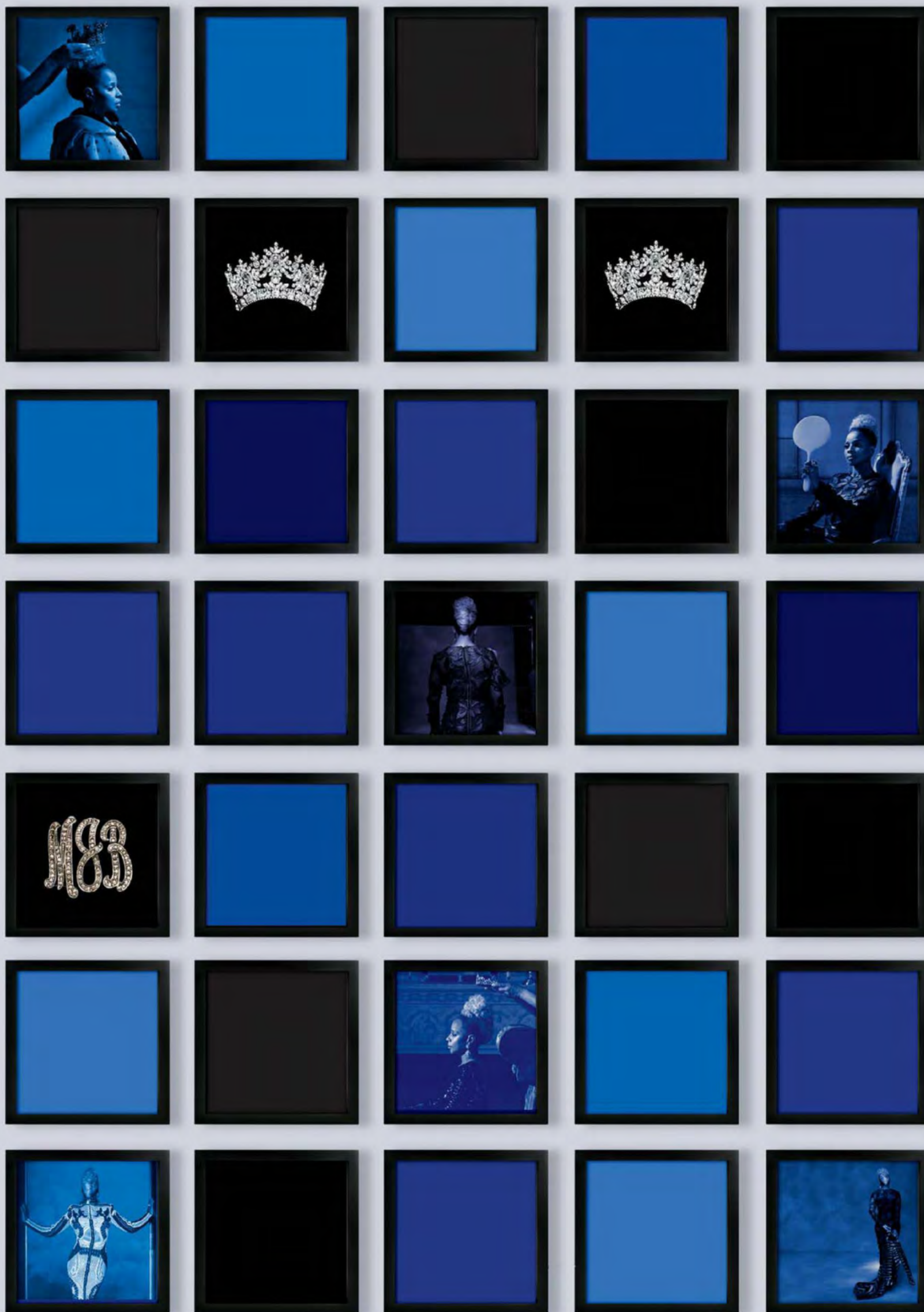
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This page: Pologeorgis coat; Gucci jacket; Fred Leighton tiara and necklace; stylist's own earrings. Opposite: Balmain dress; Jacob & Co. earrings; Munnu the Gem Palace ring.



BLACK, BLUE & BEAUTIFUL
BECAME YOUR CALLING CARD





This page: **Oscar de la Renta** dress; **Djula** earrings; (right hand, top) **Vhernier** ring; **David Webb** rings. *Carrie Mae Weems* wears her own clothing and jewelry. *Opposite, first column from top:* **Alberta Ferretti** cape; **Joseph** coat. **Balmain** dress. *Third column:* **Oscar de la Renta** dress. **Tom Ford** dress. *Fifth column:* **Oscar de la Renta** dress; **Oscar de la Renta** dress; **Tom Ford** coat. For stores, prices, and more, go to Wmag.com/where-to-buy-december-2017.

Hair by Kim Kimble for Kimble Hair Care Systems at SixK.LA; makeup by D'Andre Michael for U.G.L.Y. Girl Cosmetics. Set design by Kadu Lennox at Frank Reps.



Carrie Mae Weems's Portraiture Influences a Promising Young Photographer

By [ELLIOTT BROWN, JR.](#) and [CARRIE MAE WEEMS](#)

Aug 7 2017, 9:30am

Photographers Elliott Jerome Brown Jr. and Carrie Mae Weems share their work in our annual photo issue.

For our [annual photo issue](#) we reached out to 16 up-and-coming photographers and asked them which photographer inspired them to pursue the medium. Then we approached their "idols" to see if they would be willing to publish work in the issue as well. What was provided, we think, creates a unique conversation about the line of influence between young artists and those more established in their careers. This post

features an interview with Elliott Jerome Brown Jr. and his chosen idol, Carrie Mae Weems, and an explanation of each of their bodies of work.

Elliott Jerome Brown Jr. came to photography through self-portraiture, using it as a means to understand and confront the intersections of his identity. "The camera gave me a means to idealize and celebrate different versions of myself," he explains. Brown received his BFA from NYU this past spring and is currently attending the residency program at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture.



Photo by Elliott Jerome Brown Jr.

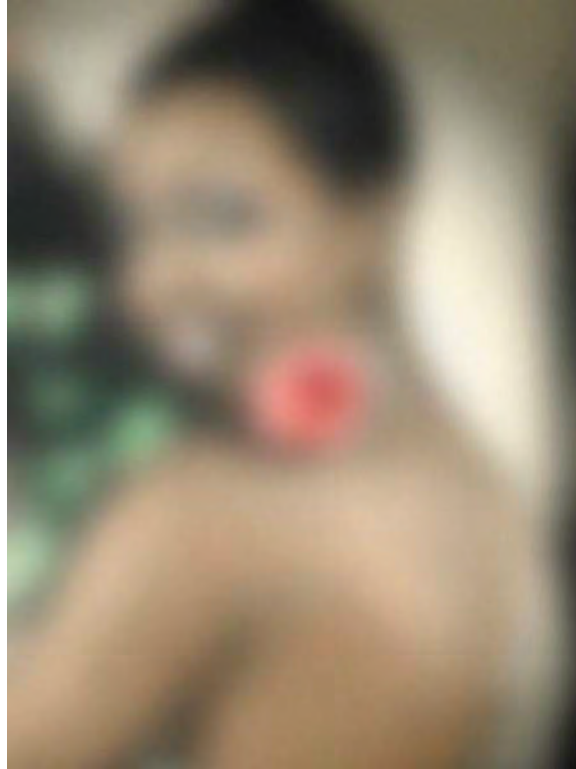


Photo Courtesy of Carrie Mae Weems and Jack Shainman Gallery

His idol for the 2017 Photo Issue, Carrie Mae Weems, is a MacArthur Foundation Genius Grant–winning photographer from Portland, Oregon, who currently lives and works in New York. Her work, which combines video, text, and photography, comments on and critiques the experiences of people of color, particularly women, in America, by addressing the socio-political limitations that African Americans have, and continue to face today. Weems's work has been exhibited in more than 50 galleries and museums nationally and internationally and continues to greatly influence a generation of young artists and activists.



Photo Courtesy of Carrie Mae Weems and Jack Shainman Gallery



Photo by Elliott Jerome Brown Jr.

Elliott Jerome Brown Jr: What have you been working on in the studio right now?

Carrie Mae Weems: I'm preparing this performance that's going to the Kennedy Center. It's called *Grace Notes*. I'm trying to tighten the script and work on the music. I'm in touch with a lot more people right now than the law allows [*laughs*]. Like damn, you know? Balancing the musicians and the singers and the producers it's, like, a whole lot. But it's coming. So I'm happy with it. So there's a lot going on! Working on a couple of exhibitions that are going up in various places, trying to get all that ready to go. It never ceases to amaze me that no matter how hard you work the next day there's always more to do. But I think that's also the human condition. You never give up—there's always something you desire, always something you're working toward, always something you're attempting to solve, always work you're trying to imagine, and figuring out how you can get there and make it happen and work. What it means to look like.

Something I base my work around—I'm primarily a photographer—is thinking often through images. I think a lot about visibility and invisibility, and working with individuals whose bodies don't belong to me but are in proximity to me. Sharing some part of them with the world and in turn thinking a lot about privacy. One thing that I'm gravitated to in your work is how you offset your own individual narrative in favor of something a little more general but still maintains this specificity. In turn you end up sharing a lot of yourself and your experiences with the viewer. The main question I have is if you think about privacy and when do you think it's powerful not to be seen.

I don't really think about privacy so much. It just doesn't concern me so much. I think if I'm working on a project, I lay out everything that I think I need to lay out about it, and then you just sort of let the chips fall where they may. I think that it's really important to simply be as open as possible to what the work is asking you to do and to get out of the way of the work so that the work can be what it needs to be. Often, the work is much larger than you. It's much larger than the eye. If you say that what you're trying to do is expose the invisible, then you're already talking about something much larger than you. To that extent, then, there is no privacy. A long time ago, I learned that the most important thing is to lay out everything that you think you need to lay out. Then you can make these editorial decisions about what you want to share with everyone else. Because they don't need to know everything about what you're thinking, but they need to know the critical parts. And for that matter, you need to know those critical parts and what belongs to you as your own sort of process, imagination, capacity. The thing that I think is so amazing about work is that normally the best, creative, and important artists are the ones who go beyond their own fact and condition to talk about the condition. And in talking about the condition, you talk about you, right? Because you aren't any different from the condition, or the people that are in the condition, or the situation, or the story, or the narrative. You are the subject—you are always the subject. We are often the participant entity observer. The marriage of the two things is the most wonderful, exciting, and necessary thing. But the idea of getting beyond your own fact and opening up to the fact

and how you understand it in the deepest possible way is the most challenging and scariest thing that you'll do as an artist.

In that way, you're leading me into the next question. Thinking more about the tools you employ in your own work—grace is a pretty big one. I'm curious as to why you think of grace as a useful approach to your work.

Well, this is so interesting. Grace and faith are evidence of things unseen. It's like the lifting of the thing out of its invisibility. To expose the potential, to expose the possibility, to expose the glance, to expose the gesture. To expose something that's complex, deep, and broad. Something extraordinary and remarkable about who we are as human subjects and what we struggle toward. So I'm interested in what we struggle toward and how we struggle toward our humanity in every case. We're all crawling toward the deepest essence of ourselves in this little speck of time that we're given on the planet. We're crawling toward ourselves and our understanding of who we are at this time on the planet. And so, the thing that I find so remarkable is how black people have historically conducted themselves in the embrace of not only their humanity but their extraordinary gift to extend their humanity—even to the perpetrators of violence and people who have acted consistently against them. In part, that's what you're saying in your own work. "Here I am. Here is the breath of my humanity on display. To show you, to some extent, who I am. And by extension, who you are." And I just think that's an amazing and remarkable thing. An extraordinary quality. But when you have the circumstances of our lives, which have stripped us to the bare bones of who we are, it's both a blessing and a curse that we stand before ourselves and the world, naked in a way that often many groups don't have to stand up to. And it's both our gift and our tribulation.

I'm interested in elaborating on that nakedness a bit more: whose stories are available and who do people have to know about in order to coordinate their own lives. If we're contextualizing how black people move through the world, there's something of our depths and our heights that people need to be aware of in order to coordinate their own actions in the world. What it reminds me of is something that I was watching the other day—a conversation led by Ruby Sales down South. She was saying how she's interested in a liberating white theology. There is tons of language around liberation as it relates to black people, and there's a kind of sexiness that attracts people, even people who are not black, to that language and investigation of how we can help black people. She's interested in how we can help the white people liberate themselves. She doesn't see that as popular of a conversation, which doesn't come with the sexiness that black trauma contains. So I'm curious if that nakedness you're speaking of speaks to that.

I think in a way yes. Because black people are naked; white people are very closed. And clothed. And that's really sort of the gist of it. It's all buried still in the trappings of the assumed humanity. But they haven't been tested in this country in the same way that we have been tested—for the most part. That's not 100 percent across the board, but that's the

general condition. This I think allows for great capacity. When you're naked and you've been stripped to the essence of "you," it allows you an incredible sense of freedom to act and to be. Even under all of the gaze and glare of the racism that's pointed toward us, we're still able to grapple with the humanness of ourselves because that's our condition. And by extension, I think that those who are looking at it, confront it openly, have to deal with some aspect of themselves ultimately. That's why we lead the discussion on race. Because we are negotiating it each and every single day.

What do you think your work has yet to do? What is it not complete on?

I don't know. I come to my studio every day struggling. Constantly trying to figure out how to make the invisible visible. And there are different entry points. The essential question of negotiating the scope and the breadth and the depth of my humanity is always the cornerstone of all of the work that has not changed. And the only thing that I'm trying to do that now is how to do it better. Every day. Figuring out how to get outside of the work, and not block it. We set up a lot of blocks for ourselves, individually and daily. Sometimes the questions we ask ourselves are so complex and scary that we don't even want to look at them. So we block ourselves, stand in front of the work, and as a result we do something that has no resonance. The important thing is what I'm trying to do—just get out of the way. Let the work be what it really can be, the best that it can be, and the deepest it can be. To give myself and allow myself time to make the work properly. I'm in my 60s now, and time has sped up. It's moving at a faster click. This question of being productive, clear, open, and honest—trying to get as close to the bone of the subject, the essence, as I possibly can remains my greatest challenge. So there are days where I feel like I'm just beginning, and then there are days when I come into my studio and I look at a book I've made, or go through a group of photographs that maybe I made 40 years ago, and I think, *Wow, you've been on this path a very long time, my sister.*



Photo Courtesy of Carrie Mae Weems and Jack Shainman Gallery



Photo by Elliott Jerome Brown Jr.



Photo Courtesy of Carrie Mae Weems and Jack Shainman Gallery



Photo by Elliott Jerome Brown Jr.



Photo by Elliott Jerome Brown Jr.

LET’S MAKE PROTEST GREAT AGAIN



BY JENS HOFFMANN

Throughout the twentieth century, art often walked in lockstep with politics and protest—even while critics and art historians endlessly debated the political efficacy of art, and its real relationship to cultural change. While this particular debate rages on (and shows no signs of either reaching a satisfying resolution or of being abandoned), what we can see looking back is that moments of unrest, uncertainty, violence, and fear have been catalytic in pushing art forward and opening it up.

Wyatt Gallery x For Freedoms Billboard, *US IS THEM*, New Orleans, Louisiana, 2016. Courtesy: For Freedoms. Photo: Wyatt Gallery

Before we ask WHAT CAN WE DO? we have first to consider the question HOW MUST WE THINK? so that the usual approach to the highest ideals of humanity... does not continue to spread as an expression of its flagrant contradiction of what we actually do in practice in our economic, political and cultural dealings in real life. We warn, however, against a thoughtless turnabout. Let us begin with SELF-REFLECTION. Let us first look for the grounds which call for our turning away from the prevailing state of things. Let us seek ideas which point in the direction of a change.

—Joseph Beuys, “An Appeal for an Alternative,” 1982

In the second decade of the twentieth century, the Dadaists acted out their distaste for war, colonialism, blind nationalism, and bourgeois capitalism by declaring a state of visual and conceptual anarchy. A decade later, Diego Rivera and the other artists of the Mexican mural movement mixed plaster and paint to create enormous, stunning portraits of a glorified and victorious working class. In 1937, Pablo Picasso completed his monumental *Guernica*, documenting the horrors of the Spanish Civil War through black, white, and gray. In the United States, African American artist Jacob Lawrence represented the movement of black Americans from Southern cities to the North in his series “The Great Migration” (completed in 1941), and would continue to paint the lives of African Americans throughout the rest of the century. Artistic avant-gardes that would explode in the 1960s and trickle their energies into the 1970s began to take root in the 1950s, with postwar migrations and attitudes forming pockets of experimentation—as in the educational community at Black Mountain College. In Europe, the Situationists around the artist and theorist Guy Debord caused significant trouble in the 1960s by demanding a radical break with the political and economic status quo in which social alienation and commodity fetishism were no longer a by-product of advanced capitalism but had spread into every part of life.

The 1960s also ushered in the civil rights era, and David Hammons began representing the black body—at times seen wrapped in an American flag, at others raising a Black Power fist in the air—through his body print works. In the 1970s, Adrian Piper’s “Mythic Being” series would also confront issues of racial and gender stereotypes via a wig, fake moustache, and dark glasses, forging for the artist a space at the intersection of racial politics and feminism. The artists Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz protested violence against women in their 1977 performance-event in Los Angeles, *In Mourning and in Rage*, while just south of there, Martha Rosler staged her first garage sale piece, critiquing the domestic expectations pushed on American women. In the mid-1980s, David Wojnarowicz began making printed works that combined text and photographs to confront discrimination against gay men, a series that would culminate in *One Day This Kid...* from 1990. Between 1988 and 1989, Group Material staged their legendary four-part exhibition *Democracy* at the

Dia Art Foundation in New York, which looked at four important subjects of the late 1980s: education, election politics, cultural participation, and AIDS. And in 1994, Kara Walker made her New York debut with *Gone, An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred b’tween the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart*, a lavish illustration and biting critique of American slavery and persistent racial stereotyping.

In our long twentieth century we have faced unending wars, genocides, environmental crises, economic meltdowns, racial profiling, terrorism, and paranoia. In the past decade, we have crumbled under the shared panic of near economic collapse, and reemerged, wounds still visible. We have witnessed the deaths of dozens of unarmed young black Americans at the hands of police officers. Continuing conflicts in Syria and other countries in the Middle East, Africa, and parts of Europe have displaced millions from their homes. A just a few months ago, we faced devastating election results in the United States that have left the country—and much of the world—reeling with uncertainty, anxiety, indignation, and rage. Along with crisis, however, comes response: protestors rise up to meet their oppressors; the disenfranchised move to resist their looming domination. When pressed, people stand. In the past decade, years, and months, we have seen the rise of movements like Occupy, Black Lives Matter, the Women’s March, and other percolating branches of political and economic resistance. In the spirit of these times of protest, artists in the United States and around the globe are creating works that engage directly with issues facing our shared communities.

Even before the current U.S. president campaigned his way into office with chants of “Build the wall!” the artist collective Postcommodity was confronting complications of country, identity, border, and belonging, in their multimedia installation works. Postcommodity consists of three indigenous artists, Raven Chacon, Cristóbal Martínez, and Kade L. Twist, who have worked together since 2007. It was the idea of the border that first inspired their collaboration, and their most visible work to date (in perhaps several ways) was the 2015 installation *Repellent Fence / Valla Repelente*. Stretching two miles between Douglas, Arizona, and Agua Prieta in Sonora, Mexico, *Repellent Fence* bisected the U.S.-Mexico border in a section of its long expanse that was already fortified with a border wall. The work’s twenty-six

large, soaring yellow balloons (modeled on “scare-eye” balloons sold to keep birds away) arranged like points in a dotted line, created a temporary connection between the two nations. As the collective described it:

“The purpose of this monument is to bi-directionally reach across the U.S./ Mexico border as a suture that stitches the peoples of the Americas together—symbolically demonstrating the interconnectedness of the Western Hemisphere by recognizing the land, indigenous peoples, history, relationships, movement and communication.”

In connecting territories in Arizona and Mexico, Postcommodity emphasizes the history and continuity of these lands. The indigenous tribes from which they descend shared land on both sides of the constructed border; the territorial claim to which the right wing clings so dearly is less than two hundred years old. Postcommodity’s *Repellent Fence* functioned as more than a symbol, however. As a community-based project, it also worked to begin conversations between stakeholders and communities on both sides of the border, to shift the dehumanizing narrative about land and sovereignty into one that is focused on the individuals affected by such nationalistic constructs. Given the renewed fervor around American border security, Postcommodity’s continuing projects relating to the U.S.-Mexico border and other forms of boundary crossing carry increasing political urgency.

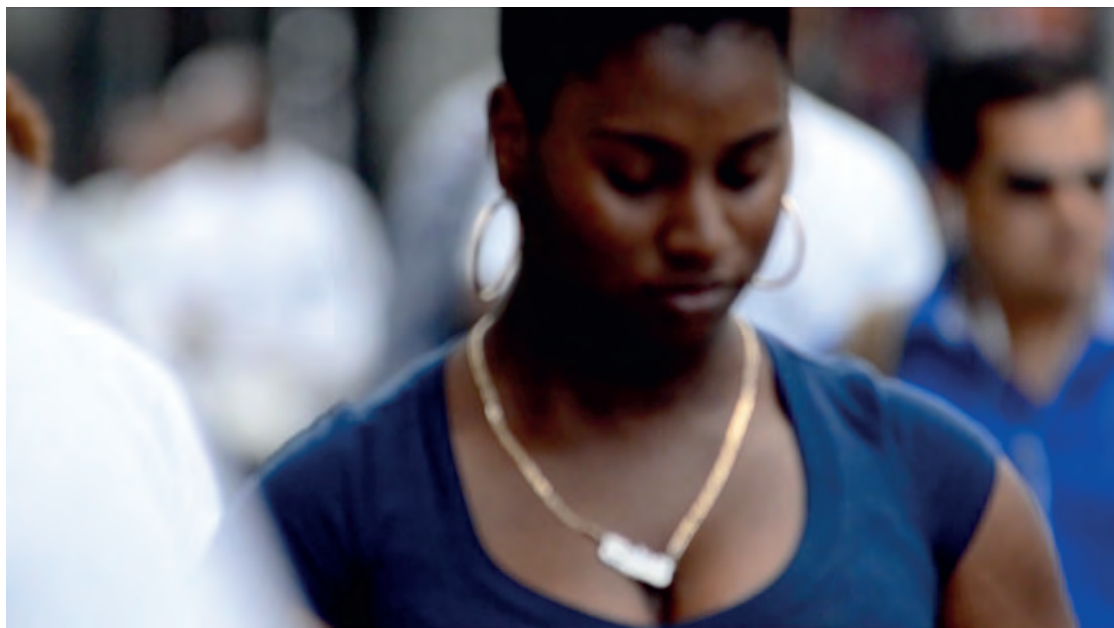
The artist Carrie Mae Weems has been making photographs, video works, and installations about black American experiences since the early 1980s, and in the past couple of years, her work has taken on the specific subject of police violence against black people. In *Grace Notes: Reflections for Now* (2016), a theatrical production that combines dance, spoken word, music, and video projections, Weems reflects on these deaths in a narrative she likens to Antigone, the Theban character who toils to bury her brother in the midst of a jealous civil war. As Weems remarks, “This is really the story of a woman—of a community—who is trying to figure out how to bury her brother. And they’re denying her the right to do that, because they’re denying that it even happened, or that it warrants our attention. And she’s saying, ‘I’m going to bury him, I’m going to bury him right!’” *Grace Notes* makes explicit references to the victims of police violence, these brothers to be buried, by projecting their names on the theater stage and a reading of their ages and roles at various points in the performance. “The numbers tell the story...” the actors recount. “She was twenty-five. He was a father. He was twenty-two. A brother. She was thirty-one. Thirty-seven. She was twenty-eight. She was a mother. She was thirty-six...” The voices combine and overlap through this recitation of facts. *Grace Notes* also directly integrates Black Lives Matter into its construction: young,

black, male performers in black shirts bearing an abbreviated “BLK LVS MTR” perform step routines and stand in for the victims shown running in Weems’s theatrical construction on a frameless treadmill while others narrate.

Parts and portions of *Grace Notes* are folded in to Weems’s film work *People of a Darker Hue* (2016), which also integrates long shots of video depicting people of color walking forward, toward the camera. Her other recent video works, including *Surveillance* (2016), *Cornered* (2016), and *The Madding Crowd* (2017), draw further connections between the contemporary state of race relations in the United States and American history. In *Surveillance*, for instance, Weems uses archival footage from the Black Panther movement along with voice-overs and other clips to draw parallels between the ways that militant black protestors were considered in the 1960s—as threats to the police, as aggressors—and the young black men killed by police officers and civilians alike in places like Ferguson, Missouri; Falcon Heights, Minnesota; New York; Sanford, Florida; and New Orleans. *Surveillance* also frames the topic of the American government monitoring its own citizens under the guise of “safety”—an ominous subject that leaves the film with a dark tenor indeed.

The political climate of the United States over the past several years—which zoomed into unflattering micro-focus during the 2016 presidential election—has inspired some artists to develop projects that mirror and draw from the political system itself. In 2016, Hank Willis Thomas and Eric Gottesman formed the organization For Freedoms as an artist-run super PAC (political action committee). Channeling financial capital into billboards and advertisements made to address questions at play in the 2016 election, For Freedoms inserted artists’ voices directly into the stream of political culture. Their billboards proclaimed messages like “THEY ARE US / US IS THEM” as a counter to the Republican campaign to divide America up into ideological, national, racial, and religious factions; and reappropriated Trump’s slogan “Make America Great Again” by floating it over an image of a 1965 confrontation between Alabama state troopers and civil rights marchers.

The Cuban artist Tania Bruguera also works through the format of organizations to combat international issues like migration and immigration, political oppression, and censorship. Her most recent project, the Institute of Artivism Hannah Arendt (INSTAR), began with a one-hundred-hour-long performance and discussion of Hannah Arendt’s 1951 text *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. INSTAR also delivers humanitarian aid to communities in Cuba (it was during one such delivery that Bruguera was most recently detained by Cuban authorities), and aims to engage citizens in rethinking Cuba’s democratic project and defending their own civil rights.



Above - Carrie Mae Weems, *People of a Darker Hue* (stills), 2016. © Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy: the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Opposite - INSTAR – Instituto de Artivismo Hannah Arendt, Opening Session of the foundational process of INSTAR – Instituto de Artivismo Hannah Arendt, 20-24 May 2015, Havana. Courtesy: INSTAR and Yo Tambien Exijo Platform





Carrie Mae Weems, *Grace Notes: Reflections for Now*, Spoleto Festival USA, Charleston, 4-5 June 2016.
Courtesy: Spoleto Festival USA. Photo: William Struhs





Above, top - For Freedoms Billboard, *MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN*, Pearl, Mississippi, 2016. Courtesy: For Freedoms. Photo: Wyatt Gallery

Above, bottom - Nari Ward x For Freedoms Billboard, *MASS ACTION*, Lexington, Kentucky, 2016. Courtesy: For Freedoms. Photo: Wyatt Gallery

Opposite - Postcommodity, *Repellent Fence / Valla Repelente*, 2015, installation views at U.S. / Mexico Border, Douglas AZ / Agua Pieta SON, 2015. © Postcommodity. Courtesy: Postcommodity and Bockley Gallery, Minneapolis. Photo: Michael Lundgren



The INSTAR mission reads: “This is a unique moment when ideas are still in the process of formation for a new country. Art enables one to transform a chaotic view into an encounter with an unexpected order, or new order, to articulate a new future.”

Postcommodity, Weems, Thomas, and Bruguera are just a few among many artists who are working within their particular aesthetic realms to confront political problems with rigor and potency. What most of the artists mentioned above have in common is that they, while politically outspoken, also push the aesthetic boundaries of their field. Their work is not simply representing and commenting on political circumstances or opinions, but employs and activates the formal strengths of art to agitate and infiltrate a world controlled by a cultural hegemony with limited political or artistic vision. Let us not forget that art does not have to address everyday political conditions and events to be political. One of the best examples of an artist who thought intensely about politics and the need for a simultaneously present aesthetic dimension was Felix Gonzalez- Torres. He utilized the established and institutionally approved visual vocabulary of Minimalism to subvert and penetrate the socially conservative establishment of his time with works that revealed their radical political substance only upon second glance to speak about the AIDS crisis, war or sexual identity. To echo Beuys’s query—“WHAT CAN WE DO?”—it is up to curators, critics, and the institutions that we lead to follow these artists’ lead. As Beuys urges, we must match our ideals with our actions in order to be sure that “what we actually do in practice in our economic, political and cultural dealings” aligns with our shared political beliefs. As people and as citizens, we must be generous with our resources and our time. As professionals, we need to exhibit, write about, discuss, and absorb work that is politically engaged. Moreover, we should be committed to cultivating work by artists of color, women artists, queer artists, and transgender artists through the acquisitions that we make and the opportunities we create. We must continue to address the historical erasures of these voices from the art historical canon, and to support and cultivate compelling new works from living artists. We should aim for more diversity among our staffs, our boards, our artists, and our audiences. We should open our doors, our theaters, our galleries, and our ears to these important and difficult conversations that artists and citizens need now to have, and to be responsive, as we can, to the changes that are most certainly coming. “*Let us seek ideas which point in the direction of a change.*”

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The New York Times

ART & DESIGN

How Glenn Ligon Is Using Black and Blue to Begin a Dialogue

By HILARIE M. SHEETS JUNE 2, 2017

In the beginning was the word: Fragments of prose by James Baldwin, jokes by Richard Pryor and, later, the testimony of a youth wrongly accused of a crime. All have served as the basis for Glenn Ligon's series of text paintings and neons exploring race, identity, language and abstraction. Now an Ellsworth Kelly painting, "Blue Black" (2000), has become the departure point for Mr. Ligon's latest project.

At the Pulitzer Arts Foundation in St. Louis, where the 28-foot-tall Kelly work composed of two monochrome aluminum panels painted blue and black is permanently installed, Mr. Ligon has free-associated on the political, formal and poetic interplay of these two colors in a large-scale exhibition he has organized. Opening on Friday, June 9, "Blue Black" comprises 54 works by 42 artists, including Mr. Ligon, in what he hopes will be a "noisy" conversation about power dynamics, spirituality and the blues as a state of mind.

At his studio in Brooklyn, this 57-year-old artist — who had an acclaimed midcareer retrospective at the Whitney Museum in 2011 — recounted how the Pulitzer's director, Cara Starke, invited him last year to a site visit in St. Louis. He went fully intending to propose a project of his own work. "When I was in the building, the Ellsworth Kelly is massive," he said. "I had this very funny aural

hallucination where I kept hearing Louis Armstrong's voice singing 'What did I do to be so black and blue?'"

A list of artists who have used this combination began forming in his head. David Hammons's "Concerto in Black and Blue" and Chris Ofili's "Blue Rider" series, the subjects of essays by Mr. Ligon, came to mind immediately.

Then, "there's Kerry James Marshall's policeman in uniform, where blackness as a racial identity and blackness as a color are conjoined — very different than Kelly's intention but somehow connected through the two colors," Mr. Ligon said. "That's where the show started."

Mr. Ligon has gathered diverse works of Western modernism along with African and American folk art, including artists such as Norman Lewis, Philip Guston, Andy Warhol, Joan Miró and Bill Traylor. There is a cross-section of portraiture by Cecily Brown, Jack Whitten and Lynette Yiadom-Boakye; abstraction by Ross Bleckner, Jennie C. Jones and Joan Mitchell.

The show explores the spectrum of ideas between Kelly's rigorous investigation of color and shape in "Blue Black" and Mr. Ligon's own luminous meditation on racial violence, in a neon sculpture called "A Small Band," placed at the center of the Pulitzer's main gallery.

White neon tubes affixed to aluminum letters spell the words "blues," "bruise" and "blood." The piece is based on the recorded testimony of Daniel Hamm, describing how he was beaten as a teenager by the police in 1964 and was permitted to see a doctor only if he was visibly bleeding. Mr. Hamm reached down to his leg, he later said: "I had to, like, open the bruise up, and let some of the bruise blood come out to show them."

But when Mr. Ligon listened to the actual tape, Mr. Hamm "made a slip of the tongue and says he had to open the bruise up to 'let some of the blues blood come out,'" Mr. Ligon said. "I thought those three words — bruise, blues, blood — went together like they were a small band."

“The content of Glenn’s work is incredibly meaningful in the context of St. Louis, being the epicenter of the Black Lives Matter movement,” Ms. Starke said.

“As an artist, there’s a liberty to curate in a different way,” she said, noting that she would have felt compelled as a curator to be more explicitly historical in her reasoning. “I would not have made that connection to Louis Armstrong’s music in the first place. It opened up a world of combinations for me.”

These are edited excerpts from a conversation with Mr. Ligon.

Did the works in the show all have to contain the colors black and blue?

You set up rigid parameters and then figure out ways to loosen them. I thought, it can’t just be work that has blue and black in it. Derek Jarman’s film [“Blue,” released in 1993, months before his death] is monochromatic, literally a blue screen, and you hear actors reading from Jarman’s diary. He was going blind and eventually died of AIDS complications. So, metaphorically, blackness is in there. I want the show to be expansive in that way.

Were there key artists or works you just had to include to do this right?

Hammons definitely. Ofili definitely. In his “Blue Bathers,” the blueness is about Trinidad, where his studio was. Ofili’s describing this kind of equatorial light, how in Trinidad even in the darkness there’s a luminosity. [That he was] able to capture that in the painting, I thought, was amazing.

What’s so interesting about the Warhol [portrait of Elizabeth Taylor] is that she was famous for her fake black hair. That blue background is so perfect, but it really is about her whiteness, too, how starkly white the skin tone is.

The Carrie Mae Weems photograph “Blue Black Boy,” I thought, was fantastic. ‘Blue black’ is an African-American usage to describe a certain kind of skin tone that you find on the continent. There are a number of artists dealing with that conjunction between identity and color, and not only black artists. Tim Rollins and K.O.S.’s “Invisible Man (After Ralph Ellison)” is about that, too. They’ve actually

painted the I M in blue over pages from Ellison's "Invisible Man." In the prologue of the book, the protagonist is in his cellar lair playing Armstrong's "What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue," over and over again. Ellison says that the blues is "personal catastrophe expressed lyrically." There's always been this sense of the blues somehow related to trauma as well as a kind of transcendence.

You included a Philip Guston, who you've spoken about as an early influence.

I wanted to be Guston when I was a young artist. This Guston, "Dark Room," may be the closest to a pure black work in the show, with just this whitish blue light bulb illuminating the scene. I love Guston's abstract paintings but also his transition from abstraction to the Klansman series [his hooded figures caricaturing the Ku Klux Klan in the '70s]. The change in his work for him was about trying to mirror what was going on in the culture. To be able to work abstractly and figuratively throughout his career is an interesting model for me.

Politically oriented shows can be a minefield. During the year you've been working on this one, there have been protests over racially charged work by several white artists. They include Kelley Walker's exhibition at the Contemporary Art Museum, right next door to the Pulitzer, which displayed sexualized pictures of black women and historical images of police brutality against black people; Dana Schutz showed a painting of Emmett Till's mutilated body in the current Whitney Biennial. Has the debate over race and appropriation influenced your approach to this show?

No. I feel like these kinds of controversies come up over and over. I was in the 1993 Whitney Biennial and the 1994 "Black Male" show at the Whitney, and I've never seen such vicious press. Twenty plus years later, critics who hated that Biennial have come to Jesus and decided it was a really important, seminal show that they misunderstood. In terms of "Black Male," there were critiques by people who thought there were too many works that depicted homosexuality — what did that have to do with black masculinity? I think the controversies around Kelley Walker and Dana's painting, these issues need to be aired. It's painful, though —

people calling for paintings to be taken out of the museum and destroyed, having your work discussed in The Guardian and The New York Times. Kara Walker's had to deal with that. Fred Wilson's had to deal with that. Maybe what is new is the speed at which these things are disseminated.

How does your show at the Pulitzer differ from the way a curator might approach the same theme?

It's more of a meander. I'm not bound by chronology or genre. It's about encounters and collisions. I'm an artist, too. I have my work in juxtaposition with other work in the show. That's a luxury I can do.

Does the exhibition itself become an artwork?

An artwork is an arrangement of things. The ideal show for me would be if everything touched, literally touched, so that everything would blur together. It's much easier to talk to one another if you're in close proximity.

A version of this article appears in print on June 4, 2017, on Page AR24 of the New York edition with the headline: Speaking Through Colors.



Black Radical Women at the Brooklyn Museum

In a powerful New York show, forgotten protesters get their due

APRIL 28, 2017 by: Ariella Budick

There's something uncanny about walking into a corner of the past and finding it almost indistinguishable from the present. *We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965-1985*, at the Brooklyn Museum, is ostensibly a historical exhibition about a period when outrage crystallised into fresh artistic expressions. The fluent survey focuses on a forgotten generation of committed women who joined alliances yet also lifted their separate voices above the collective shout. They formed a constellation of groups such as Spiral, the Black Arts Movement, Where We At, and Women, Students and Artists for Black Art Liberation. Now, decades later, the causes they represent remain shockingly current, and their distinct sensibilities come together in a show that is at once motley and unified.

One of its stars, Betye Saar, battled vile stereotypes and emerged with an intricate beauty that mixes violence and nostalgia. Saar was a printmaker when she encountered the works of Joseph Cornell at the Pasadena Art Museum and instantly shifted gears, fitting astrological references, Tarot symbols and occult signs into small boxes. The Watts riots and the assassination of Martin Luther King sent her reeling towards politics. In "Black Girl's Window" (1969) she assembled a grid of colourful signs — a skeleton, a lion, moons, stars, a fierce eagle bearing a shield emblazoned with the word "Love" — on the upper panes of a wood-framed casement window. On the lower half, a girl presses her face against the glass. She could be locked in or left out; either way, her curiosity is a form of power that will soon bear her aloft.

Saar's metaphorical flourishes took a darker turn when she enlisted Aunt Jemima, a symbol of contented servitude, into the ranks of Black Power. In her hands, that old-timey cook with the ingratiating grin became a stealth freedom fighter. Saar affixed her face to a jug of California wine and stuffed a red bandanna into the spout to make a friendly-looking Molotov cocktail. "Liberation of Aunt Jemima: Cocktail" (1973) is a call to arms.

The show elevates these latter-day Joans-of-Arc who rediscovered the potent combination of weaponry and art. The subject of Dindga McCannon's mixed media construction "Revolutionary Sister" (1971) sports a Statue of Liberty crown and McCannon's own ammo belt, merging a fashion statement with a political one. (Social change came slowly, but guerrilla style took off. In a nearby display case, a Jet magazine issue featuring a black woman with a headscarf and bullet belt bears the headline: "Black Revolt Sparks White Fashion Craze." The laziest way to confront a revolution is to appropriate its costumes.)

In 1971, McCannon, Vivian E Browne, Faith Ringgold and others formed the Brooklyn-based collective Where We At, and mounted what they claimed was "the first Black Women's art exhibition in known history". The group's members had come to realise that the Black Power movement reinforced patterns of patriarchy, while mainline feminism revolved around a white, middle-class core. African-American women wanting to be liberated had to do the job themselves. Nearly 50 years later, curators Catherine Morris and Rujeko Hockley are still making the same case.

The show segues from muscular representation to more nuanced meditations, many of them incubated at Linda Goode Bryant's Just Above Midtown gallery. Abstract paintings by Howardena Pindell glow enigmatically. "Carnival at Ostende" (1977), for instance, breathes through a screen of confetti — bright, handmade dots scattered over a pale expanse. The title refers to works by James Ensor, the eccentric Belgian artist whose skeletons, masks and monsters supercharged ordinary alienation and malaise into trenchant social critique.

Paradoxically, the heart of this show about political art consists of art that is not explicitly political. Senga Nengudi loaded nylon stockings with sand or rubber and then twisted them into suggestive, surreal organisms. A photograph documents her eerie "Rapunzel", a performance/ritual from 1981 that involved a dilapidated building, a window and a pair of grotesquely distended pantyhose.

That same year, Blondell Cummings blended mime, dance and performance into a singular creation. For "Chicken Soup", a video that plays on a constant loop, she dug into childhood memory and acted out a few hours in the life of her grandmother as she cooked, cleaned, gossiped and prayed. Cummings was not an activist; she explicitly denied that "Chicken Soup" had any political overtones. And yet the piece, which turns the traditional, homebound life of one black woman into a universal spectacle, nurtures the seeds of protest. It is loving and wistful, a nostalgic ode to a domestic culture born of racial and economic constraint.

The exhibition ends in the mid-1980s with Lorna Simpson and Carrie Mae Weems. Simpson once described how, when she and Weems and a third African-American classmate were students at University of California, San Diego, people often confused them despite the discrepancies in shape, size and age. "Our presence was as interchangeable as it was invisible," Simpson said. In part to combat that erasure, Weems and Simpson each merged text and photography, subtly affirming their separateness in the face of a society that insisted on shoving them into the same mental box. Weems conceived "Family Pictures and Stories" (1978-84) to refute a 1965 government report blaming "the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society" on the breakdown of black family life. She countered bureaucratic bigotry with documentary-style pictures of her clan in all its messy complexity. Her father and mother, aunts and uncles appear in captioned photos, while in a recorded narrative she recounts their stories and idiosyncratic passions.

This show comes at a time when issues of fairness and freedom are burning again, and when negotiation and incremental change can feel like futile strategies. It's salutary to look back at a time when art drew its mission from a mixture of ire and hope. The artists here were — and many remain — angry but never jaded.

To September 17, brooklynmuseum.org

Photographs: Jan van Raay; Ryan Lee; Roberts Tilton



Carrie Mae Weems

EXHIBITION

A New Exhibition Shows How Black Women Challenged the Art World

Kenneth Bachor

Apr 24, 2017



We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965–85 is a new show at the Brooklyn Museum featuring more than 40 artists, including Carrie Mae Weems, Howardena Pindell and Faith Ringgold, to highlight the work of black women who were at the crossroads of the Civil Rights, Black Power and Women's Movements during that 20-year period.

For Catherine Morris, the senior curator for the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum, the goal of the exhibition is to offer the public "a new understanding of the complexity of history," as well as showcase some new artists that "they hadn't known or hadn't seen before," she tells TIME.

The mixed media exhibit features art of various mediums, from photography to performance and sculpture to video art. Morris outlines that this time between the mid-1960s to mid-1980s was not only a time that various social movements expressed their voices, but that it was also a time that artists challenged traditional ways of making art.

By including these different art forms, the message of race and feminism that is explored through the work is brought into a bolder light. Morris emphasizes that the "known and unknown" factor regarding these artists and the predominately white mainstream becomes part of the conversation, especially after the 2016 U.S. presidential election. "An exhibition

like this is years in the making, so over the course of producing the exhibition, the pertinence and necessity of it seems to have only increased," says Morris, "It certainly speaks to the need people have to talk about the contributions black women have made to our culture."

We Wanted a Revolution is part of *A Year of Yes: Reimagining Feminism at the Brooklyn Museum*, celebrating the 10th anniversary of the Brooklyn Museum's Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, which is meant to educate people about feminist art and raise awareness of its cultural offerings in a positive learning environment. In 2016, **The New York Times noted** that a surge of all-women art exhibits were on the rise, with a number of museums bringing much-needed attention to art made by women. "The Brooklyn Museum has a very longstanding commitment to thinking about art as a social motivator, as well as being a cultural touchstone," says Morris, "So this is an exhibition that completely fits into this institution's ongoing interest in thinking about ways of expanding the canon of art history."

ART & DESIGN

To Be Black, Female and Fed Up With the Mainstream

By HOLLAND COTTER APRIL 20, 2017

One reason for the hullabaloo around Dana Schutz's painting of the murdered Emmett Till in the current Whitney Biennial is the weakness of the work. It looks half-baked, unresolved. Like a lot of recent "political" art, it doesn't try for a weight suitable to, and therefore respectful of, its racially charged, morally shattering subject. The result, to use one writer's words, is "a tasty abstraction designed purposefully or inadvertently" to evoke an image of "common oppression."

Actually, those dismissive words weren't written about the Schutz painting. They were written in 1970 by the African-American critic Linda La Rue about the vaunted cross-cultural embrace of the second-wave feminist movement. The writer eyed with deep distrust the movement's assumption that it could speak with authority for all women, including black women.

Ms. La Rue's words are in the catalog for the exhibition "We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965-85" at the Brooklyn Museum. And her critical perspective is one that to a large degree shapes this spare-looking show, which takes a textured view of the political past — a past that is acquiring renewed weight in the immediate present when the civil rights gains, including feminist gains, of the past half-century appear to be up for grabs.

Whether those gains have ever not been up for grabs is a question to consider, though the show asks more specific historical ones. Such as: What did women's liberation, primarily a white, middle-class movement, have to offer African-American women in a country where, as late as the 1960s, de facto slavery still existed; a country where racism, which the movement itself shared, was soaked into the cultural fabric? Under the circumstances, to be black, female and pursuing a career in art was a radical move.

The show starts in the early 1960s, with the formation in New York City of the black artists' group **Spiral**, composed mostly of established professionals — Romare Bearden, Norman Lewis, Hale Woodruff — who debated the pros and cons, ethical and aesthetic, of putting art in the service of the civil rights movement. In all the talk, at least one political issue seems to have been passed over: the group's gender bias. Among its 15 regular members, there was only one woman, the painter **Emma Amos** — then in her early 20s and one of Woodruff's students — who would go on to make important political art.

By the time **Spiral** dispersed in 1965, the social mood of the country was tense. Black Power consciousness was on the rise — you'll find a detailed account of its growth in the exhibition "**Black Power!**" at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture — and art was increasingly a vehicle for racial assertion. The multidisciplinary Black Arts Movement took form in Harlem and spread to Chicago. There it spawned a subsidiary group called **AfriCobra** (African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists) which, with its interweave of black nationalism, spirituality, free jazz and brilliantly colored patterning, had a wide, sparks-shooting embrace. Yet it attracted relatively few female participants. Two — the prolific printmaker **Barbara Jones-Hogu**, and the fashion designer **Jae Jarrell**, who painted directly on her clothes — are in the show.

By the 1970s, feeling the pressures of racism from outside the African-American world, and the pressures of Black Power sexism within it, female artists formed their own collectives, without necessarily identifying them as feminist. One of the earliest, called **Where We At**, was initiated in Brooklyn in 1971 by **Vivian E. Browne**, **Dindga McCannon** and the redoubtable **Faith Ringgold**. After organizing what it advertised

as “the first Black Women’s art exhibition in known history,” the group turned its second show into a benefit for black unwed mothers and their children.

The practical generosity of that gesture said a lot about how a distinctive African-American feminism would develop. Black collectives were embedding themselves, at street level, in communities, running educational workshops, scrounging up funds for day-care centers, and making inexpensive art — graphically striking posters, for example. “Our struggle was primarily against racial discrimination — not singularly against sexism,” said the painter Kay Brown, a Where We At member.

Her measured words barely hint at the hostility felt by some black artists toward a mainstream feminist movement that in their view ignored the black working-class poor and sometimes its own racism. And anger sometimes comes through in the work. It does in the fierce hilarity of a short 1971 film called “Colored Spade” by Betye Saar that flashes racial stereotypes at us like rapid-fire bullets, and in a funky 1973 assemblage called “The Liberation of Aunt Jemima: Cocktail,” by the same artist, which turns a California wine jug with a “mammy” image on one side and a Black Power fist on another, into a homemade bomb.

As the 1970s went on, black women began to participate, with their guard always up, in feminist projects like the all-woman A.I.R. Gallery and the Heresies Collective, at least until they were reminded of their outsider status. At the same time, they found a warm welcome at Just Above Midtown, a Manhattan gallery opened by Linda Goode Bryant in 1974 to show black contemporary art. Archival material related to this remarkable space, which closed in 1986, fills one of the exhibition’s several display cases and makes fascinating reading, as does a vivacious interview with Ms. Bryant by the critic Tony Whitfield reprinted in a “Sourcebook” that serves as an exhibition catalog.

Major pieces by artists whose careers Ms. Bryant helped start and sustained — Maren Hassinger, Senga Nengudi, Lorraine O’Grady, Howardena Pindell — appear in galleries devoted to the late 1970s and ’80s, when an unprecedented amount of mixing was in progress. A multiculturalist vogue brought women and African-American artists into the spotlight. In a kind of parody of tolerance, the Reagan-era

culture wars attacked artists across gender and racial lines. So did the H.I.V./AIDS epidemic.

The show ends with heirs to the Just Above Midtown generation. Some of them — Lorna Simpson, Carrie Mae Weems — we know well. Others, like the great dancer Blondell Cummings and the Rodeo Caldonia High-Fidelity Performance Theater, we need to know more about. And the exhibition, organized by Catherine Morris of the museum’s Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art and Rujeko Hockley, a former curator at the Brooklyn Museum now at the Whitney Museum of American Art, at least encourages us to learn.

And it leads us to at least one broad conclusion: that the African-American contribution to feminism was, and is, profound. Simply to say so — to make an abstract, triumphalist claim — is easy, but inadequate. It fails to take the measure of lived history. The curators of “We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965-85” do better than that just by doing their homework. They let counternarrative contradictions and confused emotions stand. The only change I would make, apart from adding more artists, would be to tweak its title: I’d edit it down to its opening phrase and put that in the present tense.

We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965-85
Through Sept. 17 at the Brooklyn Museum; 718-638-5000, brooklynmuseum.org.

A version of this review appears in print on April 21, 2017, on Page C21 of the New York edition with the headline: To Be Black, Female and Fed Up With the Mainstream.

The New York Times

February 9, 2017

THE HUMAN IMAGE: FROM VELÁZQUEZ TO VIOLA

Through Feb. 18. Richard L. Feigen & Co., 34 East 69th Street, Manhattan; 212-628-0700, rlfeigen.com.

Gallery exhibitions with hefty themes tend to be limited to a gallery's holdings and what it can borrow. As the excellent "The Human Image: From Velázquez to Viola" demonstrates, the long-established Richard L. Feigen & Co. has abundant resources. The nearly 40 assembled works — including paintings, collages, drawings and photographs — have more highlights than can be pointed out here.

This show is a chance to see reasonably familiar works in the intimacy of a gallery setting, including Max Beckmann's 1926 "Portrait of a Turk" — of a man who misses nothing — and Picasso's "Maya With a Boat," a 1938 painting that portrays his older daughter as an endearing little monster. Less known are Marc Chagall's "Self-Portrait With a Palette" (1917), an uncharacteristically smooth-surfaced portrayal of the artist as a hardened dandy with a red palette against a slate sky; and Édouard Manet's solid little 1873 portrait of Berthe Morisot, fully clothed and alert, posing on a sofa in the artist's studio. Carrie Mae Weems offers this work a tough riposte in the five photographs of "Not Manet's Type" (1997), which considers some male artists' tastes in (usually white) models and the urge to be an artist oneself.

Velázquez, Hyacinthe Rigaud and Thomas Eakins represent social order with sober, strikingly realistic, even sympathetic portrayals of gentlemen across several centuries. Benny Andrews's wrenching painting-collage "Study for Portrait of Oppression (Homage to Black South Africans)," from 1985, reminds us that the costs of such order are often dehumanizing. So, in another way, does Wangechi Mutu's 2002 "Mirror, Mirror," a photo-collage depicting a seemingly self-wounding woman. The most effective human images may be those that force us to look inward.

ROBERTA SMITH

Art

History as a woman's work

For black American artist Carrie Mae Weems, the 'changing same' of the world must be countered consistently

Kwanele Sosibo

I am a woman who uses her voice. That I have laryngitis right now is hilarious to me," says artist Carrie Mae Weems. By "voice," Weems is being resolutely unambiguous, as she is one artist who finds joy in speaking about her creations.

When Weems (63) relives the impetus for her work, she stacks the metaphors, repeats and lingers over words and their sounds, as if the works are suddenly coming alive off the print to offer new meaning.

It's intriguing to listen to, for Weems has the ability to create towering works that easily embody more than their own subjectivity. When she revisits them, as she often does in talks with large audiences or in one-on-one interviews, one gets the distinct sense that the artist, as much as the interviewer, is still finding joy in peeling away hitherto undiscovered layers.

Weems, whose signature works include *The Kitchen Table Series*, 1990 (which explored the domestic space as a site of power), *Roaming*, 2006 (in which she explored the hidden power of architecture) and *Constructing History*, 2008 (which critiques the erasure of women from the historical narrative), recently exhibited in South Africa as part of the group show *Africans in America*, which formed part of the *Black Portraiture[s] III* series.

From *Constructing History*, she exhibited a series of photographs, namely *Mourning*, *The Assassination of Medgar, Martin, Malcolm* and *The Capture of Angela*. The trio of photographs is accompanied by a 20-minute video called *A Requiem to Mark the Moment*.

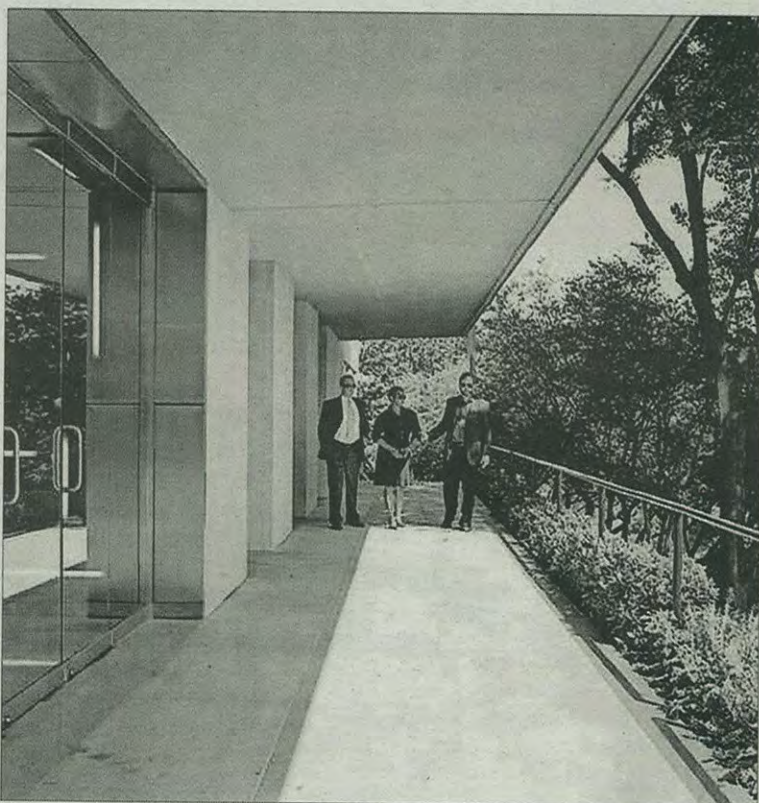
Over at the Johannesburg Art Gallery, Weems screened another video of a television screen, titled *Before the Loss of You*. The video is loosely about love in the time of struggle, but Weems's spoken text and her use of archival images infuses the two lovers' lives with the weight of history that turns their love of self into a wider exploration of global relations. Most importantly, diasporic relations.

Asked to review her work (particularly *Before the Loss of You*) through the prism of these sweeping themes, Weems is reluctant to "trump up something" but is unguarded and generous when recalling the beginnings of the video.

"Our relationships are profound, linking us across many boundaries and many distances," she says, a little hoarsely. "So the struggle for South Africa, the struggle to bring Mandela out of prison, we were all deeply involved in for a very, very long time."

"When I started thinking about the Mandelas, I had wanted to make an opera about their relationship and about the ideas of truth and reconciliation. But that was a huge project and I didn't quite have the chops for it."

"And then I saw something one morning, something very simple, a man bicycling his wife, girlfriend,



Black Portraiture: In South Africa, Carrie Mae Weems exhibited photographs from her series *Constructing History*, including *The Capture of Angela* (top), *Mourning* (above) and *The Assassination of Medgar* (below). The series critiques the erasure of women from the historical narrative



Carrie Mae Weems: 'The specific challenges facing South African youth now, they are probably the same challenges affecting African-American youth.' Photo courtesy John D and Catherine-T MacArthur Foundation

companion or lover. That simple gesture opened up a door of possibilities and a way into exploring this key question about politics, about love, about this loss of trust. About love anchoring us through our social circumstance and about how we can be spun by the greater cause of social movements around us. How deeply they shape who we are and how ultimately we can express ourselves in the deepest possible way."

I ask Weems whether the apartheid struggle was a cut-off point in the ability of the African diaspora – in particular Africans on the continent and the descendants in the United States – to form tangible bonds that will not only be illuminated by hindsight but also allow us the feeling of marching in step in this present moment.

"I think today we find ourselves trying to articulate our own particular circumstances," says Weems.

"The specific challenges facing South African youth now, they are probably the same challenges affecting African-American youth. Black Lives Matter is indicative of ongoing injuries and insults to the black body; it's something we have to go about in our own particular way."

"We are dealing with a localised situation that has to be resolved with limited resources and I don't want to say limited leadership, because it is not there, and now we have Donald Trump, as well, to contend with."

Perhaps strangely, Weems believes the election of Trump may offer the much-needed room to "refocus our international interest because there is an interest now in what it means to have white supremacy rise across many nations."

In this sense, Weems's *Constructing History*, a work created in the same year United States President Barack Obama was elected into office, begins to articulate and underscore different issues to the ones it touched on when created.

In a public talk, Weems alludes to the fact that when she created the photographic series (characterised by the constructed nature of the black-and-white images that mimic historical events and foreground the presence of women), she was partly emphasising all that had happened to make the moment of Obama a reality.

In light of the leadership vortex created by Trump's emergence, *Constructing History* takes on the strident electricity of the moment.

"I think of *Constructing History* as being, as [writer] Amiri Baraka

would say, 'a changing same'. The social conditions in the United States have been very consistent even as we had a black man in the White House. A part of what is being underscored in *Constructing History* is that it is not necessarily a man who will completely change the face of a country."

But there are further layers – layers that enhance the obvious in, perhaps, ghostly ways.

"Even if we have movements like Occupy Wall Street, or Black Lives Matter, these are relatively small movements to what there was in the Sixties. So this idea that leadership has been thwarted has all to do with this extraordinary backlash that took place against progressive thinking in the country."

"That it happened in the United States and the way that it happened in the United States is also very important because we think of ourselves as representing this highest standard of democracy, when in reality it is quite the opposite and has been for a long time."

Because Weems's work is often about women and "the changing same" it has forced her to reflect even more poignantly about relations between women in the US. "If the country is becoming a majority minority state, then white women are going to maintain their position of power in relation to white men," she says, addressing how the white female vote was pivotal in electing Trump.

"If they are going to maintain their level of representation, their sense of privilege in relation to the country, then they have to side with white men at this point."

With the global upheaval, it is clear that Weems's work will continue to signpost history and therefore possible futures.

Although Weems may be oblivious to a generation of South African artists and cultural producers she has influenced, mostly aware of the prowess of aging masters such as William Kentridge and Marlene Dumas, it is her insistent practice that will continue to remind us to be simultaneously mindful of the present, past and future.

Perhaps when Trump falls, the insistence of that lone black figure confronting the Palazzo dei Congressi in Rome (as part of the *Roaming* series) won't seem so forlorn and Tiananmenesque. Perhaps then, the thousands of women behind her will be visible in the frame.



The Radical Power of the Black Feminine Gaze

Carrie Mae Weems's unwavering vision sparks dialogue about violence, mourning, and strength.

By Ladi'Sasha Jones



Carrie Mae Weems, *Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me – A Story in 5 Parts*, 2012

© the artist and courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Black feminists, Black women artists, and Black feminist artists have a laborious tradition in witness work. They imagine futures unseen. They engineer poetic tools of resistance and provocative encounters. Through their paintings, sculptures, images, performances, fabric works, moving images, and writings, Black women convey the essential connections between the body and spirit with compassion for states of mourning and healing.

Carrie Mae Weems's interdisciplinary practice of portraiture, documentation, and storytelling is a part of this legacy of women who work in remembrance and refusal. Her current two-site exhibition at [Jack Shainman Gallery](#) is a sharp, meditative assembly of ideas and questions that extend her career-long disruption of conditioned perception and viewership. In her new series, *Usual Suspects* (2016) and *Scenes & Take* (2016), Weems tackles power structures as represented by American media, and state-sanctioned violence.



Carrie Mae Weems, *Scenes & Take (The Bad and the Beautiful)* (detail), 2016

© the artist and courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

The evolution of Black feminist cultural production and political thought has sought to articulate the intimate relationships between the body and power, the body and violence, the body and capitalism. Weems has frequently drawn upon these dialectic relationships. One of her recurring devices, a Black woman avatar—who is present in photographic work from the *Kitchen Table Series* (1990) to *The Museum Series* (2006–ongoing)—relies on the strength of a Black feminine gaze. The avatar confronts viewers with scenes and sites both startling and familiar. This avatar, an enigmatic character whose sightings we have all come to relish, is a witness and a guide.

In a 2009 interview with the photographer Dawoud Bey, Weems said, of the avatar, “Carrying a tremendous burden, she is a black woman leading me through the trauma of history. I think it’s very important that as a black woman she’s engaged with the world around her; she’s engaged with history, she’s engaged with looking, with *being*. She’s a guide into circumstances seldom seen.” Weems continues, “She’s the unintended consequence of the Western imagination. It’s essential that I do this work and it’s essential that I do it with *my* body.” Her avatar doesn’t wander or drift about; she is determined. She is a lens, a way of seeing. We look and journey with her.



Carrie Mae Weems, *All the Boys (Blocked 2)*, 2016

© the artist and courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Black women have always been at the forefront of national dialogues around state-sanctioned murders and the rituals and processes of mourning. Weems's approach in addressing the murders of Black children, women and men at the hands of America's policing citizens is to forge an unmistakable reckoning. From *Usual Suspects* (2016), a grid of nine panels featuring descriptions of deadly encounters, to the enlarged fragments of police reports in the series *All the Boys* (2016), Weems conspicuously displays the fruit, the evidential repetition, of racial injustice.

"The history of Black women is a long study in mourning," Jessica Millward stated recently. "The mourning takes on an added layer, however, when those sworn to serve and protect proceed to hunt and kill furthering African Americans' long distrust of the government." In the face of racial violence, the Black feminine gaze is a radical aesthetic, a technology that generates its own framework for the production of art, culture, and resistance. At this moment in America, a Black feminist vision is consequential for the future, and Carrie Mae Weems's feminist vision has never been more timely.

Ladi'Sasha Jones is a writer and arts administrator from Harlem.

Carrie Mae Weems is on view at Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, through December 10, 2016.

CARRIE MAE WEEMS

by Matthew Biro

JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY | OCTOBER 29 – DECEMBER 10, 2016

Since the late 1970s, Carrie Mae Weems has pursued a socially engaged form of creative practice, examining how identity is constructed through concepts of race, gender, and class, while interrogating the processes by which we produce a sense of self in relation to both private memory and public history. Moving seamlessly between photography, video, installation, and performance, her art simultaneously utilizes and criticizes documentary strategies and the assumption that camera images are neutral. Weems's new exhibition turns the spotlight firmly on the contemporary mass media, exploring the conflicted representations of African Americans in today's screen-rich environments. There is a postmodern overtone here, suggesting that visual depictions are manufactured, the bearers of stereotypes and ideologies. The show, however, also affirms the modernist belief that a committed photographer can reveal something true and vital about the current moment.

Two new series from 2016 confront the ongoing murder of black citizens at the hands of police. A systemic injustice that the proliferation of cell phones and body cameras has now rendered impossible to ignore, these homicides have produced an ethical crisis that currently defines our nation. The "Usual Suspects" consists of ten black-and-white silkscreened text panels listing the names of recent victims, their physical data, and the time and place they were killed. Commemorated in separate works, these individuals are united by a common text, ending with the words: "Suspect killed. To date, no one has been charged in the matter." Through their dispassionate, quasi-bureaucratic language, Weems's panels emphasize the

brutal facts of their public murders, and remind us of the objectifying avenues of communication—from the discourses surrounding the law and justice systems to the news media and Facebook—that reify the victims, while also calling attention to their plight. The other series, "All the Boys," comprises archival pigment prints rendered in bluish grisaille portraying young African Americans wearing hoodies. Although photographically based, their portraits have been blurred slightly, giving them a painterly effect. In one, a young man is presented from the front and side, as if in a three-quarters-length mug shot. In the others, a single frontal portrait, partially obscured by a red rectangle—a metaphor for how color prevents us from



Carrie Mae Weems, *Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me - A Story in 5 Parts*, 2012. Video installation and mixed media. Dimensions variable.

seeing the person—is paired with a text panel that simulates a redacted police report. And by blurring the overall images, obscuring the faces, and partially occluding the texts, Weems creates more general allegories out of specific tragedies, demanding justice without exploiting the particular visages of those who have lost their lives.

While Weems's new prints and silkscreens memorialize the victims of police violence without directly using their likenesses, *All the Boys: Video in Three Parts* (2016) refuses to eschew this risky tactic. A mixture of staged and documentary footage, the video appropriates police and cell phone footage depicting the murders of Laquan McDonald, Eric Garner, and others to evoke the horror of an everyday reality where black people are killed for minor infractions. Through crowd shots filmed with a telephoto lens, the video's initial sequence emphasizes the camera as an instrument of surveillance and control. In its final sequence, Weems depicts organized mourners and ruminates via a voiceover on the unbearable nature of what she has witnessed. The violence of representation, the video suggests, must be balanced with the necessity of directly picturing evil and resolutely commemorating the dead.

A new series of nine color inkjet prints on canvas, "Scenes & Take" (2016) seems slightly more optimistic. They all present Weems, shot from the side or behind, as she contemplates the opulent sets built for contemporary TV shows such as *Empire* and *Scandal*, series created by prominent black producers, showrunners, and directors, that pay attention to African-American lives. Texts, printed next to the photographically based images, articulate fragmentary plot synopses centered on female characters who ponder the changes—both good and bad—that have taken place in the world of entertainment. The sets are scattered with the equipment of film production, thus exposing the cinematic apparatus. Standing in as both an example of and a witness to the growing success of the black creative class—some of whose most important members are either female or gay—Weems creates representations that celebrate the victories that have taken place, while suggesting that the struggle must continue. She also implies that a full sense of what it means to be black in America today can only emerge from interplay between the real and the imagined.

Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me (2012) an eighteen-and-a-half-minute mixed media video installation, explores Weems's relationship to history, art, and social activism, giving insight into her self-conception as a political artist. Consisting of a dark room with heavy, blood-red curtains framing an empty theatrical stage, it uses video projection on an invisible Mylar sheet to create a succession of ghostly images that fade in and out. As blues and pop songs play, a series of voiceovers evoke the Civil War, arts activism, athletic competition, and the mental anguish of a figure bent on revenge. Moving image sequences, which include appropriated news footage, historical reenactments, and isolated figures, appear, along with a staged tableau that recreates Marcel Duchamp's disturbing installation, *Étant donnés* (1946 – 66). Connecting the various sections is the presence of Weems, playing a morphing trickster figure, who embodies different characters ranging from an androgynous personage in an old-fashioned frockcoat and top hat to an awkward Playboy bunny. Alternately displaying herself to the audience and turning her back, the artist seems to exist as both the subject and the object of the spectacle she creates, reminding her viewers of how the creative individual depends upon and produces a past that is personal and collective at the same time. Open to a diverse range of sources and strategies and unafraid to mix the private with the common, the political artist, Weems suggests, inserts herself into contemporary events, revealing her struggle to make sense of them, as well as the ethical touchstones that guide her response. Given the results of last month's

election and the sexism, xenophobia, and racism that contributed to Donald Trump's shocking upset, Weems's embrace of diversity in her art, and her insistence on maintaining an attitude of dialectical openness and acceptance, seem prescient, vital, and even more necessary today.

CONTRIBUTOR

Matthew Biro

MATTHEW BIRO is Professor and Chair in the Department of the History of Art at the University of Michigan. He is the author of *Anselm Kiefer and the Philosophy of Martin Heidegger* (1998), *The Dada Cyborg: Visions of the New Human in Weimar Berlin* (2009), and *Anselm Kiefer* (2013). His reviews of contemporary art, film, and photography have appeared in *Artforum*, *Contemporary*, *Art Papers*, and *The New Art Examiner*.

Art & Photography / Who, What, Why

Carrie Mae Weems' Powerfully Subversive Oeuvre

— December 6, 2016 —

As the extraordinary provocateur's New York exhibition draws to a close, we take advantage of the welcome opportunity to look back on her formidable career thus far

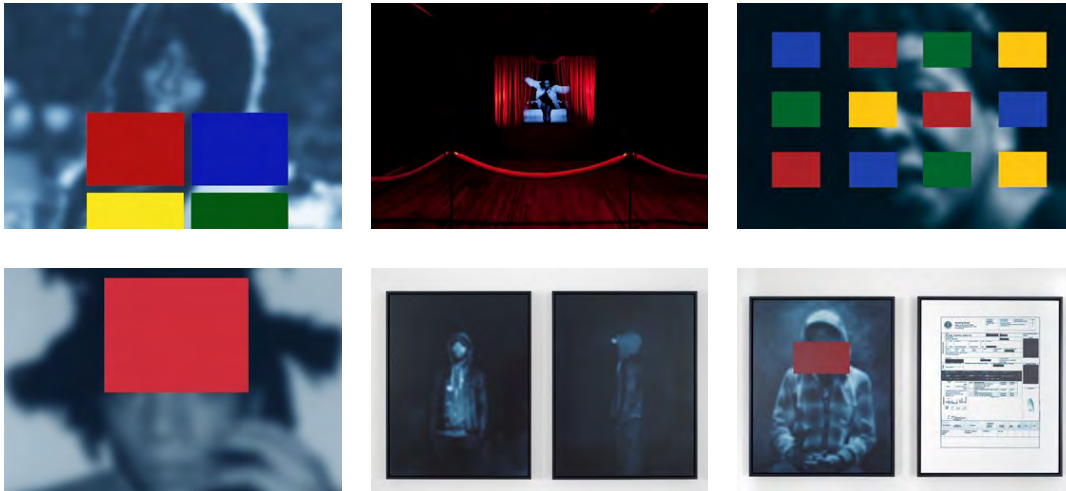


Untitled © Carrie Mae Weems, Courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery

Text Soianne Berner

Who? Ever since **Carrie Mae Weems** first picked up a camera, thanks to a 21st birthday gift from her then-boyfriend, she was convinced she would become a visual artist. That moment was 1976 New York, when the ramifications of the Civil Rights Movement was still being felt, and the Portland-born creative activist knew, as she has often recounted, that she would dedicate her lens to black women. 1976 was also the year when Weems made her first visits to the Studio Museum in Harlem, where a thriving avant-garde community of black

intelligentsia and African American artists would motivate her now 30-odd-year career. But, as Weems is often at pains to make plain, black female subjectivity would only serve as the entry point to explore much wider concerns, from individual and collective memory to gender, class, race, and cultural identity.



Carrie Mae Weems

12 images

If that makes for a rich and controversial well of issues, Weems' penchant for humour and storytelling buoys her work with sharp-witted grace. In fact it was not only via studies in the fine arts that Weems eventually pursued her passion for visual storytelling; in 1984 she enrolled in a graduate program in Folklore at Berkley, California, where insights into realms like folk art and performance studies, ethnomusicology, and race and coloniality powerfully lent themselves to Weems' picturing of narratives that spoke of personal and shared histories. From her early documentary photography to later staged images, performance, video and the use of written and spoken word, she has largely used herself as the subject, object, performer and director of her practice. Where cinema, art, history and popular culture lack black female protagonists, Weems effectively gives one centre stage.



Untitled (Man and Mirror) © Carrie Mae Weems, Courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery

What? You may know Weems for her 1990 Kitchen Table Series, the black and white photographs of the artist sitting alone at a kitchen table, or with various family members, children and lovers staging an array of domestic scenarios under the room's glowing light. Inflected with cinematic overtones, it was this seminal series allegorising the micro peaks and troughs of familial relationships – or the macro power dynamics of social structures – which brought critical acclaim to the now 63-year-old artist. As Weems herself has said, “I think the reason that the work has been able to speak so broadly is it speaks to our deeper humanity, but [I used] the African American subject to get to that. In other words, getting rid of that stereotype so this person's humanity shines through. That's the project, that's what I'm doing.”



BLACK WOMAN WITH CHICKEN

Black Woman with Chicken © Carrie Mae Weems, Courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery

Proving that beauty and radicalism can come hand in hand, in more recent artworks, Weems borrows from the lexicon of canonical art history. While in *Blue Notes* (2014), she overlays images of artists and singers like Jean-Michel Basquiat and Claudia Lennear with modernist coloured blocks, in the 2010 *Untitled (Colored People Grid)* Weems arranges portraits of black children in a Sol Le Witt-like grid – each time inserting the spectre of the Other into the artistic canon as we know, in order to rewrite the books. The telling configuration of a grid also makes an appearance in earlier works that rebuke a colonial tendency to categorise, classify and stereotype. Such rebukes, though, don't always relinquish her canny sense of humour, as in the 1987 photo-text *Black Woman with Chicken*.



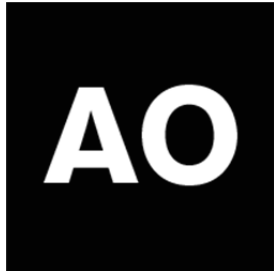
Untitled (Colored People Grid), 2010

© Carrie Mae Weems, Courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery

Why? It's easy to see why Weems, who was the subject of a 2014 Guggenheim retrospective, is so relentless in her artistic focus. As she recently said in an indelible interview for *Lenny*, "I realised at a certain moment that I could not count on white men to construct images of myself that I would find appealing or useful or meaningful or complex". Just as art history has traditionally failed to recognise the creative contributions of non-white communities and the issues they face, Weems is ever-conscious that cinema also lags behind. "I love Fellini. I love Woody Allen. I love the Coen brothers, but they're not interested in my black ass", she says. "We don't even occur to them as subjects. (...) I can't count on them to do my job. I can't count on them to think about me in any sort of serious way (...) I look at it as unrequited love. You know? I love them, but they ain't thinking about me. It's not really a complaint. It's just the reality. I build a form for myself that don't exist anyplace else."

Carrie Mae Weems is on show at Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, until December 10, 2016.

CREAHA, D. "CARRIE MAE WEEMS AT JACK SHAINMAN THROUGH DECEMBER 10TH, 2016." *ART OBSERVED*. NOVEMBER 8, 2016



NEW YORK – CARRIE MAE WEEMS AT JACK SHAINMAN THROUGH DECEMBER 10TH, 2016

November 8th, 2016



Carrie Mae Weems, *Work from the Scenes and Take Series* (2016), via Art Observed

Returning to New York City for her major solo exhibition in the city since her 2014 retrospective at the [Guggenheim](#), artist [Carrie Mae Weems](#) has brought a series of new works, spread across a broad range of media and techniques, to both of [Jack Shainman's](#) Chelsea exhibition spaces. Addressing both the ongoing violence against African-Americans at the hands of the police, as well as threads of cultural peripheries, power and representation in relation to concepts of the image and its performance. Drawing on diverse threads and themes, Weems's series of works is a striking orchestration of ongoing themes and thematics in the modern discourse of race in America.



Carrie Mae Weems, *All the Boys* (2016), via Art Observed

At the forefront of the show is a new series of works, *Scenes & Take*, which presents Weems's long-running alter-ego as a black-robed muse, wandering among the set pieces and props of various television programs in contemporary Hollywood. Each show addressed carries with it a call to modern depictions of blackness in the contemporary film and television industry. Shows like *Empire*, *How to Get Away With Murder*, and others make subtle appearances, paralleled with abstracted scripts that plot struggles, concepts and subject matter that underscore the psychological struggles and politics of representation that undergird each of these images.



Carrie Mae Weems, *Work from the Scenes and Take Series* (2016), via Art Observed

Nearby, the artist has returned to her *Blue Notes* series, depicting a range of black celebrities in shaded blue tones, contrasted with a series of blocks of clinically rendered primary colors. Presenting relationships

between the iconography of modern and contemporary art practice with the photographic reproduction of celebrity and fame, the artist's dialogue here is a strikingly elegant one, serving as a strong counterpoint her images in *Scenes & Take*. Playing on distance to her subjects, and the imagery that ultimately bounds each subject's relationship to the viewer, her pieces present the manifold acts of participation and representation that function within visual culture. Hers are ordered spaces, where the viewer's identification with the humanity of her chosen subjects must negotiate with an aesthetic qualifier that often blots out facial features and identifying characteristics.



Carrie Mae Weems (Installation View), via Art Observed

The show continues these threads of representation, performance and visibility at the gallery's 24th Street location, where Weems is showing a series of powerful condemnations of police brutality on the African-American body. Joining another series of *Blue Notes* works are a series of stark pieces presenting the conditions and police files of various police killings from the past years, showing both the situation and the bureaucratic documentation of lives cut short in the face of state violence. Combined with these works is the artist's video piece *All the Boys*, a fitting companion that offers not only a stark emotional underpinning for the documents and images presented, but the visual evidence of the killings themselves. Moving beyond an attempt at understanding or examining the killings, Weems presents them in all of their numbingly blatant violence, showing one African-American man after another gunned down. With each image, the viewer must contend with the evidence presented, and the often callous approach of the officers on camera. There is little room to process, as each image streams past, leaving the viewer with only an awareness of the scale and force of the impact these events leave on the communities they affect.



Carrie Mae Weems, *Work from the Scenes and Take Series* (2016), via Art Observed

Taken as a whole, Weems's new body of work runs through a wide range of visual and cultural signifiers, with *All the Boys* serving as the force that ultimately crystallizes the images and texts around them into a cohesive narrative of modernity. Delving into the representation of the African-American on camera, as victim of state violence or a beneficiary of modern culture, her works seek to plot and expose the system and makes both visible within the modern American experience, and in turn, how those systems shape the images themselves.

Carrie Mae Weems's work is on view through December 10th, 2016.

— D. Creaha



Carrie Mae Weems on a Career of Challenging Power and Black Representation in Art

ARTSY EDITORIAL
BY ANTWAUN SARGENT
NOV 1ST, 2016 12:35 AM



Installation view of Carrie Mae Weems, “Equivalents,” 2012, at Jack Shainman Gallery. Photo courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery.

On Friday evening, over two years after her traveling exhibition made its final stop at the Guggenheim Museum, artist Carrie Mae Weems sat on a green couch on the lower level of Jack Shainman Gallery’s 20th Street space. “There’s absolutely nothing in this exhibition that is”—fingers forming quotes in the air—“new,” she tells me as she faces a wall of her series of photographs, titled “Equivalents” (2012), part of the two-venue exhibition that spans both of the gallery’s Chelsea locations. “All of these are very old ideas that I’ve been exploring, thinking about, and struggling with for years.”

Since 1978, Weems has spent her career equally tracing and contesting power and the very specific ways it has informed representation, past and present. The artist’s seminal 1990 work of 20 black-and-white photographs

looking. A child watches her mother; a woman peers into a mirror; a group of female friends sit around exchanging expressions; a wife overlooks her husband. All the while the viewer is invited to gaze at how power, or the lack thereof, is racialized, feminized, or sexualized and impressed upon the body.



Portrait of Carrie Mae Weems by Jerry Klineberg, courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery.

Later that decade, Weems appropriated the 19th-century Harvard biologist Louis Agassiz's "Slave Daguerreotypes" from the 1850s, and other images. The resulting series, "From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried" (1995–6) presented 33 toned prints paired with text to examine how photography as a medium has contributed to the stereotyping of blackness. Weems examined how black people were presented as stereotypes like "a scientific profile," "a negroid type," and "mammie, mama, mother & then, yes confidant—ha." (The series is now a part of the Museum of Modern Art's collection.)

Picturing women and critiquing the art-historical canon are also persistent themes. In such works as "Family Pictures and Stories" (1981–82) and "Not Manet's Type" (1997), Weems contemplates race, gender, class, and how the black body is presented throughout the history of art.



Carrie Mae Weems, *All the Boys (Blocked 1)*, 2016. Image courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery.

Despite what Weems says, while the new show's ideas, motifs, and questions—like, what is power? How is it constructed, employed, and represented?—are the same, they are manifested through refreshingly new dynamics at Jack Shainman's galleries. On 24th Street, Weems created a series of photography, text, and video, titled "All the Boys" (2016), which evolved out of her performance project from earlier this year, *Grace Notes: Reflections For Now*. The series responds to the recent killings of young black men, women, and children by police officers in the U.S. In *All the Boys (Blocked 3)*, for instance, Weems presents a diptych of a blurred hooded black male behind a red color block, next to a Ferguson Police Department incident report with all identifying information blacked out as if it is classified.

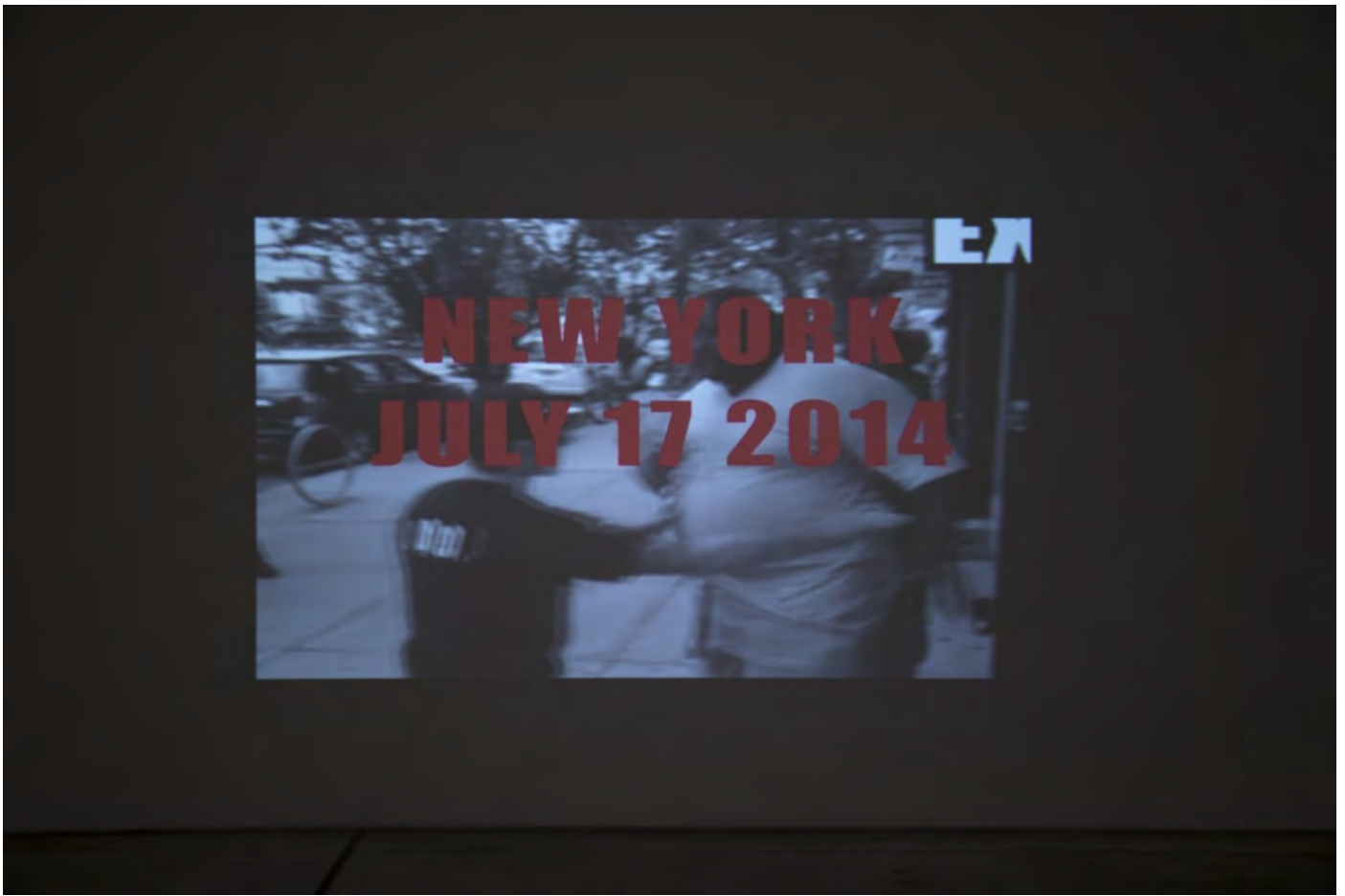
Lining one wall in the gallery is a series of text panels that provide the basic facts—age, name, date of death, race, height, and weight—of 10 unarmed victims of police shootings, including Philando Castile, Tanisha Anderson, and Eric Garner. The "Usual Suspects" all fit one single description, which Weems states as: "Matching the description of the alleged, perpetrator was stopped and/or apprehended, physically engaged, and shot at the scene. Suspect killed. To date, no one has been charged in the matter."



Left: Carrie Mae Weems, *Usual Suspects (Castile)*, 2016; Right: Carrie Mae Weems, *Usual Suspects (Anderson)*, 2016. Images courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery.

“Four years ago, I was working on a film project, and I invited a group of young men—musicians—to play music for me and they all arrived in hoodies,” Weems says. “Trayvon Martin had just been killed, maybe several months before and I had done a small piece around the tragedy of that. I asked the young men if I could photograph them.” She pauses and asks rhetorically, “What does it mean to wear a hood?” I say, “This idea of the hood has not only travelled throughout our community, but has also fascinated artists. David Hammons’s *In the Hood* (1993), the young photographer John Edmonds has a billboard up on 29th Street of a figure, presumably black, in a hood, and you now with ‘All the Boys.’” She quickly replies, “*Certain* artists.” We both laugh.

“When I made those photographs, I just lived with them for a long time. And then, last year, I decided after the killing of the Emanuel 9 [in Charleston], I wanted to say something about the moment in which we live.” She adds, “I also wanted to produce a work that explored the question of grace. And in exploring the question of grace you have to explore the question of humanity.” Jabbing her hands into the air, Weems says, “The thing that really struck me about the ways in which people have handled this tragedy, whether we are looking at the young people who have started Black Lives Matter or the President singing ‘Amazing Grace,’ is we are continuing to ask for our humanity to be recognized. And at the same time offering the generosity of spirit even as our young men are being murdered. That’s kind of extraordinary and what really motivated the piece.” In *All the Boys: Video in Three Parts* (2016), in a dark back room, Weems uses the moving image as a device to monumentalize her notions of grace.



Carrie Mae Weems, *All the Boys: Video in Three Parts*, 2016. Photo courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery.

On 20th Street, the exhibition shifts to record how color has also impacted art, TV, and film. “Blue Notes” (2014) references Weems’s earlier series, “Slow Fade to Black” (2010), which used the cinematic fade to consider the opportunities black starlets were not granted simply because of the color of their skin. With “Blue Notes,” Weems mixes it up, adding in white artists like Andy Warhol to draw contrast to Jean-Michel Basquiat and Mick Jagger, who in *Blue Notes (Nick and Lisa Fischer)* (2014), is blocked out, in front of his former back-up singer. The color blocking suggests that oppression not only happens because of color, but gender, too. “It is very difficult to move beyond color,” says Weems, sipping a glass of red wine. “On the other hand I am very interested in color theory. What happens when you mix those colors? What do you get then?”

In “Scenes & Take” (2016), another series on view, Weems seems to be concerned with changes in representation that have occurred contemporarily in Hollywood for black actresses. Using performance, she reprises her role as the muse—seen in her “Museums” series (2006–present)—which she characterizes as “a woman of a certain age, wearing a fabulous, sexy, and innocuous black dress.” Weems inserts her muse, who never gazes at the camera, into the worlds of Shonda Rhimes’s “Scandal,” and “How to Get Away With Murder,” and Lee Daniels’ “Empire.”



Carrie Mae Weems, *Scenes & Take (Great Expectations)*, 2016. Image courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery.

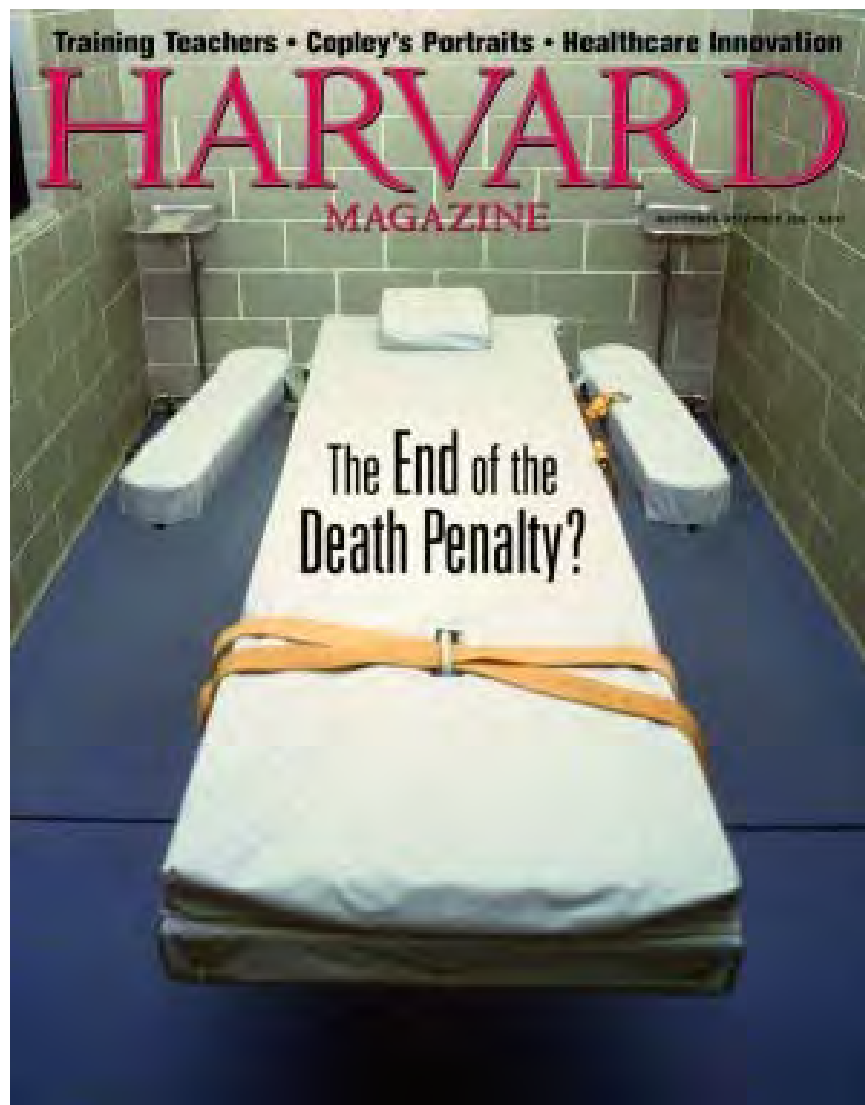
“There’s a piece called *Director’s Cut*, that says, ‘She presents herself at various auditions and Woody Allen says ‘Are you kidding?’ Demme says, ‘What?’ And Scorsese says, ‘No! Get the fuck out of here!’,” Weems says laughing. For the artist, “*Scenes & Take*” playfully acknowledges the state of pop culture in 2016. “I was looking at these shows and saying, Kerry Washington, a star of a contemporary show, Viola Davis, a star of a contemporary show, all written by black people who are all sort of changing what is happening in popular culture.” She adds, “I wanted to stand in and position myself in sites where I thought important cultural shifts and shifts in representations are taking place.”

Those shifts are also apparent in Weems’s own 15-minute cinematic tour de force, *Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me* (2014). The slow-moving video installation employs a level of inventiveness that rests on a 19th-century optical illusion film technique, known as “Pepper’s ghost,” which presents images by Weems and of the photographer Lonnie Graham—historical moments, and works of art as apparitions on a shrouded stage. “*Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me* explores, in a *straaange* way, a history of segregation,” Weems says. She pauses, then adds, “When you break it all down, invariably, I am always interested in questions of representation and questions of power—that is the thing that hounds me.”

—Antwaun Sargent

Scherlis, Lily. "Getting Out of The Way of Work." *Harvard Magazine*. October 17, 2016

HARVARD MAGAZINE





VISUAL ARTS

“Getting Out of the Way of the Work”

by LILY SCHERLIS

10.17.16

THERE’S A LINE OUT the Cooper Gallery’s doors, wrapping back around Peet’s. We’re queuing between those old-style red-velvet aisle markers, printed tickets in hand. When we finally make it inside, they make it worth our while: I sample some kind of fritter that seems to involve crab and wasabi, and a spear of asparagus wrapped in bacon. “How old are you?” the caterer asks as I pluck a glass of wine from his tray. “Twenty-one,” I say, which is true, and he gives me a look of disinterested incredulity but doesn’t ask for ID. I’m probably the only one he had to ask: the crowd in the atrium-like entry is well-dressed and over 30.

We’re here for a tour of *I once knew a girl...*, which exhibits the work of Carrie Mae Weems. It’s the Cooper Gallery’s first solo-artist show, and Weems’s art certainly merits such a spotlight. A 2013 recipient of a MacArthur “genius grant” and a 2015 W.E.B. Du Bois Medalist at Harvard, Weems is best known for her photography, which has done groundbreaking work to provoke dialogue around how power relations—especially race and gender—operate in visual art and beyond.

The remarks begin: Hutchins Center director and Fletcher University Professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. gives a brief background of the center’s art gallery, made possible, he notes, by the generosity of “zillionaire” Ethelbert Cooper. Gallery director and exhibition

curator Vera Ingrid Grant introduces Carrie Mae Weems. We are reminded that food is not permitted to accompany us up the ramp into the exhibit space. At long last, Weems herself receives the mic, and we're off. Sets of heels click-clack forward in a rush to be right up there with her.

The interior of the Cooper, designed by architect David Adjaye, snakes back into the depths of the city block in a U-shape. Its atrium is high-ceilinged and full of natural light; the true exhibition space is dark-walled, intimate, and pleasantly cavernous: the antithesis of the ice-cube gallery. Weems' disembodied voice—rich and soothing—booms from the speakers at a measured tempo. She begins with a discussion of her desire to honor W.E.B. Du Bois by naming a flower for him. Subsequent conversations with a team of botanists revealed that she was in luck: a new variety of peony had recently been discovered and needed a name. The W.E.B. Du Bois peony was born. That project is an especially relevant choice for this particular exhibition, which grew out of her association with the Hutchins as a Du Bois medal recipient. As her narrative penetrates deeper into the core of her works and her practice, the attendees weave their way into the heart of the gallery. Progress is slow: bodies pack the rooms, and I've lagged behind, too full of asparagus to elbow my way to the front. I'm resigned to seeing each piece only after Weems has already moved on to describing works still ahead, out of sight. I like to take my time with the images, anyway.

The exhibit is divided into three themes that orient viewers within Weems's body of work: *Beauty*, *Legacies*, and *Landscapes*. While Weems discusses *Legacies*, which takes up the lower part of the U of the gallery and includes a series of coloring-book-style renditions of the Obama family and images of the Du Bois peony, I'm still looking at *Beauty*, by the entryway. I am struck by the triptych *Framed By Modernism*: three photographs that depict Weems, nude, posing in a backgrounded corner of Robert Colescott's studio while he, head in his hands, turns away from her. Colescott is known for satirical personal reflection on the experience of being African-American. The photographs include text where Weems addresses the painter: "You framed the likes of me and I framed you," she writes. "But we were both framed by Modernism." As curator and art journalist A.M. Weaver puts it, Weems is "purposefully casting herself as the object of the male gaze," but reinscribing herself as the subject of the encounter. In the series *Not Manet's Type*, which leads attendees up the ramp, she speaks not only through the images but through the words that frame them, asserting her voice as an African-American woman and a maker of great art while making visible the bad politics of art that excludes or objectifies black and female subjects.



Weems addresses the crowd in the Cooper Gallery's "Long Gallery"
 Photograph by Liesl Clark Photography

It's a bona fide audiovisual experience. Weems's voice booms down from above, raining over the din of inarticulate "mms" of nonverbal art appreciation. There are three discrete ceiling speakers in the gallery, but the narrow hall between the two main exhibition rooms is left out of the audio immersion: I get stuck in the middle and have the strange experience of hearing her speak from both sides at once.

In the end we are all packed around the artist in the back of the gallery, with *Landscapes*. The gallery layout dead-ends: we are a jostling horde in a dimly lit space, enveloped in sound and image and in too-close proximity to each other's bodies. Here is my favorite: the Museum Series. Each of its images focuses on a stark solitary figure, immobile, in all black, posing in whatever well-lit plaza allows appreciation of the great pale behemoth of the particular museum sprawling around it. Weems describes this figure as her muse, a conduit for the viewer to inhabit the space in which she stands. In her black skirt and tight bun and face turned toward the architecture, the muse's message is clear: "I see you, Museum." The series grew out of indignation about the exclusion of African and African-

American artists from the world's monumental museums, and a desire to use her own physicality to reveal the power that the vast, looming architecture of a museum has over those of us who inhabit it. I am captivated by the figure's solitude and immobility: she stands still amid the flow of tourists filtering in and out.

Weems, meanwhile, is discussing her process, emphasizing the necessity of "getting out of the way of the work" so that it can develop unimpeded. I sympathize: from my perch in the corner, I'm trying to get a shot of each of these muses to see them in more detail. I'm leaning around torsos with my phone camera zoomed in all the way: each of my pictures is framed by the big dark shapes of fellow gallery-goers' bodies. The sound system cuts in and out; someone rushes to replace Weems's microphone.

In the days following the tour, I have the chance to discuss it with Sarah Lewis, assistant professor of history of art and architecture and of African and African American studies, who attended the event and has also curated Weems's work. Lewis tells me that she would be unable to teach her current course, "Vision and Justice: The Art of Citizenship"—"which is really about the way that art offers a corrective to the mismeasurement of human life"—without Weems's work. (Weems, in fact, visited the class that week; she and Lewis are also good friends.) The course inspired the theme of the issue of *Aperture* Lewis guest-edited, which included commentary on Weems's Kitchen Table Series by important voices in theater, photography, and art history. Lewis mentions what Fredrick Douglass called "thought-pictures": "imaginative visions inspired by pictures that crystalize in our minds about the world around us." For Lewis, Weems's art was foundational in filling these galleries-of-the-mind with images that serve as "a benevolent agitational force to get us to see the full humanity of subjects who have been definitionally left out of the idea of citizenship."

Weems ended her talk by noting the need for museums to reexamine themselves as institutions in order to remain relevant across the next decades. I'm still thinking about the woman in black: I imagine Weems standing before Widener, or Memorial Hall. Students and faculty circulate in and out, moving along to their next commitment. She remains and continues to look.

Lily Scherlis '18, a joint concentrator in comparative literature and visual and environmental studies, is one of this magazine's 2016-2017 Berta Greenwald Ledecy Undergraduate Fellows.



Black Men Keep Getting Killed by Police, Carrie Mae Weems Offers a Graceful Reflection

by VICTORIA L. VALENTINE on Aug 10, 2016 • 9:10 pm



A behind-the-scenes look at "Grace Notes: Reflections for Now" by Carrie Mae Weems | Video by Art21

AMID THE TRAGEDY AND VIOLENCE of black lives snuffed out at a Charleston, S.C., church during Bible study and gunned down on the streets of countless cities across the United States at the hands of police, artist **Carrie Mae Weems** is staging a graceful rebuttal.

Primarily known for her photography, Weems has written and directed a multimedia stage performance, a blend of elegiac and contemplative poetry, song, dance and video that reflects on the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and so many others. "Grace Notes: Reflections for Now" was performed at the Spoletto Festival in Charleston in June and will be presented at Yale Repertory Theatre in September.

In anticipation of the Yale staging, Art21 released an exclusive short video featuring excerpts from the performance and Weems meeting with the cast, talking through the motivation and concept of the work.

"You write something not because you have the answer. You write something because you know you have to work through it," Weems says in the video.

"Well, what is this piece? And then I thought, 'Oh, well really this piece is very much like "Antigone" isn't it?' There are only like 10 stories in the world that we keep coming back to and I thought this is really the story of a woman and a community that is trying to figure out how to bury her brothers, and they are denying her the right to do that because they're denying that it has even happened, or that it warrants our attention. And she is saying, 'I'm gonna bury him. I'm going to bury him right.'"

“I thought this is really the story of a woman and a community that is trying to figure out how to bury her brothers, and they are denying her the right to do that because they’re denying that it has even happened, or that it warrants our attention.” — Carrie Mae Weems, Art21



"Grace Notes" is being presented at the Yale Repertory Theatre on Sept. 9 and 10. | Screen Shot, Art21 Video

"Grace Notes" is curated by Sarah Lewis and features a cast of creatives including vocalists Eisa Davis, Alicia Hall Moran, and Imani Uzuri, and poets Aja Monet and Carl Hancock Rux. The staging—minimalist and abstracted—features Weems seated with her back to the audience at a table with a typewriter. There is a bare-branched tree, a round clock on the wall, and the sound of somber jazz is ever-present. At various moments a black man is running in place on a treadmill, members of Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity are stepping, and the cast recites prose and verse and sings from atop white platforms.

In the real world, racial and police tensions are heightened. The work reflects on these trying times and community tragedies and asks questions about how to change the narrative.

"I am deeply aware of the stress. The stress that's put on our community the stress that's put on black women. The stress that's put on black men. I mean, it's not a play. It's really, you know, this battle," Weems says.

Writing in Artforum, Charleston-based Chase Quinn reported on the Spoleto performance and related programming and wondered where the artistic reflection on what he describes as "the recent carnage across America" leaves us in the end. Quinn wrote in part:

"At a talk at the Charleston Library Society the afternoon before the second performance, Weems described grace as "holding on to your humanity and integrity, your core, in the face of all question and all forces." If, as she suggests, grace is inherent to survivors of oppression and violence, the African American experience becomes a perfect metaphor for grace. Each new day a mercy for unprotected black and brown bodies.

"Yet as I left the theater, though moved by the stunning visuals and the music—Moran delivered a barn-burning rendition of "Amazing Grace"—I felt a tug of dissatisfaction with the conclusion. More specifically, I felt like I knew this story, which seemed all too familiar in the telling. I, like many, had been weaned on images of imperiled black people (mostly men, of course) who, in the face of tragedy, joined together in song and struggle. Songs like "We Shall Overcome"—anthems of the civil rights movement—were a requisite of my education as a young black man. Conveniently, for white supremacist systems of power peddling violence, that popular education builds on a simplified narrative, one whose moral is that peaceful resistance

Indeed. What now? CT

BOOKSHELF

A couple of recent books explore the practice of Carrie Mae Weems. Last month, "Carrie Mae Weems: Kitchen Table Series," which explores one of her early and most acclaimed bodies of work, was published. The exhibition catalog "Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video," coincided with her mid-career survey at the Guggenheim Museum and includes full-color images of works from throughout her career and contributions by Henry Louis Gates Jr., Franklin Sirmans, Robert Storr, and Deborah Willis.

POETIC

On the eve of being presented the National Artist Award by Anderson Ranch, Carrie Mae Weems talks about being part of a "phenomenal" generation.

JUSTICE

BY CHARLOTTE BURNS

Carrie Mae Weems tells stories about class and power, about the inequalities of race and gender. She inserts herself into history to remind us that it is merely a fiction told by the victor, a tall tale that ignores those who were trampled upon. Weems casts new perspectives on the past, traveling through time in her photographs, films and performances to question what it means to be black, what it means to be female and what it means to be treated unfairly.

In person, Weems is coolly elegant and possesses one of the best voices in the business, all plum tones and poise. She came to the art world's attention in 1990 with her *Kitchen Table Series*, a suite of black-and-white narrative photographs in which she and other models enacted domestic scenes in a narrow and starkly lit room. The career-making project posited her as both Everywoman and specifically as an African-American woman. Other works such as *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* (1995) show how photography can mold racism. In this series, she appropriated images of African-American subjects, including daguerreotypes of slaves in the American South that were commissioned in 1850 by the Swiss naturalist Louis Agassiz. She enlarged the works, colored them blood red and overlaid them with a narrative of song titles, literary references and folklore saying things like, "God Bless the Child," "some said you were the spitting image of evil" and "a Negroid type."

In recent years, recognition has come thick and fast: In 2012, she was awarded one of the first Medals of Art from the US Department of State; in the few years since 2013, she has been presented with a whopping 15 honors, including the much-coveted MacArthur Foundation "Genius" award. Her 2014 retrospective at the Guggenheim was, shockingly, the first exhibition the institution had ever devoted to a female African-American artist.

This summer, she will receive a National Artist Award from the Anderson Ranch Arts Center in Aspen. "I'm a lucky girl," Weems says. "There is nothing like being recognized by your colleagues and people in the field, especially considering the great landscape of artists we have."

The prizes don't change the way she thinks about her work, although "reputation affords you the opportunity to present the work consistently,

which is one thing many artists lack." She likes working with other artists and uses her influence to create a platform. "You see it in the way she conducts her life," says Jack Shainman, her gallerist since 2008, who will be mounting an exhibition in October of mostly new work. "She's always engaged in projects that involve other voices besides her own. So many young artists tell me that, if not for Carrie, they wouldn't be an artist—she's a role model."

At the core of her art is a "deep interest in having engaged conversations around the meaning of our lives and times with a larger public, in achieving a complex dialogue," Weems says. "There resides in me a very intense drive to respond creatively to the world around me and to ask some of the difficult questions that lead me through the course of my life and which clarify the path for me, as an individual and as a women."

What really excites Weems is to see her work in context, she says: "It doesn't exist in a vacuum. It's part of the larger world of art and culture." Her work and that of other African-American artists is now the mainstream, no longer a sideshow. It is exhibited, discussed and sought after by a world that would previously have shunned it: "We are the first significant generation to create a substantial shift in the way contemporary art practice is understood," she says. "It occurred to me recently that I am amongst a group of artists who have reimagined and repositioned new possibilities within contemporary art practice. Artists like Mark Bradford, Theaster Gates, Kehinde Wiley, Mickalene Thomas, Lorna Simpson, have broken new ground in artmaking—this is phenomenal. We are a generation of artistic inventors.

"It's all about the time and place of your historic moment, and we've come along at a time when things are cracking open so we're responding to this shift economically, politically and culturally," she continues. "This isn't just about black creative expression or artistic production. It has profound implications and is a major contribution to art and history.

"I am thrilled to be part of a movement in this country—which will be a majority-minority country by the year 2020," she says. "It has great significance for the way culture is understood, and the work museums and galleries will have to show."



The artist appears in her *Untitled (Woman and Phone)*, 1990, part of her career-making *Kitchen Table Series*.

Usually the term *art world* is a grandiose touch, a misnomer that really means, depending on the circumstances, famous artists and museum personnel, people who attend art fairs, the 200 or so blessed souls who bid on record-setting lots at auction, or the folks who claim to understand what's written in *Artforum*. But for the lean, low-profile outfit known as Art in Embassies, the global connotation fits. A cadre of career employees of the U.S. Department of State, AIE maintains operations in more than 170 countries, and the annual visitor count at the many temporary exhibitions and permanent collections it is in charge of easily exceeds those of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art combined. It is, in short, one of the most influential and farthest-reaching programs on earth.

Created during the Kennedy administration, AIE can claim those attendance figures because of a simple reality: U.S. foreign service offices granted 9.9 million visas in the last year on record, and artworks installed by the program are in view of applicants. In the new embassy in Santo Domingo, for example, which processes more than 55,000 visas a year, a huge AIE commission faces the sunlit hall where visitors wait for appointments: a vibrant portrait by Kehinde Wiley (*right and below*) of four aspiring artists from the Dominican Republic.

"Initially we called ourselves a global museum," says chief curator Virginia Shore, who, with her staff of seven, is based on the sixth floor of the Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations in Arlington, Virginia. "And we soon realized that's exactly what we're not. Whatever these spaces are, they're not a museum, and this is part of the appeal for the artists we work with." ➤➤➤

➤➤➤ In the program's 15 years under Shore, out of sight of most Americans, AIE has expanded its mission and vastly multiplied the value of its holdings. When she started, as an intern in the last year of the first Bush administration, the total value of works on loan was roughly \$10 million; now the value of works on loan to the State Department and those acquired for permanent collections in new embassies (as the Wiley was) is approaching half a billion dollars. "We believed that art could be more than just an accent or part of ambassadorial furnishings, which is how some people saw us for a long time," Shore says.

Starting in the late '90s, she and the other curators began to talk up the program to museums, galleries, art collectors, and artists, urging them to lend pieces and commissioning new ones. Artists, they argued, are a type of ambassador, ones who specialize in inspiration and who can express American ideals, culture, history, or identity in places where such messages are critical.

The expansion coincided with a building boom for the State Department. After the 1998 bombings of embassies in East Africa, which killed more than 200, Congress passed the Secure Embassies Construction and Counterterrorism Act (SECCA), which set aside billions for more secure facilities. In one of the first embassies built to the new standards, in Moscow, AIE installed its first permanent collection, with works by 13 artists, including Pat Steir (an American of Russian heritage), and 12 glass sculptures donated by Dale Chihuly. That precedent has now been institutionalized, and one half of one percent of the building budgets is set aside for the program.

That percentage is not an arbitrary figure; it's the amount the General Services Administration allots for art in government buildings at home. And since the costs of the new, highly fortified embassies—with their mandatory hundred-foot setbacks from the nearest road, their bombproof walls and ballistic glass—can be ➤➤➤



NAVY MEN

When Secretary of State John Kerry presented Kehinde Wiley with the State Department's Medal of Arts in 2015, he told the artist, "I need to get that suit."

"I CAN'T TELL YOU THE NUMBER OF TIMES OUR VISITORS HAVE BEEN TAKEN ABACK," SAYS PATRICK GASPARD: "THIS IS NOT THE ART I WOULD EXPECT IN THE HOME OF THE U.S. AMBASSADOR."

TRIPLE THREAT

Carrie Mae Weems, and two of her photographs, at the Shainman gallery, New York City.

ESCADA TOP; CHRISTIAN LOUBOUTIN PUMPS; SIDNEY GARBER NECKLACE AND BRACELET

DIPLOMACY



CARRIE MAE WEEMS

The artist's award-winning photographs, films, and videos often feature tableaux: a family around a kitchen table, figures in poses familiar from history. But when Weems herself gets in front of the camera, she can't sit still—arms thrown wide, legs on the table, all in such rapid succession you wonder why modeling is considered a young person's game. Her work has, from the beginning, focused on the consequences of racism, power, and gender inequality, and she is something of an ambassador herself when it comes to promoting her fellow female artists. It was Weems whom Shore tapped when she needed art

to fill the New York residence of the U.S. ambassador to the UN before a visit from the African delegation. "I had no idea my pieces would be included until I arrived at the party," says the artist, who had spoken highly of the work of Lorna Simpson and Shinique Smith. In fact, there were four Weems photographs in Susan Rice's suite, on the 42nd floor of the Waldorf Astoria. "They were large and dominated the space," she says, still clearly impressed by that and the event. "As with all parties, people start to leave, and finally there are five people left having a drink: me, Lorna, Shinique, Ambassador Rice, and her husband, having a great conversation about her new position."

→ astronomical (the price tag of the new embassy in London, slated to open in 2017, is rumored to be nearing a billion dollars), the sliver that goes to AIE is nothing to sneeze at. Still, as anyone who follows the art market will realize, even 5 percent of a billion dollars will not buy a lot. And, of course, the biggest budgets go with the largest embassies. London's will cover 500,000 square feet, more than twice the size of the new Whitney Museum.

One way AIE has adapted to budgetary constraints is by presenting an encyclopedic range of American art, including works by quilters, sculptors, potters, photographers, glassmakers, Native American weavers, lithographers, and muralists. Key pieces by well-known regional artists—say, Barbara Ernst Prey, a Maine watercolorist—take the place of comparable works by pricier artists. Another budget stretcher: Artists who command high prices will lend works for extended periods for next to nothing, as Jeff Koons did with his sculpture *Tulips* outside the embassy in Beijing, or they'll work for well below their standard fees, as Mark Bradford (page 139) is doing for the new embassy in London.

The program is so extensive that you can easily spot currents in American art, one of the most important being the internationally collected African-American artists photographed for these pages, all of whom have responded with significant works. Their motives for signing on vary. They're proud to represent their country or eager to engage with a new audience; they're fans of the art or a particular country, or devoted to certain principles that fit well with America's diplomatic message. But all were particularly responsive to AIE's cultural exchange programs, which sometimes pair the work of U.S. artists with local ones in exhibits at the embassies or link artists in collaborations. When Mickalene Thomas (page 144) got a commission to create a mural on the fortified walls outside the new embassy in Dakar, Senegal, the work grew into a collaboration with an emerging Senegalese collage artist called Piniang. "I wanted people walking by to feel as if this façade, this huge wall that divides the people and the embassy, was really not a division but an extension of welcome," Thomas says.

These cultural exchanges also dovetail with one of AIE's original mandates: to provide art for the homes of ambassadors, one of the great perks of the job. Incoming ambassadors meet with the program's curators to discuss their diplomatic priorities and how art might complement their messages. Some take a straightforward approach: They'd like art that looks like home. Others

are more idiosyncratic. When Republican senator Dan Coats of Indiana was ambassador to Germany, he asked for help organizing an exhibition, "Art from the American Heartland," that he hoped would cover themes of family, faith, farming, and fun. Some appointees are already sophisticated collectors, and they collaborate with AIE's curators to create wide-ranging contemporary exhibitions. James Costos, a former HBO executive who is now ambassador to Spain, has in his residence works by Robert Rauschenberg and Josef Albers, and Glenn Ligon's neon *America* is opposite Julie Mehretu's *Plover's Wing* in the formal dining room.

What many ambassadors are coming to realize is that the impact of art can be profound; it can even prove useful in advancing an agenda. In Madagascar an exhibition of landscapes by two *National Geographic* photographers provided the occasion for the U.S. ambassador to discuss environmental efforts with the Chinese ambassador. Patrick Gaspard, the ambassador to South Africa, set up a series of talks in Cape Town and Johannesburg with Ellen Susman (then AIE's director), South African artists, and several African-American artists whose works were in his home; their discussions on race

drew overflow audiences, both black and white.

"This is a tool that needs to be further exploited," Gaspard says. "When you walk into the foyer of our home, two dramatic works greet you: a Rob Pruitt portrait of a young woman and a Kehinde Wiley portrait of a young man with a goatee and a little bit of bling. I can't tell you the number of times our visitors have been taken aback: 'This is not what I would expect in the home of the U.S. ambassador.' For young black South Africans, it lets them know immediately how much of a shared experience there is between us." «



MOD SQUAD

The AIE team (from left): Jamie Arbolino, Imtiaz Hafiz, Sally Mansfield, Welmoed Laanstra, Sarah Tanguy, Camille Benton, chief curator Virginia Shore, and director Ellen Susman. ALL CLOTHING BY BROOKS BROTHERS; SHOES BY JIMMY CHOO, PAUL ANDREW, AND CHRISTIAN LOUBOUTIN. FOR DETAILS SEE PAGE 175.

See an Iconic Look at Life Around the Kitchen Table

By Sarah Spellings



Untitled (Woman and Daughter with Makeup). Photo: Carrie Mae Weems

American artist Carrie Mae Weems's defining work, *Kitchen Table Series*, consists of portraits of herself interacting with others around the eponymous piece of household furniture. The prolific contemporary artist is best known for her exploration of relationships and the human condition across many mediums including text, fabric, audio, digital images, and video.

In her 1990 series, Weems explored what she once called "the battle around the family ... monogamy ... and between the sexes, (<http://www.artbook.com/9788862084628.html>)" anchored by the table and hanging lamp.

The photos are set side by side and accompanied by their textual partners for the first time in *Carrie Mae Weems: Kitchen Table Series* (<http://www.amazon.com/Carrie-Mae-Weems-Kitchen-Table/dp/8862084625/>), out April 26 from Damiani/Matsumoto. In them, her characters smoke, teach, and embrace, acting out daily domestic life under the camera's lens. Click ahead to see the makeup, the kisses, and the cigarettes.



"Untitled (Woman standing alone)" © Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Carrie Mae Weems Reflects on Her Seminal, Enduring Kitchen Table Series

"I knew what it meant for *me*, but I didn't know what it would mean historically," the artist says of her now iconic photographs.

April 7, 2016 4:28 PM | by Stephanie Eckardt

Decades ago in Northampton, Massachusetts, Carrie Mae Weems began devoting a part of every single day to photographing herself at her kitchen table. Obsessive in telling the story of the woman she was playing—whom we follow through the course of relationships with her lover, her friends, and her daughter—Weems knew the series would be important to her. She didn't realize, though, that it would take on historical significance, too, paving the way for a generation of women artists concerned with their own representation, as well as in conversations of race and relationships to boot. Since then, Weems has landed a MacArthur “genius grant” and around 50 solo shows, including the Guggenheim's first retrospective of an African-American woman. And her *Kitchen Table Series* has been equally enduring, making its way into plenty of books and museums over the years. It's now finally getting a stand-alone copy, out at the end of April from Damiani. Here, Weems reflects on why it's as relevant as ever.

How do you feel about this series now, over 30 years on?

It's interesting. I started working on it in like 1989 and I finished it in 1990, so it's been around for a long time. I really do think of it as a seminal body of work—it was the coming together of many, many, many sorts of stops and starts and trials and errors, just that sort of struggle of a young artist to discover the nuance of my own voice, my own photographic style, my own vocal utterance. All those things came together in this piece. I still find it remarkable, and I'm still completely surprised by it, and how it's still so completely contemporary. It's very difficult to discern when the work was made; it could have been made 30 years ago, or it could have been made 30 days ago. The

sense of time is really displaced within the work. At least I think that that's true.

Did you have a sense that it was going to be such a seminal work at the time?

No, but I knew that it was important for me. I worked on it constantly, every single day for months and months and months. I knew that I was making images unlike anything I had seen before, but I didn't know what that would mean. I knew what it meant for *me*, but I didn't know what it would mean historically, within the terms of a graphic history.



It started with you trying to create images you thought didn't exist at that point—ones that properly represented women, and black women in particular. Would you say that those images now exist today?

Oh yes, I think there are certainly more women known to us who are making important and seminal work focused on the dynamic and complex lives of women. People like [Mickalene Thomas](#), [Cindy Sherman](#), and Lorna Simpson have come along, and all of us sort of stand in a line, marking a trajectory that's deeply concerned with the constructed image and representation of the female subject. Yet I think the [Kitchen Table] images are more current now than ever before, and I'm still very much aware of the ways in which women are discounted: They're undervalued within the world generally, and within the art world in particular. And of course that was something that came up with the Academy Awards this year, right? There's still sort of a dearth, a lack of representational images of women. And not, you know, like strong, powerful, and capable, that kind of bullshit, but rather just images of black women in the world, in the

domain of popular culture. I think it's one of the reasons that Kitchen Table still proves to be so valuable, or invaluable, to so many women, and not just black women, but white women and Asian women; and not just women, but men as well, have really come to me about the importance of this work in their lives. I find it remarkable.

Why did you originally decide to put yourself in the photos, since the series wasn't specifically about you?

Because I was the only person around. It really is true. I work often and a lot, and in this case, sometimes I would work at six in the morning or three in the afternoon. I was just simply available. I began to understand, too, that I'm very interested in the performative, and that's one of the things that the work has actually taught me. I use my body as a landscape to explore the complex realities of the lives of women.

Do you still keep in touch with the others in the photos?

No, not really. It was so many years ago. They were my neighbors, people that I found on the street. The little girl that's on the cover—I don't remember her name anymore, though it's probably in my files—I saw her one day chasing a boy on a bicycle, I think. I thought, 'There's my girl, there she is.' And she *looks* like me, she looks like she could be my daughter. Some of them are friends and some of them are colleagues, all living in Northampton, Massachusetts, which is where the work was made. I go back, maybe once a year or something like that. The apartment isn't there anymore, but I do have friends in the area.



This serphotos, but there's a large text component, too.

How do you see the relationship between the two?

I added the text just as I was wrapping up, and it was wonderful. A man had come to visit me, and we had this wonderful talk about men and women, about our relationships, and he left and then I took a long drive. I always drive with my tape recorder, and I started reciting this text. By the time I got home, it was done, and I went upstairs to my computer and transcribed it. But you know, I've always thought that both the photographs and text operate quite independently, and together they form yet a third thing, something that is dynamic and complex and allows you to read something else about the photographs. I don't think of them as being necessarily dependent on one another. Rather, they exist side by side, in tandem.

Would you say that the series is as much about black representation as it is about women?

I think it's important in relationship to black experience, but it's not about race. It's not the thing that's foremost important about the work at all. But I think it can be used in that way, for sure.

Do you think it's been interpreted as the main point of the work?

Well yes, because I think that most work that's made by black artists is considered to be about blackness. [*Laughs.*]

Unlike work that's made by white artists, which is assumed to be universal at its core. I really sort of claimed the same space, and I think the work in many ways is universal at its core, but we can certainly also use it to talk about the position of black representation. That was not the intent of making the work, but it can function in that way, and to talk about how photographs are constructed, since it uses the tropes of documentary but in highly constructed, staged images. We can use it to talk about the relationships between men and women, women and children, women and women, and to have large discussions about the issue of the representations of blacks and their relationships. Maybe that's one of the reasons why the work has sort of stood the test of time and entered the culture in this unique way: You can use it to have many, many kinds of discussions about things that are going on in the world today. You know, we know that for the most part the work that's made by women is simply not valued in the same way as work that's made by men. It just isn't, and it's something that we have to struggle against consistently, persistently, if we want to see change in that area. I'm looking forward to a leveling of the playing field.

Have you found your treatment as an artist has gotten better? You've definitely found some mainstream success along the way.

No. I mean of course, you know, I'm acknowledged, I'm offered awards, and those kinds of things, they're really wonderful. But I'm aware of what it means not to have the work valued seriously, so that you're always struggling for a fair price for the work, that you have to fight for that.

So you're saying that you still feel like you have to struggle?

Absolutely, I do. And that I'm aware that I have to. And you know, from my perspective, I do this not simply for me, but I do it for the larger cause of equality, that I'm interested in all aspects of equality, and when I feel as though women through my own experience are not being taken as seriously as others, then I think it's necessary to speak up. I'm not always the most popular girl in the room [*laughs*], but I think that it's important.



Carrie Mae Weems

Adrienne Edwards

Untitled (Yellow Painting),
2003-5

APERTURE 102

Performance may not immediately come to mind when one thinks of prolific conceptual artist Carrie Mae Weems (born 1953, Portland, Oregon). Yet Weems's foray into art began with participating in Anna Halprin's San Francisco Dancers' Workshop at the age of seventeen. Halprin, an experimental dance legend, is known for her shared aesthetic sensibility to that of minimalist choreographers Yvonne Rainer and Trisha Brown, who collaborated with visual artists Robert Morris and Donald Judd, respectively.

Drawing on four bodies of work made over twenty-five years, including *Colored People* (1987), *Beacon* (2003–5), *Africa: Gems and Jewels* (1993/2010), and *Blue Notes* (2014–15), Weems's self-selected portfolio opens with *Untitled (Yellow Painting)* (2003–5), an indelible image of the artist with her back to the camera, reclining on the floor of a gallery in Dia:Beacon. Dia Art Foundation is closely associated with Minimalist artists Donald Judd, Dan Flavin, and Robert Irwin, to name a few. One cannot overlook the fact that Weems's askance beholding of the yellow monochrome occurs in an institution that has presented only two artists of African descent in exhibitions over the past forty years. She approaches Minimalism and Dia with her long-standing concern regarding, as it was stated in the catalogue for the 2013–14 retrospective of her work, organized by the Frist Center for the Visual Arts, the “ongoing search for answers to questions about where individuals fit within societal constructs,” and, one might add, artistic ones as well.

Weems's own presence in the photograph at Dia lays bare the absence of blackness and female blackness from the history and style of Minimalism. Minimalism, one could be led to think, simply cannot hold blackness. But the parameters of Minimalism's preferred style, the monochrome, are placed in Weems's vector of inquisition, for the artist has always used the photographic monochrome, as in her well-known black-and-white photographs, which capture scenes of black love and life and haunt institutional structures in which the concept of blackness was formed, circulates, and gets represented or omitted. The capacity of these works—their very ability to perform as felicitous ocular acts—resides in the affective dimension of Weems's artistic choice. Their levity is possible because Weems privileges the luminance of blackness, evinced in and evanescent of the grays, as opposed to the binary of black and white that refers to the medium itself.

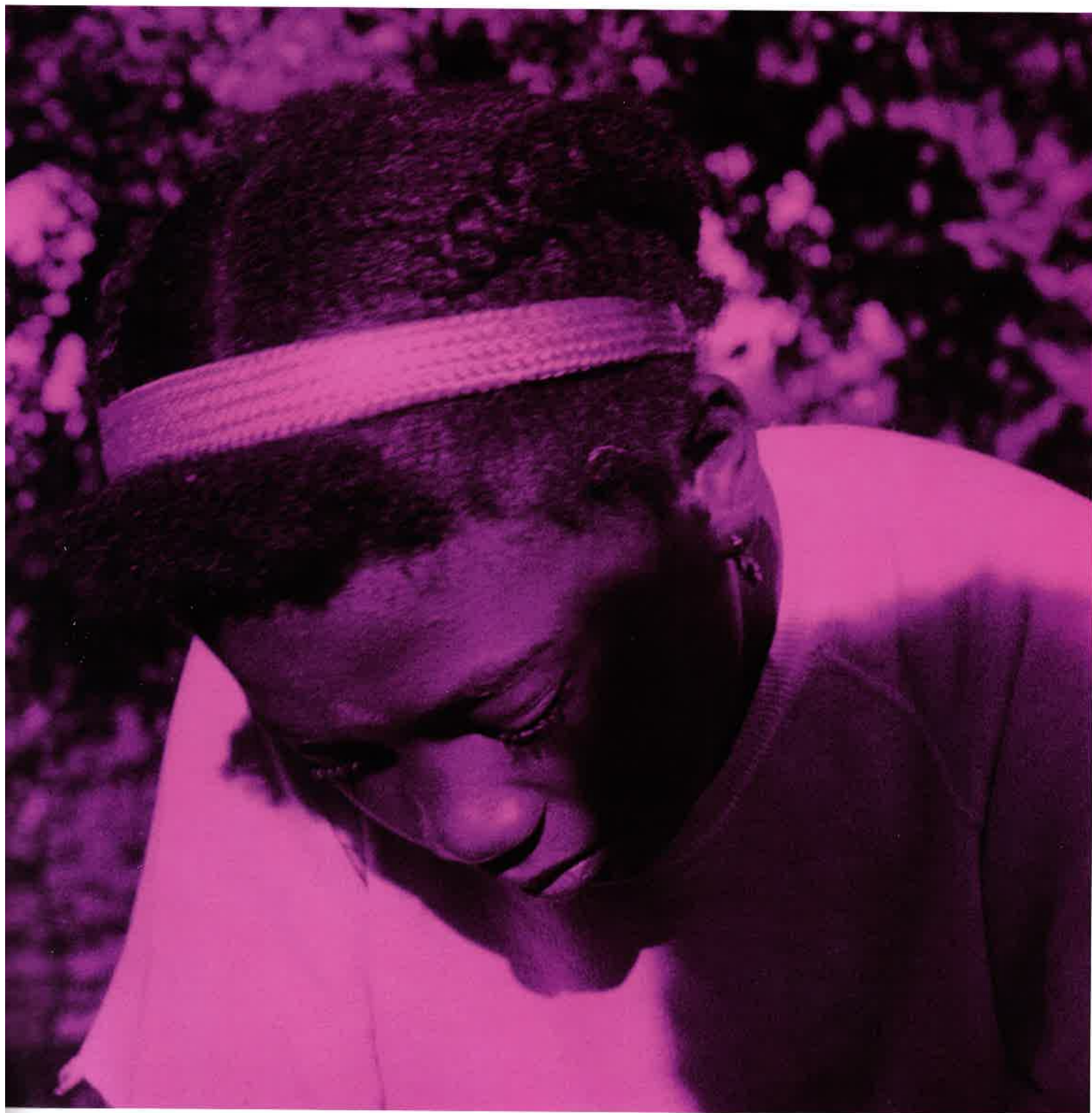
In this portfolio, Weems delivers a sentimental minimalism, folding monochromatic color, the concept of blackness, and her interest in beauty by intervening in the images with color in two distinct ways. The works in *Colored People* and *Africa: Gems and Jewels* are not color photographs but *colored* photographs, meaning pigment is not reproduced but rather imbues, envelops, and pervades the images in hues of luminescent violet, azure, sepia, and citrine in the former, and delicate rose, emerald, and indigo in the latter. When installed as *Colored People Grid* (2009–10), the dyed images are situated on the wall in a floor-to-ceiling pristine grid, assembled and interspersed alongside monochrome squares in shades such as eggplant, vermilion, gray, fuchsia, and myriad other tones that make up the forty-two-piece work, each framed in black. Her most recent work, *Blue Notes*, a series of silkscreened panels, takes found images of celebrities, including Rolling Stones singer Claudia Lennear, jazz pianist Thelonious Monk, and vocalist Dinah Washington, and renders them oblique by blurring their visages and overlaying them with single or multiple blocks of primary colors. This artistic move functions to shift our perception and places us more in the field of view of the artist. Weems's radical gesture is to break a pattern in the ways that we typically view certain subjects. We are asked to engage in the questioning with her.

Weems animates minimalism, using color in distinct ways akin to the more conceptual dimensions of performance, or, in other words, what it is that art *does* in the world, and our relation to it and one another. In all of these works—saturating images with color, foreclosing the legibility of images with blocks of color, and turning her back to the camera—Weems structures visual interludes that suspend and complicate our interpretation of them and their subjects. What she gives are portals for projecting desire, planes of sensual expression, and scenes of the imagination.

With references to abstraction, the artist employs geometry as a formal device and color theory as a logical framework to enable subtle reflection on the illogical constructs of how we frame race and how race frames beings. Weems has said the color works are influenced by a self-reflexive openness that we find in works by artists Mark Rothko and Ellsworth Kelly. However, her priorities and objectives are oriented differently. Color in these works is ornamental, embellishing in order to break through the dimension of the skin, yet acknowledging color and race as vital referents.

Adrienne Edwards is Curator at Performa and a PhD candidate in performance studies at New York University.





Opposite:
Colored People Grid,
2009-10

This page: *Magenta Colored
Girl*, 1987, from the series
Colored People



Detail from *Africa:
Gems and Jewels*,
1993/2010



Page 108:
Claudia, from the series
Blue Notes, 2014-15

Page 109:
Monk, from the series *Blue
Notes*, 2014-15

Pages 110-11:
Color Real and Imagined,
from the series *Blue Notes*,
2014-15

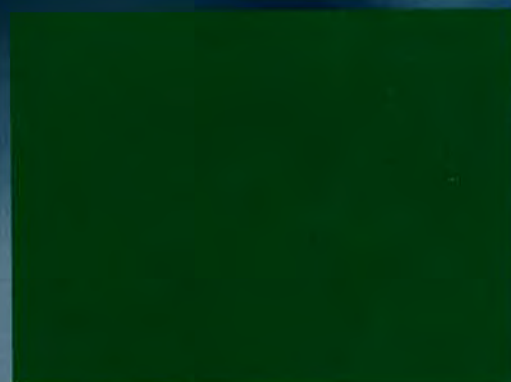
All photographs courtesy
the artist and Jack Shainman
Gallery

This page:
Detail from *Africa*:
Gems and Jewels,
1993/2010









END FRAME



LEFT: Carrie Mae Weems's "House/Field/Yard/Kitchen," 1995-96, from her series "From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried." Ayana V. Jackson was inspired by the work.

© CARRIE MAE WEEMS/COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY

Digging up the Past: Ayana V. Jackson on Carrie Mae Weems

IN HER SERIES "Archival Impulse," photographer Ayana V. Jackson follows a long line of artists who use and transform historical material in order to re-examine our views of the past. (For more about Jackson's work, see "Our History," page 98.) In Jackson's case, she bases her photos on

nineteenth and twentieth century images of blacks by whites. To examine what those images say about the photographers' notions of blacks as exotics, subjects for scientific scrutiny, and as "others," she places her own likeness in the recreated images, redressing the power imbalance between photographer

and subject evidenced in the originals.

One of Jackson's inspirations was another photographer who has used self-portraiture and archival material in her explorations of race and stereotypical

images of blacks: Carrie Mae Weems. In particular, Weems's series "From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried," Jackson says, "was very much an inspiration for the 'Archival Impulse' series."

Weems, a recipient of a MacArthur "genius" Fellowship, the U.S. Department of State Medal of the Arts and other awards, began the series in 1995 when she was commissioned by the Getty Museum to explore an archive of historical images, including daguerreotypes made by the Harvard natural scientist Louis Agassiz. In 1850, Agassiz toured plantations in the American South, making ethnographic portraits of American slaves. He then shipped his daguerreotypes back to the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology. In treating his subjects as specimens rather than humans, the Agassiz collection has much in common with the Duggan-Cronin archive, the collection of images of South African blacks which Alfred Martin Duggan-Cronin made for the DeBeers diamond company. That archive provided material for Jackson's "Archival Impulse" series.

Weems saw that the Agassiz daguerreotypes represented a white view of blacks as inferior. "I wanted to intervene in that by giving a voice to a subject that historically has had no voice," she said. She toned the images blood red and placed them on circular mats under glass that was sandblasted with text, emphasizing the labels and stereotypes applied to the subjects.

In her career, much of Weems's work has focused on people who have been largely excluded from the historical record and popular media: women and people of color. She has done this largely through photography, but also through text, video, audio and installations. Speaking at the LOOK3 Festival of the Photograph in 2013, she said all her work shares a consistent theme: "an overarching commitment to understanding the present by closely examining history and identity."

—HOLLY STUART HUGHES



Carrie Mae Weems, *Untitled (Woman Standing)*, 1990.

The museum's efforts to address broader issues such as class and especially race should prove interesting, given the challenges to and blind spots in the feminist movement. This year, for instance, when actress Patricia Arquette called for gay people and people of color to fight for equal pay for women during her best supporting actress acceptance speech for *Boyhood*, the response was mixed.

Meryl Streep may have given her a standing ovation, but others accused Arquette of supporting a brand of feminism that is "only for white women." The NMWA is clearly looking to be more inclusive, bringing on-board MacArthur genius grant-winning photographer Carrie Mae Weems for one of the inaugural Fresh Talks evenings.

"That there are so few images of African-American women circulating in popular culture or in fine art is disturbing; the pathology behind it is dangerous. I mean, we got a sistah in the White House, and yet mediated culture excludes us, denies us, erases us," Weems told BOMB in 2009. "I insist on making work that includes us as part of the greater whole."

The WASC program kicks off on October 18 with "Righting the Balance—Can there be gender parity in the art world?" National Academy Museum chief curator and arts writer Maura Reilly, who served as the founding curator of Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum, is co-organizing the event.

The evening will be divided into segments on the market, artists, and the issue as whole. Guerrilla Girl Alma Thomas, Hyperallergic critic Jillian Steinbauer, and Mary Sabbatino, partner and vice president at New York's Galerie Lelong, will be among the speakers drawn from the art world. Placing the discussion within a broader context will be Jamia Wilson, executive director of Women, Action, & the Media.

In November, Weems will be on hand to explore artists' ability—and responsibility—to inspire social change. The series resumes in the new year with "Change by Design," featuring designer Gabriel Maher and New York Times design critic Alice Rawsthorn, who will consider the role gender identity plays in the field.

Below, artnet News spoke to Sterling about her hopes for the new initiative.

What are some of the specific goals the museum hopes to meet in terms of empowering women in the arts and challenging the status quo?

The vision for Women, Arts, and Social Change is inspired by the observation over the last several years that current discourse focused on women and social change typically do not include any depth on the arts and programs focused on arts and social change tend to underrepresent women's contributions. With our mission to champion women through the arts, no organization is more uniquely poised to take up this conversation. By focusing on women, artists, designers, and innovators—people whose socially conscious ideas and innovations are reshaping lives and economies, engaging communities, and empowering women and girls—we hope to foreground the relevance of the arts in our lives and their potential to impact social change.

It's great to see Emma Watson and Taylor Swift speaking up for social justice, but with trends such as "women against feminism" what will it take to change the discourse so that the movement isn't seen in a negative light?

We see gender-based social justice as a daily focus on Facebook feeds, Tweets, and blogs. Major summits empowering women are being convened, TED Talks given, and books written. This growing phalanx of advocates for women is growing with a necessary urgency that is hard to deny. By the way, it's interesting to note... that a year after Beyoncé made the "non-feminist" statement in *Vogue*, she wholeheartedly embraced the word feminist in massive glowing capital letters in her performance at the 2014 MTV Music Video Awards.

How did you select the participants for Fresh Talk, and what are you looking forward to as the initiative gets off the ground?

We decided to launch with a program to address the "elephant in the room" here at NMWA—the current state of women in the arts today reflecting upon the museum's core advocacy mission. We then chose to feature artist and activist Carrie Mae Weems, an artist who had her first major solo show at NMWA in 1993, to talk about her belief in an artist's social responsibility. In conjunction with our exhibition, "Pathmakers: Women in Art, Craft, and Design. Midcentury and Today," we wanted to highlight the new pathmakers who are leading socially-conscious innovation. So in January we'll kick off a year of Fresh Talk programs under the theme of "Change by Design," featuring conversations on genderless design, art and environmental remediation, bicycles as agents of change, women pioneers in the film industry, architects as community builders, and fashion as a visual manifesto.

"Pathmakers: Women in Art, Craft, and Design. Midcentury and Today," currently on view at the Museum of Arts and Design (April 28–September 30, 2015), will travel to the National Museum of Women in the Arts October 30, 2015–February 28, 2016.



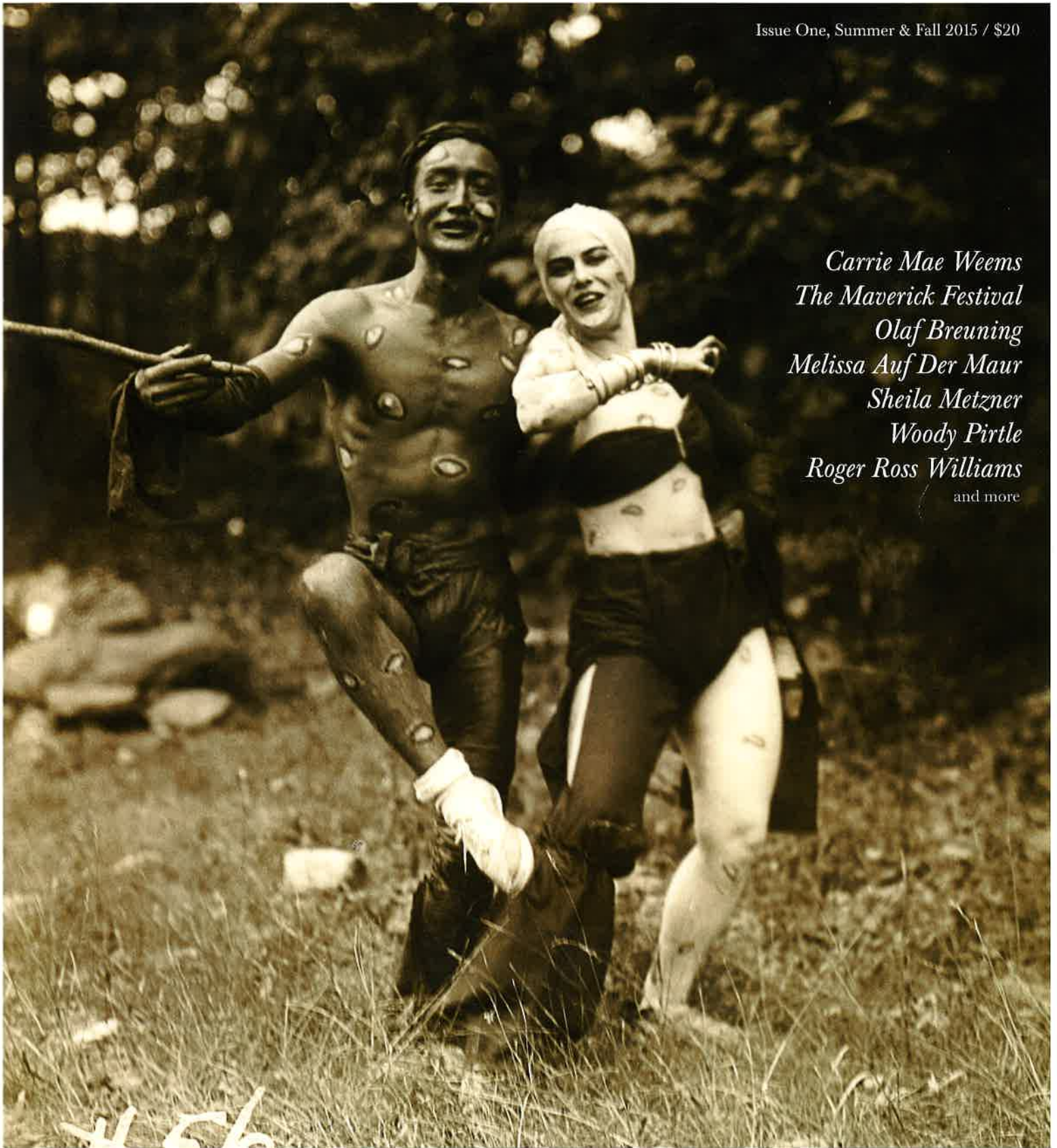
Sarah Cascone

UpstateDiary

Insight & Inspiration From Our Creative Landscape

Issue One, Summer & Fall 2015 / \$20

*Carrie Mae Weems
The Maverick Festival
Olaf Breuning
Melissa Auf Der Maur
Sheila Metzner
Woody Pirtle
Roger Ross Williams
and more*



Carrie Mae Weems

Visual Artist

“To the extent that I’m really interested in exploring race, I’m actually exploring whiteness and the limits of whiteness as it pertains to other social and ethnic groups. White people, for the most part, have been free to roam the world. With the privilege of just knowing that I can roam it and that I don’t have to name it—I don’t have to say anything other than, ‘I’m here.’”

KO: Which photographers did you hold in high regard early in your career?

CMW: I was particularly in love with Roy DeCarava. Roy taught me the importance of simply being consistent and vigilant with one’s practice and one’s self, and also something very basic — you have to really love people to do this. There’s a large human component to photography.

KO: What do you think about when you look through the viewfinder?

CMW: Getting it right. (laughs). The critical framing of the world is the high art of photography and because I’m in my photographs that sort of critical framing becomes even more important. It’s the way in which I’m able to maintain some sort of direct relationship to the photograph — the physicality of framing it — because sometimes I have to run half a block before the 10 second timer is up (laughs). I challenge myself to know what distance I can go through the physicality of working out in front of the camera — performing.

KO: Your work investigates human relationships. Which early relationships prompted these investigations?

CMW: I became politically active early in my life by addressing questions of power, class and race and by working with the problems arising out of gender and so forth. Those questions have been important to me since I was 16 - 17 years old. My father is the biggest influence in my life.

One of my earliest memories is having my father pick me up, put me on his knee, and say, “Never forget that you are the equal to any man, woman, child; black, white, brown or green. Never forget it. There is no man greater than you and you are greater than no man.”

My background informs the way that I act in the world and the way in which I think about the world.

KO: Do you investigate your personal relationships with equal, feverish passion?

CMW: Yes, why not? (laughing). You can’t really do important work unless you investigate the personal. The questions that I ask of my viewer are no different than the ones I ask of myself. I’m questioning the power balance in relationships; loyalty, devotion, and who gives more. I used to say that I dragged my husband, kicking and screaming, to love. But, actually, it’s the other way around. It’s been his devotion in the relationship that has saved the marriage. I’m kind of crazy — out there. He’s the anchor.

Of course there are other concerns as well. What does it mean to be involved in a monogamous relationship? What does it mean to live with a white American man when so much of the work is about examining power relations between the races and the genders? What I understand and see of his privilege, I’m able to extrapolate across relationships in general.

KO: Talk about your envy and jealousy of other artists.

CMW: More than jealousy; it’s a kind of envy, a kind of pure inspiration. I know what other artists are doing, how they work, so it’s impossible for me to sit back. The stakes are much too high. Other artists are a source of inspiration for getting work done.

For instance, Cindy (Sherman) made a photograph of a woman by a telephone. That image is frozen in my mind’s eye. I decided that I wanted to do a send up to that moment, to that feeling, but also to the image and the artist.

My *Essay on Equivalents* series is based on my love for and influence by other artists. It’s both a homage to the artist and a reference to art history. I often work this way; bending photographs and photographic meaning, text and story around artists and subjects that already exist.

A case in point is *From Here I Saw What Happened And I Cried*. Here it’s about the African American presence in contemporary photography but you’re also looking at very particular contemporary photographers who’ve made certain images. You’re looking at and thinking about American history in general. This sort of triangulation of ideas is a strategy that I’ve often used in my work.

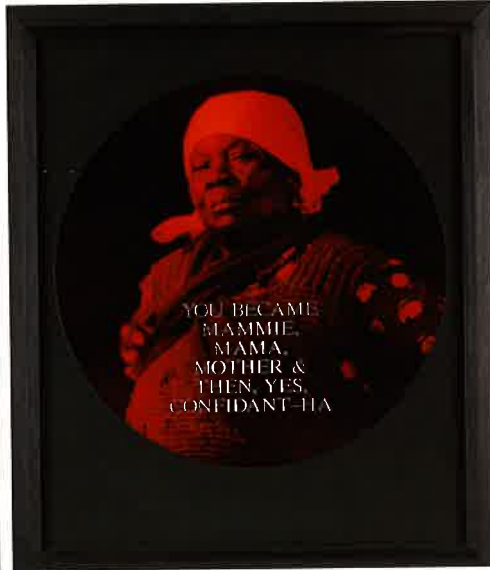
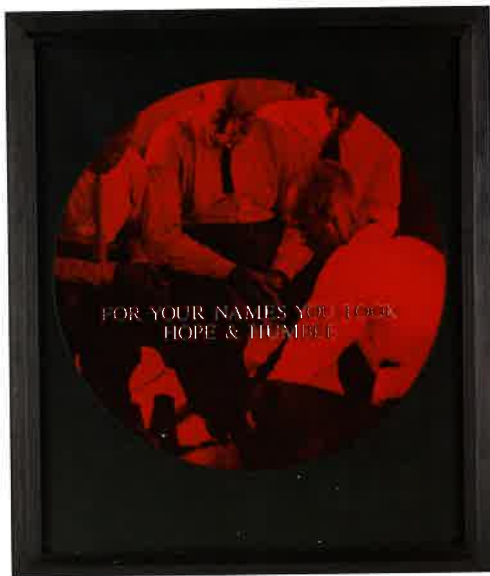
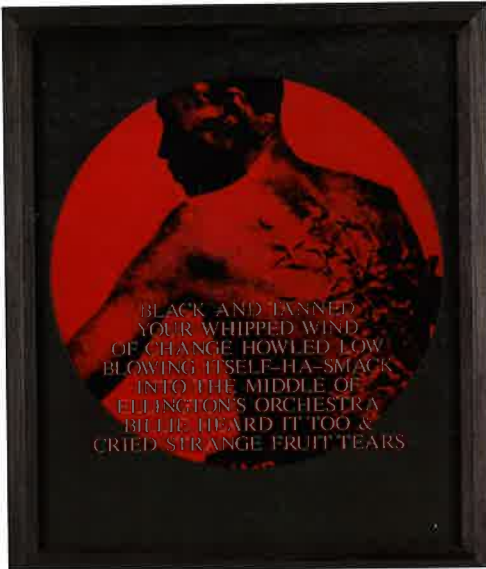
KO: Your wording in that series brought it to a deeper level. I thought this was very important.

CMW: I began using language in my work with *Family Pictures and Stories*. There is something about my particular approach to language that intrigues even me.



Carrie Mae Weems in her home in Syracuse, NY.





From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried Series 1995-1996 (left to right, top down)

1. *& a Photographic Subject*

2. *Black and Tanned Your Whipped Wind of Change Howled Low Blowing Itself - Ha Smack into the Middle of Ellington's Orchestra Billie Heard It Too & Cried*

5. *You Became Mammie, Mama, Mother & The, Yes, Confidant - Ha.*

6. *You Became Playmate to the Patriarch*

7. *Descending the Throne You Became Foot Soldier & Cook*

8. *Anything but What You Were-Ha*

In the beginning. I was trying to figure out how to provide a complex narrative without being descriptive, so that, when it comes together, the photographs and the texts form a third way of experiencing the work, yet remain equal and separate in their own right.

It asks the viewer to pay attention. It's not a passive engagement, it's much more active, it's more demanding. How long do I want to stand in a gallery or institution and read something?

So, the strategies that I've tried to develop are based on my own likes and dislikes of reading while standing. It's been interesting to watch people inside my exhibitions. How they engage with the work is usually the way in which I was hoping that they would -- which is to slow down, to read a little bit.

KO: Do you feel that the categorization of gender and race in art is over such as "black art" or "feminist art"?

CMW: We do need to push past it and we need to do it in interesting ways. At the moment there is still an aspect of it that's absolutely essential because women and blacks still are very much treated a certain way.

The way in which work is valued has intrigued me for years. How do you value and evaluate a piece of art? How do you make those determinations? Well, I'm not sure about all of it but, out of the hundreds of sales that take place on a monthly basis, there have only been 7 women in history that have sold work for more than a million dollars.

So, this gets back to how work is theorized and what's taught. If 99% of graduate students and art historians working on their PhD's are shoring up men, then they are creating a critical value around that work and, therefore, the critical reception of the work. So, when I talk about the importance of trying to encourage young art historians and young curators to spend time investigating the work of people of color, of black artists, photographers and women -- it's for real reasons.

Because we place so much value on what is 'valued', particularly in the West, we say to ourselves: "If I haven't seen it in a Christie's auction or at the MoMA ... If nobody has written about it in a critical way beyond some fucking pamphlet that Carrie Weems has on her desk, why am I gonna spend time there? It can't be important and I'm not going to collect it."

I'm thinking about how the work of many artists is completely undervalued because of its association with those that are not desirable. If you are undervalued as a citizen then your work will also be undervalued. There'll be some

people that are interested, of course, but I think it is pretty extraordinary how it gets reflected in the larger world of art and the economy and I find a lot of it repulsive.

I'm involved in trying to change the nature of the debate. I keep insisting on this idea about the extent to which women and people of color are kept outside of modernism. So, you can talk about Carrie Mac Weems only if you talk about Carrie Mae Weems in relationship to being a great storyteller -- or a folk artist. The last thing I am is a fucking folk artist.

There are all of these types of pejoratives that get spun around the work that keep the work locked outside of a deeper engagement within the world of art. And the reality is that I'm a single individual trying to think of a whole bunch of stuff to do. So, I don't get a lot of sleep -- 'cause I'm really thinking about this stuff and, as I age, I'm 62 now, it's like, "Okay, okay. You've only got so much time and there's only so much you can do." So that's where I am, trying to think and act my way through this very difficult circumstance. It's a difficult place to be. (laughing)

KO: Do you still experience discrimination?

CMW: Of course!! But it's a complicated question. There are moments when I realize that there's some tension because I've walked into the room or because somebody has to serve me. Sometimes this is more direct and unmitigated but I've also had these very interesting experiences. I was given the Rome Prize a few years ago and when I got to Rome I saw a lot of white people that I knew, friends, or so I thought, all of whom spend lots of time in Rome, but I never knew that.

KO: Why didn't you know that?

CMW: Yeah, like wouldn't I know that? I realized that their sense was, "Why would we tell you, because what would you be doing here?"

The thing that was so interesting is that many of the artists who go to the American Academy of Rome rarely leave their studios. The city has no relationship, ultimately, to what they do, to what they create and to how they think about themselves.

From day one, I used the city, and I worked with Italians. I was the only artist to ever use Cinecittà to shoot my film. The Academy had been trying to go there for years, yet I was the only person that ever brought the Academy into this legendary movie studio. It was very interesting.

What it reminded me of is how people are kept out, how the opportunity has never even been

presented. It means that this notion of privilege for a few is very real and so are assumptions about who belongs where and under what circumstances one stands to gain and to learn.

I am not from West Africa, I am educated in the West and I know nothing at all about African practice, African traditions or African arts. I am just as steeped in the Roman traditions of the Renaissance -- as you are. The literature is ours, it belongs to us, it belongs to the world, and it's for anybody who's interested in using it.

This question of equality is a complicated one when you know that you are systematically still left out.

KO: Because of your recent achievements; the MacArthur Genius Award 2013, the Rome Prize and your 2014 retrospective at the Guggenheim, it might be easy for a by-stander to assume that discrimination is no longer part of your reality.

CMW: I'm thrilled that I've won the MacArthur. I never thought that I would win such a distinguished honor. But it has very little to do with my life in terms of how I'm viewed in the world and how I participate in the world. Of course, there are things that come your way, amongst a knowledgeable few, who say, "Yes, Carrie Weems has won the MacArthur, we'll invite her to do this." The more that you have in certain ways, the more you get. I'm always aware of that fact.

KO: What is more important to you: Carrie Mae Weems, first black artist to be given a retrospective at the Guggenheim, or, Carrie Mae Weems, the artist?

CMW: In this case, the latter is absolutely of greater importance to me. That I'm the first African American woman to be given a show at the Guggenheim is a historical fact but that speaks more to the institution than it does to me. The work that I make is by no means always focused on questions of blackness.

But the work is often reduced to being thought of as only an exploration of black subjectivities -- and this is wrong. It's an easy way of dealing with me, dealing with my work, and, therefore, dismissing it and keeping it out of the greater frame of modernism. That's why I keep coming back to it: To the extent that I'm really interested in exploring race, I'm actually exploring whiteness and the limits of whiteness as it pertains to other social and ethnic groups.

White people, for the most part, have been free to roam the world. With the privilege of just knowing that I can roam it and that I don't have to name it -- I don't have to say anything other than, "I'm here."

“I keep insisting on this idea about the extent to which women and people of color are kept outside of modernism. So, you only talk about Carrie Mae Weems if you talk about Carrie Mae Weems in relationship to being a great storyteller – or a folk artist. The last thing I am is a fucking folk artist.”



The Impossible, See Magritte, 2012, From *Essay on Equivalents*, Archival inkjet print 40 x 30 inches ©Carrie Mae Weems, Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.



Feature:

Still Looking: On Carrie Mae Weems

by *Yves Jeffcoat* / August 24, 2015



Carrie Mae Weems, *I Looked and Looked to See What so Terrified You* from Louisiana Project, 2003; chromogenic prints, 35¾ by 23¾ inches each.

Yves Jeffcoat wrote this essay for the fifth session of our *Emerging Art Writers Mentorship Program*. The session was led by Chuck Reese, co-founder and editor of the *Bitter Southerner*, and was titled “Where Does Your Work Come From?” He asked the mentees to reflect on what compels them to write, and specifically to write about art. We were impressed and at times moved by the essays, which we’ll be featuring over the coming weeks.

When I was young and naive and upset, which wasn’t that long ago (and I’m still at least two of those things), I wrote an essay for my nonfiction class about what I then thought was my abhorrence for the term “African American” — not because I rejected either of those appellations, but because I was bitter that I couldn’t put my finger on the “African” and how it led to the “American.” Soon after I wiped my hands of that vehement but misguided essay, I saw *Carrie Mae Weems*’s work *I Looked and Looked to See What so Terrified You* at *Spelman College Museum of Fine Art* in “Posing Beauty in African

American Culture.” In response to that essay my professor had told me earnestly, “Sometimes we just need more time. You just need more time.” It was true. I needed more time to process my feelings so I could write more eloquently about them. And now, about three years later, I’ve mulled over my frustrations and how they’ve evolved, and I still feel like I need more time.

I had that same feeling two winters ago (months after I saw the exhibition that Weems’s work was in), when I was sitting on my “extra-long twin” box spring in Lacoste, France. My roommates were all white, and they were all talking about their family crests, and all I was thinking was, “What the fuck is that?” It was another one of those moments where I felt punished and ignorant for not knowing my own history. I wanted that kind of knowledge and felt like less of a person because I didn’t have it. I felt like Carrie Mae Weems in the double portrait, wearing my heritage on my back like her quilted dress but still looking at myself and saying, “What’s wrong with you?” But time had passed since that essay — in which I reminisced about the time a high school teacher yelled at all the black kids in the class because we didn’t know our countries of origin (“You’ve got to be from somewhere, right!”) — and I felt more comfortable knowing that I couldn’t delve deep into the annals of Ancestry.com and dig up the shades of my ancestors. Like the woman in the photo, I felt critical and doubtful and out of place, but still proud. I’d learned that I could embrace the good and the bad and recognize them both as a part of me.

If the photograph hadn’t been in such good company, surrounded by other artwork celebrating the Black American image, like the wall full of *Jet* Beauties of the Week and images from Sheila Pree Bright’s *Plastic Bodies* series, it might’ve seemed vain. Her hair and outfit are pristine. She’s poised, touching her face, holding up a mirror. And there’s not just one of her, there’s two, like the Instagram models who mirror their photos to get double the likes—maybe. There’s an element of narcissism that, in the context of the exhibition, you know she couldn’t afford. *I Looked and Looked to See What so Terrified You* is a doubling in many ways. “I’m maintaining that facade, too,” I want to say to her. “I’m struggling to find my self-image, too.” I’m reminded of the time when my black woman principal whispered to me in high school, “I’m so happy a black girl is salutatorian” and my 18-year-old privileged self only kind of understood that that was because I was giving people (and myself) a reason not to be so terrified.

But as I stood there and looked at Carrie, in the esteemed gallery of an HBCU, I still felt that sense of shame and inferiority that had been instilled in women like her and me and that is perpetuated in black families to this day. She seemed like she had the same feeling I had after I swung my two bow-tied, bone straight ponytails from side to side after I got my first relaxer. Or that I have when I get too mad in public, like I had to tame my terrifying-ness.

It's a notion that we (black people) have adopted and unfortunately let inform our actions. In the portrait, Weems has to be even better than the best, prettier than the prettiest, smarter than the smartest, and damn-near-perfect. So, while she's saying she *Looked and Looked* and sees a human like any other, she's also saying she *Looked and Looked* in the sense that she scrutinized and molded and tailored herself to appease the terrified — and in the process became unable to accept her own blackness. Like me, the Weems in the portrait is worried about the appearance she sees in the mirror: a skewed self-image, one created by years of institutionalized racism and ignorance and apathy and hatred.

Weems's artwork hasn't clarified my feelings on identity or the lack of it or helped me figure out my family tree. She, too, made me realize that I needed more time. Just now, instead of being angry that my history and identity were marred and molded by someone else, I realize the true cyclical and defeatist nature of that attitude. Now when I look at the mirrored *I Looked and Looked to See What so Terrified You*, I see an infinity of self-doubt, shame, and stagnancy. And that's not African American.

Yves Jeffcoat is an Atlanta-based writer and was a participant in the inaugural cycle of BURNAWAY's *Emerging Art Writers Mentorship Program*.

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ART BASEL 2015 | OUR FAVOURITE WORKS

19th June 2015 | Aaron Price

Art Basel opened this week for its' 46th edition. It is known as one of the biggest art fairs in the world. This often results in exceptionally strong sales for galleries and ensures a strong showing from some of the best international galleries. The event is seen as a central meeting point for the international art world. Last years event saw 285 galleries from 34 countries across the six sectors of the show. They were exhibiting work from over 4000 artists. There was also a great emerging scene with 24 galleries showing at Basel for the first time. With Art Basel now fully underway we take a look at some of our favourite work from the art fair. The quality of artwork has been stronger than ever and we've gathered a selection of our favourites for you to take a look at.

Carrie Mae Weems – *Moody Blue Girl*, 1997



Carrie Mae Weems - Moody Blue Girl, 1997

The artist's work is steeped in African-American history. It explores issues of race, class, gender and identity. She works primarily in photography and video but also explores many other mediums, including performance and verse. Regardless of medium the artist has said that activism is a central theme to her work. In particular she looks at history as a way of better understanding the present. Most recently the artists efforts were recognised with a 'genius grant' from the MacArthur Foundation. Jack Shainman Gallery represent the artist at the art fair.

More information about [Jack Shainman Gallery](#)



ART BASEL 2015

African-American artists respond to racial injustice in the US

Works dealing with race relations are hard to miss at this year's fair

by JULIA MICHALSKA | 18 June 2015

Race relations in America are at perhaps their tensest point since the Civil Rights Act was passed 50 years ago, following a string of deaths of young African Americans due to use of force by law enforcement. While these events have led to protests across the country and calls for police reform, they have also inspired many artists to react. "It is a reality that cannot be ignored, certainly not by black artists, nor by society at large", says Katerina Gregos the curator of the Belgian pavilion at this year's Venice Biennale (until 22 November), which explores the legacy of colonialism and includes a large-scale work by the African American artist Adam Pendleton that incorporates the powerful protest slogan "Black Lives Matter".

Such socially engaged works are not traditionally big sellers, and so dealers rarely bring them to fairs, but visitors to Art Basel this week have seen more works dealing with racial politics than ever before, by artists such as Glenn Ligon at Lühring Augustine (A2), Carrie Mae Weems at Jack Shainman Gallery (T6), Tony Lewis at Massimo De Carlo (R3) and in Unlimited (U6), Melvin Edwards at Stephen Friedman (L11), David Hammons at Salon 94 (J9), Lorna Simpson (also showing in Unlimited, U23) and Mickalene Thomas at Galerie Nathalie Obadia (K17), Kara Walker at Sikemma Jenkins (R11) and Victoria Miro (R7), and Adam Pendleton at Pace Gallery (A6).

Although there was "already a waiting list" for Pendleton's works when the artist joined Pace Gallery in 2012, says its president Marc Glimcher, his participation in the Belgian pavilion has hugely increased the demand for his output. Before the fair opened, Pace sold *Mississippi #2* (2015), which uses an image by the American Civil Rights photographer Charles Moore, to a British private collector for an undisclosed price. Pendleton says he used the 1960s picture in his work to "link the past to the present within our current political climate". Another work, *Black Lives Matter #1* (2015), sold to a European collector during the VIP opening. Pendleton describes the phrase emblazoned across the piece as a "public warning, a rallying cry and a poetic plea".

Stephen Friedman Gallery has sold all five pieces it brought from Melvin Edwards' abstract sculptural series, *Lynch Fragments*. Edwards began creating the works at a time of renewed racial tension in the 1960s, using objects such as chains and tools to evoke the memory of the victims of lynchings in the US. He returned to the series in the 1970s to reflect his activism during the Vietnam War, and continues to add to it today. A spokeswoman for the gallery says that Edwards has had "consistent museum presence" throughout his career, but a show at the Nasher Sculpture Center and his participation in the Venice Biennale have helped the market to rediscover his work.

Institutional recognition

International institutions have been taking note: many socially engaged African American artists have had prominent museum exhibitions in the past two years including Glenn Ligon (Camden Arts Centre), Carrie Mae Weems (Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation), Melvin Edwards (Nasher Sculpture Centre), and the late Jacob Lawrence (Museum of Modern Art New York).

The Broad, a museum founded by the Los Angeles-based collectors Eli and Edythe Broad, which is scheduled to open on 20 September, recently announced its acquisition of Robert Longo's *Untitled* (Ferguson Police August 13, 2014), a large drawing of police holding back protesters in Ferguson, Missouri. Jonathan Jones, the *Guardian* newspaper's art critic, described it as the work that "mattered the most" in 2014.

Weems, whose retrospective ended its national tour at the Guggenheim in New York last year and who was awarded a \$500,000 MacArthur Foundation "genius" grant in 2013, says that "social justice and how to articulate it at any given moment" has always been the primary concern of her work. "The urgency has been there for a very long time, but I think it's now reaching an apex. Something has been triggered; something has been broken. Police departments around the country are having to rethink how they operate," she says about the recent uprisings.



Carrie Mae Weems's *I Looked and Looked but Failed to See What So Terrified You* (2003), at Jack Shainman Gallery (T6).
Photo: David Owens

Jack Shainman, whose stand is dedicated to the artist, says that Weems's retrospective provided "the perfect time to expand her audience to Europe". At the fair, he sold the work *House/Field/Yard/Kitchen* (1995-96) during the VIP opening and five works from her *Kitchen Table* (1990) series to a major US institution.

Artists take to the streets

The social efforts of many artists extend beyond the gallery. In 2011, Weems launched Operation Activate, a public art campaign in Syracuse, New York, to raise awareness about gun violence. This led her to open the Institute of Sound and Style, a summer programme that provides visual arts training for underprivileged youth. Weems is now working with artists and urban planners to expand the institute to cities across the country.

“It is a natural step,” Weems says. “I’m a person who is engaged in my community. My work grows out of that space, so it’s only natural that I would step up to the plate given the opportunity to help bring the arts back to the community.”

In Los Angeles, Mark Bradford founded the Art and Practice Foundation, which offers jobs to foster children and stages contemporary art exhibitions by black artists. Other artists, such as Rick Lowe (another MacArthur award winner) and Theaster Gates, have extended their art practice to encompass the restoration of dilapidated buildings in their local neighbourhoods.

Despite such productivity, Gregos points out that it is important to remember that there are still “far fewer black artists (as well as women artists) who are widely recognised for their work and represented at the top end of the art market,” she says. “In that sense, there is still a long way to go towards racial and gender equality in the art world.”



AO ON-SITE: ART BASEL AT MESSE BASEL, JUNE 18TH-21ST, 2015

June 18th, 2015



In the Courtyard of Messe Basel

As the opening previews draw to a close in Basel today, the 46th edition of Switzerland's massive art fair and exhibition is well underway, capping two initial days of strong sales and attendance during the VIP Previews that have set a brisk tone for the week's proceedings

Helly Nahmad was on-site in Basel, selling a \$50 million Mark Rothko canvas, glowing with subdued yellows and oranges under the bright lights of Messe Basel. It was the same work purchased last fall at Sotheby's New York at \$36 million, but had yet to find a buyer here. Jack Shainman, however, sold a striking Carrie Mae Weems diptych for \$50,000, while Kim Gordon sold a pair of works at 303 Gallery for \$30,000 each. Matthew Marks also brought an interesting selection of works, pairing Jasper Johns with Robert Gober in one corner for a peculiar contrast. In another area, Hauser and Wirth was showing Mike Kelley's Untitled (stuffed animal mandala), paired with works by Martin Kippenberger and Louise Bourgeois, the latter of which sold for \$2.5 million. At Cheim and Read, a Joan Mitchell piece from 1957 sold for \$6 million, while a Robert Rauschenberg piece at Thaddaeus Ropac sold for \$1.1 million. Rauschenberg was also the subject of the Pace Gallery booth, where seven paintings and drawings sold in the first days of the fair for between \$450,000 and \$1 Million.

— D. Creahan



INTERNATIONAL EDITION

THE ART NEWSPAPER

ART BASEL 2015

Collectors are calling the shots at Art Basel and beyond

Roles in flux as patrons establish private museums and foundations or work directly with artists

By CHARLOTTE BURNS | 17 June 2015



Several large-scale works in the Unlimited section at Art Basel sold to VIP collectors on the opening day. © Art Basel

Collectors are in the driving seat at Art Basel and, increasingly, in the rest of the art world. Thousands of collectors, including the hedge-funder Steve Cohen, the publishing magnate Peter Brant, Susan and Michael Hort and the Belgian collector Mimi Dusselier, visited the fair during yesterday's preview, and many more are expected for today's second VIP opening.

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"Collectors certainly have a lot of power, and that's not a bad thing," says the New York-based dealer Jack Shainman (T6), whose sales include Carrie Mae Weems's *House/Field/Yard/Kitchen* (1995-96), which was bought by a private European collector for \$90,000. "There are some top collectors who are very independent, and there are also collectors who buy with their ears. All in all, there's room for everyone."



THE ART NEWSPAPER

ART BASEL 2015

Africa is a state of mind that defies definition

Eurocentric views of the continent's contemporary art overlook its diversity in an increasingly migratory art world

by ANNY SHAW | 17 June 2015

Just over a decade ago Africa Remix—the largest exhibition of African art ever seen in Europe—opened at the Museum Kunstpalast in Düsseldorf before travelling to London's Hayward Gallery. Its intentions were clear: to de-exoticise African artists, more than 60 of whom had work in the show, and to help pave the way for many to enter the global contemporary art market. For some artists, including El Anatsui, Chéri Samba and Gonçalo Mabunda, the exhibition helped underline their position on the global stage.

But, as critics noted at the time, Africa Remix attempted to survey contemporary African art in one fell swoop—an audacious if not impossible task given the size and diversity of the continent, and one that seemed to emphasise a Eurocentric view of Africa. For this reason, the Beninese artist Georges Adéagbo, who has a solo show at Galerie Wien Lukatsch at Art Basel (T8), refused to participate. The independent curator Stephan Köhler, who often works with Adéagbo to help realise his projects, says: “He didn’t want to be in one of these comprehensive shows [on Africa]. It’s presumptuous to say that one show can cover it all.”

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Artists stay at home

El Anatsui, who moved from his native Ghana to Nigeria in 1975 when he was 31, also uses found materials in his sculptures, including cassava graters, railway sleepers, driftwood, iron nails and obituary printing plates. But the artist, who is best known for his vast shimmering wall tapestries made out of flattened aluminium bottle tops, is often quick to point out that his work is not about recycling.

“In fact, I object to people using the word recycle in connection with the way I use my materials because my materials are not recycled. They are given a new life—they are transformed,” Anatsui told the BBC in May, soon after receiving the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement at the Venice Biennale (his work is on show there until 22 November). “The bottle caps are no longer going back as bottle caps. They are part of an artwork and, being part of an artwork, they have a higher status ... a higher dimension.”

The bottle tops, which are discarded by distilleries in Nigeria, represent a link between Africa, Europe and North America. Alcohol was one of the first commodities Europeans brought to Africa to trade, while rum and other spirits played a significant role in the transatlantic slave trade.

While the art world becomes increasingly transient, the emergence of new art markets in Africa also means that more artists are able to make a living at home. Anatsui is represented by October Gallery in London and Jack Shainman Gallery in New York (T6). As Anatsui himself says: “With a growing interest in art from ‘all over’, and an enhanced capacity to reach global audiences, it is easier for artists not only in Nigeria but also other locations previously thought ‘distant’ to access information and pursue their careers by living in their home country.

“It gives one the advantage of being in touch with your own culture, yet still able to reach the rest of the world.”

The New York Times

INTERNATIONAL ARTS | THE ART OF COLLECTING

Mapping Out New Plans for Art Basel

By TED LOOS JUNE 17, 2015

Fresh on the heels of the New York auctions that gave the art market its first-ever \$2 billion week, Art Basel, the original high-end art fair, opens its doors for the 46th time from June 18 to June 21 in the Swiss city.

Some 284 dealers from 33 countries will gather in the exhibition hall on Messeplatz, in the center of Basel, for the last springtime stop on what the New York dealer Jack Shainman has called “the art world’s moveable feast.”



“I Looked and Looked but Failed to See What so Terrified You,” a 2003 photograph by the American artist Carrie Mae Weems. Credit Carrie Mae Weems/Jack Shainman Gallery, New York/Photo by Jeremy Lawson

Also in Feature, Mr. Shainman will be showing works by the American artist Carrie Mae Weems, a MacArthur fellow best known for her work in photography, including the image “Untitled (Woman Brushing Hair),” from 1990.

“It’s so fast-forward at an art fair,” Mr. Shainman said. “But when you have the chance to present just one artist, you can really take something away from the experience.”

Art Basel 2015 Sales Report: See What's Selling

BY NICHOLAS FORREST | JUNE 17, 2015

Jack Shainman of Jack Shainman Gallery reports strong interest in the work of Carrie Mae Weems, selling 5 Kitchen Table works by Carrie Mae Weems to a major American institution. “I am so pleased at the level of interest in the work of Carrie Mae Weems, particularly the level of recognition from European institutions. Sales have been brisk in the opening hours of Art Basel including the placement of works in top collections,” said Jack Shainman on his solo presentation of Carrie Mae Weems in Feature (T6)



Contemporary Sales Battle Modern in Art Basel's Second Day

ARTSY EDITORIAL

JUN 17TH, 2015 10:34 PM

A frenzied opening to Art Basel continued in the second full day of sales at the fair yesterday, with contemporary art making a strong play to match blue-chip in transaction activity.



Carrie Mae Weems
Untitled (Woman standing), 1990
Jack Shainman Gallery



Carrie Mae Weems
Untitled (Woman feeding bird), 1990
Jack Shainman Gallery



Carrie Mae Weems
Untitled (Woman and Phone), 1990
Jack Shainman Gallery

Elsewhere, Deniz Pekerman of Vienna's Galerie nächst St. Stephan said the gallery had sold a number of pieces to a mixture of European collectors including an Agnes Martin drawing for \$150,000 and a work by Bernard Frize going to a Swiss collector. Other Wednesday sales included five works by Carrie Mae Weems at Jack Shainman to a major American institution.

ARTNEWS

BEST IN SHOW: HIGHLIGHTS AT ART BASEL

BY ***Andrew Russeth*** POSTED 06/16/15 3:02 PM

A look around the fair in 65 photos

Yes, there are a lot of things to dislike about art fairs. There are the crowds, the lines, the expense—one salad in the VIP lounge at Art Basel, which opened today, costs 45 Swiss francs, or about \$48 (it includes edible flowers). And yet, one gets to see a breathtaking array of art in one convenient location, much of which one may never see again. There are 300 galleries at Basel this year, all stocked with some of their finest offerings. Surprises abound. Pleasure too. Below, some highlights from the aisles.



Jack Shainman Gallery, which has spaces in Chelsea and Kinderhook, New York, gave over its booth to a miniature Carrie Mae Weems survey. Here, four works from her 1997 “Colored People” series



Preview Art Basel: Self-Portraits by Marina Abramović & Carrie Mae Weems, Grotesque Busts by Barry X Ball & More

The world's premier art fair for Modern and contemporary art, [Art Basel](#), opens to invited guests tomorrow (June 16) and to the public on Thursday (June 18). Presented in [Messe Basel](#) in Switzerland, this year's edition of the fair features 284 galleries from 33 countries, including 56 ADAA members. Sneak a peek at some of the real and fantastical portraits that our members are exhibiting (alongside many other works) and check out our full list of participating member galleries below.



Carrie Mae Weems, *I Looked and Looked but Failed to See What so Terrified You* (Louisiana Project series) (detail), 2003, digital print. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

FINANCIAL TIMES

June 12, 2015 7:48 pm

Art Basel: sound and fury

Christopher Weber

Although only a fraction of us buy art, you wouldn't know it from the scale of the fairs

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Both buyers and visitors to the Messeplatz will find much that's familiar this year. Basel is a behemoth of an event, encompassing 300 galleries divided among eight sections, with work right across the contemporary and modern spectrum in just about every conceivable medium. How on earth to negotiate it all? Some of the sectors are self-explanatory — “Edition”, for instance, is obviously devoted to editioned works, prints and multiples, and “Unlimited” is for works that “transcend the limitations of a classical art-show stand” (in other words, enormous). But others are frankly a bit obscure: search me for the significant difference between “Feature” and “Statements”. I think the real point of creating sections like this is that it allows movement, making room for newcomers in a way that the main section doesn't.

Among interesting newcomers, it is good to see New York's Jack Shainman Gallery bringing artist Carrie Mae Weems; the gallery specialises in work from Africa and east Asia, as well as North America, a welcome addition to the overall fairly Eurocentric scene that is Basel.

ARTNEWS

PREVIEW ART BASEL 2015

BY **Maximiliano Durón** POSTED 06/12/15 10:02 AM

The 2015 edition of Art Basel opens Tuesday, June 16, to invited guests. This year's fair includes a reorganization of the gallery booth layout, with many of those presenting work that dates from 1900 to 1970 grouped together on the lower level of Hall 2.

The fair will include 284 galleries from 33 countries, showing work by more than 4,000 artists. Among the highlights are Carrie Mae Weems at New York's Jack Shainman, Danny McDonald at New York's Maccarone, Joris van de Moortel at Galerie Nathalie Obadia of Paris and Brussels, and video by Julieta Aranda, which will be shown in the film section by Mexico City's Galeria OMR.



Jack Shainman, New York

Carrie Mae Weems, *You Became a Playmate to the Patriarch/And Their Daughter*, 1995-96, C-print with sandblasted text on glass

©CARRIE MAE WEEMS/COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK

Aesthetica

Interview with Jack Shainman, Gallerist and Owner,
Art Basel 2015



This year **Jack Shainman Gallery** participates in the Feature sector at **Art Basel** with a presentation dedicated to American artist Carrie Mae Weems. Part of a selection of carefully curated projects, the gallery's stand will be the first showcase of Weems' work in Switzerland – an exciting continuation of her major exhibition at the Guggenheim New York in 2014. Regarded as one of the most influential contemporary African-American artists, Weems explores themes of family relationships, cultural identity, sexism, class, political systems and power across the art forms of audio, installation video and most notably, photography. We speak to Jack Shainman, Gallerist and Owner, about the importance of Weems' presence amongst the gallery's impressive line-up of practitioners, as well as the highly anticipated impact of her work at Art Basel.

A: Jack Shainman will be presenting a display of work by Carrie Mae Weems at Art Basel – the artist's first solo showcase in Switzerland. Why is Weems' practice a valuable addition to both the gallery and the art fair?

JS: Carrie's work inspires tremendous emotion and holds a kind of power you don't often witness in contemporary art. She is a natural story teller; her photographs have weight but

a lightness and universality at the same time. Subtle yet poignant, people really respond to her work.

A: With the continued momentum of the artist's hugely successful Guggenheim show last year, this promises to be a highly anticipated retrospective. Which of her works are you looking forward to exhibiting the most?

JS: It's hard to narrow down which of her works I'm most excited about. We will have some of the series she's most known for such as the *Kitchen Table* and *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*, but we're also looking at the fair as an opportunity to show less-seen photographs like *Louisiana Project*, *Dreaming in Cuba* as well as some of her most recent work, *Color Real* and *Imagined* and a piece that is an expansion of the *Slow Fade to Black* series.

A: Weems has explored themes of class, cultural identity and sexism throughout the past 30 years of her career. How do you think her work will be received by audiences at Art Basel?

JS: One of the things I love most about Carrie's work is that while she uses herself often as a model for her photographs, these are not self-portraits. She creates these scenes in which she becomes a stand-in for everyone. There is something so universal about the *Kitchen Table* series for instance. We follow this woman, played by Carrie, as her life unfolds around the centrepiece of the home, the kitchen table, drawing on experiences of which we are all familiar with ourselves.

A: Jack Shainman has hosted numerous shows that inspire thought and dialogue about race and gender equality such as *Unbranded: A Century of White Women*. How does the work of Weems add to this ongoing exchange?

JS: I tend to gravitate towards work that challenges the viewer, and that isn't happy just being decorative or reiterating what everyone else seems to be saying. Our artists, including Carrie, are the same. They are constantly working on the next thing, and in many cases that doesn't stop at the four gallery walls. Carrie is one of quite a few of our artists, like Titus Kaphar, Nick Cave and Hank Willis Thomas, who are interested in engaging people on a social

level with community outreach projects. I'm proud to work with artists that want to engage with communities that might not ordinarily be exposed to their work.

A: Aside from Art Basel, what does the gallery have planned for the rest of 2015 and beyond?

JS: We currently have a solo exhibition of Havana-based Yoan Capote's work spanning both our Chelsea spaces through July, as well as a five decade survey of El Anatsui's work on view upstate at The School in Kinderhook, New York, through September. Looking ahead to the fall, we'll have our first solo exhibition with Enrique Martinez Celaya, followed by Vibha Galhotra, Carlos Vega, Toyin Odutola and Odili Donald Odita. Outside the gallery, *Nick Cave: Hear Here* opens 20 June at Cranbrook Art Museum. Lynette Yiadom-Boakye is currently on view at Serpentine Gallery through 13 September, Titus Kaphar's Vesper Project is at the Cincinnati Art Center through 11 October, and Meleko Mokgosi is on view at ICA Boston through 9 August.

Jack Shainman at Art Basel, 18 – 21 June, MCH Swiss Exhibition, Messeplatz, 4058 Basel, Switzerland.

For more information, visit www.jackshainman.com.

Additional details can be found at www.artbasel.com.

Credits

1. Carrie Mae Weems, *I Looked and Looked but Failed to See What so Terrified You (Louisiana Project series)*, 2003. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Posted on 10 June 2015

SNEAK PEEK: WHAT TO SEE AT ART BASEL IN BASEL 2015

BY Nicholas Forrest | June 03, 2015

Art Basel, the world's premier international art show for Modern and contemporary works, returns to its namesake city of Basel, Switzerland for its 46th edition in 2015 from June 18-21 with an impressive lineup of galleries and an exciting program of events.

The 2015 edition of Art Basel in Basel features 284 leading galleries from 33 countries across Europe, North America, Latin America, Asia, and Africa presenting the work of more than 4,000 artists ranging from the great masters of Modern art to the latest generation of emerging artists.

The Feature sector is dedicated to 30 precisely curated projects that may include solo presentations by an individual artist, or juxtapositions and thematic exhibits from artists representing a range of cultures, generations, and artistic approaches. In 2015, Feature (see highlights here) will present 30 galleries from 13 countries.



Jack Shainman Gallery

CARRIE MAE WEEMS

I Looked and Looked but Failed to See What so Terrified You (Louisiana Project series), 2003
©Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

©Carrie Mae Weems.

ARTNEWS

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Although only a fraction of us buy art, you wouldn't know it from the scale of the fairs

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Both buyers and visitors to the Messeplatz will find much that's familiar this year. Basel is a behemoth of an event, encompassing 300 galleries divided among eight sections, with work right across the contemporary and modern spectrum in just about every conceivable medium. How on earth to negotiate it all? Some of the sectors are self-explanatory — “Edition”, for instance, is obviously devoted to editioned works, prints and multiples, and “Unlimited” is for works that “transcend the limitations of a classical art-show stand” (in other words, enormous). But others are frankly a bit obscure: search me for the significant difference between “Feature” and “Statements”. I think the real point of creating sections like this is that it allows movement, making room for newcomers in a way that the main section doesn't.

Among interesting newcomers, it is good to see New York's Jack Shainman Gallery bringing artist Carrie Mae Weems; the gallery specialises in work from Africa and east Asia, as well as North America, a welcome addition to the overall fairly Eurocentric scene that is Basel.

ARTNEWS

June 2015

CARRIE MAE WEEMS

Born in 1953, lives in Brooklyn and Syracuse, New York

There's a reason Sheryl Sandberg's book *Lean In* was so important. There have been wonderful changes for women artists in the past 40-some years, and I know these women now in a way that I didn't when my career began. As a student I went to the library to find books on women photographers and found there were very few—among them, Julia Margaret Cameron, Diane Arbus, Imogen Cunningham. That was what first stimulated me to do research trying to locate women artists. I did a lot of that work as an undergraduate. Since then, there has been considerable improvement. However, although women artists are now being exhibited more, their work is still not valued to the extent of the male artists'. We are still a psychological and cultural distance away from recognizing and valuing them.

One factor may be that women artists tend to be isolated. They more often work alone, while men tend to work in teams. Look at Gregory Crewdson, whose production process might involve 50 assistants, while Cindy Sherman works quietly in her studio with maybe one assistant.

And then there is cultural isolation. I'm always calling my male friends to task when they work on a project and call their male friends for advice but don't call me.

But all of this relates to larger problems. As a society we are still seeking ways to deal with gender disparity. The isolation of women is culturally imposed, and it's a situation in which they participate. Rising to the occasion is a tall order. I don't blame women. But I'm always trying to discern how we might be complicit in our own victimization. I'm aware of the ways in which we are isolated and realize how difficult it is to combat that.

Around the same time that Linda Nochlin wrote "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" Alice Walker wrote the book *In Search of Our Mother's Garden* (1972), in which she asked, "What did it mean for a black woman to be an artist in our grandmothers' time? In our great-grandmothers' day? It is a question with an answer cruel enough to stop the blood."

For my part, I find myself in constant battle with organizations, institutions, both male and female, about fair and equal treatment. I attempt in my work to negotiate the power imbalance. There is a certain lack of democracy, whereby women represent the womb of a democracy not yet born.

Only when we start to separate questions of feminism from the larger issue of democracy will we really be able to have the conversation in a way that doesn't cause a

large group of people to shy away from us. How do I do that as a black artist? As a woman? These are my ongoing questions. A whole generation was snowed by the idea of "political correctness." The term wore on us, and we backed away—we didn't want to appear "p.c." The term substituted for a movement. So how do we pose the questions in a new way?

The feminist movement, which has been displaced and undermined, depends for its survival on organizing—that is still true. But what do we organize around? There has been a splintering of groups: blacks are over here, gays over there—everybody trying to do his or her own thing. And in the midst of it all, you tend to lose the greater social connections among those groups. Feminism as a larger movement was destroyed because these people weren't working together and organizing around a larger principle of social change.

That is one of the ways in which the political right has won. At the end of the day, we are all human beings searching for equality in a challenging system. We need a narrative change. We need a new set of terms. And most importantly, we need to keep the conversation going. The extent to which you are willing to relinquish the conversation is the extent to which you've failed.

65



Carrie Mae Weems, *Abbey Lincoln*, 2010, from the "Slow Fade to Black_Set II" series.



Installation view, *Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2014.
photo: David Heald © Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation

Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, January 24–May 14, 2014

Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video is the first exhibition by an African-American woman at the Guggenheim. The plausibility of that scenario and the national-political sensibility it engages go under the knife in Carrie Mae Weems's challenging and crucial presentation. Consider work like her 2003 *The Louisiana Project* series: in a number of ghostly, almost incandescent photographs, Weems stands in front of Southern plantation estates dressed in the garb of a nineteenth-century domestic worker. With her back to the viewer, she stays at a remove from the romanticized gravitas of American mythology, cast as its actor but ambivalent about performing its roles. Her sumptuous formalism renders the scene with a forceful sense of presence, but that ordered containment also rings as illusory: what emerges through Weems's exhibition is a key thematic dilemma—how to imagine oneself in an historical subject-position whose very trajectory is always already sketched by forces of domination. In work both difficult and generous, Weems opts to express the sheer trouble of such a cultural impasse.

Captions turn out to be Weems's most effective tools. As with the domestic scenes of her *Kitchen Table Series* (1990) or the imposing architecture of *Slave Coast* (1993), captions rarely explicate the contents of an image. Instead, they challenge or contradict the photograph in hesitant proximity. In her stunning *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* (1995-96), Weems appropriated nineteenth-century ethnographic daguerreotypes of American slaves, staining them blood red and inscribing them with captions alternatively furious, mournful, or sardonic. On a portrait of a white family and their female slave, Weems writes, "YOUR RESISTANCE WAS FOUND IN THE FOOD YOU PLACED ON THE MASTER'S TABLE—HA." The affective ambiguity of the laugh haunts the series, and

much of the exhibition as a whole, as a reaction to the unbearable opacity of a document whose production and reception have been brokered by violence. Weems attends to the force of political trauma while allowing for its reframing, and the frame becomes Weems's most effective arena of action on both discursive and aesthetic levels. Frames stage both the lonely beauty of Weems's *Roaming* photographs (2006) and the theatricality of the *Constructing Histories* tableaux (2008), in which epochal moments of political violence are treated like didactic dioramas. In her efforts to narrate stories of historical mistreatment, Weems is pedagogical, but it's a pedagogy whose emotional and personal thickness remains an intense, strangely disorienting aesthetic experience.

[Joseph Henry]



Carrie Mae Weems, *Untitled (Woman and daughter with makeup)* from the *Kitchen Table Series*, 1990.

photo: © Carrie Mae Weems and The Art Institute of Chicago



Carrie Mae Weems, *Untitled (Man and mirror)* from the *Kitchen Table Series*, 1990.

photo: © Carrie Mae Weems and The Art Institute of Chicago



THE INTERNATIONAL REVIEW OF AFRICAN AMERICAN ART

BUY BLACK

Who's Controlling
the Game?

TOP 10 PLAYERS

in the Black
Art Market

Studio Museum in Harlem's
Postcards Series

Revisiting the Black Male Show

Arts Consulting in a Digital Age

SCENE



Carrie Mae Weems. *Afro-Chic* (video still), 2010. DVD, 5 minutes, 30 seconds. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. © Carrie Mae Weems



Carrie Mae Weems. *Listening for the Sounds of Revolution from Dreaming in Cuba*, 2002. Gelatin silver print, 28 1/2 x 28 1/2 in. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. © Carrie Mae Weems



Carrie Mae Weems. *A Broad and Expansive Sky—Ancient Rome from Roaming*, 2006. Digital chromogenic print, 73 x 61 in. Private collection, Portland, Oregon. © Carrie Mae Weems

From the Hands of a Master

TACKLING THE COMPLEX ISSUES SURROUNDING RACE, GENDER, AND CLASS in the black community is an undertaking that must be done from the soul. For decades, artist Carrie Mae Weems has addressed these issues with masterful skill. *Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video* was a retrospective that documented Weems's rise and growth as an artist. Around two hundred pieces were on view, primarily photographs, including her famous series *Kitchen Table* and *Family Pictures and Stories*. In addition to

the numerous photographs, the exhibition included audio recordings, fabric works, video, and writings. Accompanying the exhibit was a catalogue published by the Yale University Press, which featured essays by scholars pertaining to Weems's cultural relevance. While Weems's work speaks loudly of black American identity, her artistic strength lies in creating unifying themes and calling for understanding and empathy among people of color. *Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video* was on view from October 16, 2013, through January 5, 2014, at Stanford University in Stanford, California, and from January 24 through April 23, 2014, at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York.

1.



2.



3.



ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: *Rabbit*, Jeff Koons, 1986; *L'Adoration du veau*, Francis Picabia, 1941-1942; *Untitled (Woman and Daughter with Make Up)*, Carrie Mae Weems, 1990.

Singular Sensations

Art-world luminaries reveal the work or show that started it all for them. *By Rachel Wolff*

Maybe it was the transformative experience of plucking a piece of candy from a Félix González-Torres stack of sweets—turned—memorial as a kid. Maybe it was a drug-free hallucination spurred by fixating on a James Turrell cutout or a near-religious response to Jackson Pollock splatter.

For every art maker, curator, dealer, and lover, there is that one work or exhibition that proved to be utterly metamorphic, shifting perspectives, triggering neurons, and launching what would ultimately become a lifelong obsession—in the best possible sense of the word. Spanning decades and continents, these artworks helped shape some of the most impactful figures in the art world today.

1. STEFAN EDLIS, COLLECTOR

Artwork: Jeff Koons, *Rabbit*, 1986



"It's tough to select one single piece of art. My focus has changed so much over the years. My recent fascination is with Glenn Brown, who mines the 19th century—Fragonard, Boucher, Fantin-Latour, Landseer—with his inimitable wit and style. But reaching back, I'd have to say Jeff Koons's *Rabbit* would make the cut. Art collecting is like making a film: What can you learn about a movie from snipping one frame from the spool? Our way is a journey perhaps lasting a

lifetime. At the stops along the way, we pick up supplies and drop off debris so as not to overload the camels."

2. MARCEL DZAMA, ARTIST

Artwork: Francis Picabia, *L'Adoration du veau* (*The Adoration of the Calf*), 1941-42



"Growing up in a small city, I was exposed to most artwork via books. When I first saw Picabia's *Adoration of the Calf*, I immediately cut it out and put it above my drawing table. I love how it's both pitiful and powerful. He's a cow deity—is there anything better? I keep going back to it, and it never gets old for me. The way he paints the hands, the color of the cape, the pink of the mouth—it's all so good. This piece in particular has a very interesting provenance because Picabia took the image from an Erwin Blumenfeld photograph called *The Dictator*. Picabia took the image further by adding the hands and the richness of color. Thinking about artists being inspired by another piece of art resonates for me because it rings true. When artwork moves you, you cannot help but feel inspired. It's so exciting when this happens. I have looked endlessly at this piece and have made my own short film where I tried to recreate my version of the cow. I was never more happy than seeing it come to life."

3. MICKALENE THOMAS, ARTIST

Artwork: Carrie Mae Weems, *The Kitchen Table Series*, 1990



"It was about 1994, I was living in Portland, Oregon, and Carrie Mae Weems had a show at the Portland Art Museum. I wasn't an artist at the time. At that point I had dropped out of college, and I was just working and living and trying to figure things out. I saw her show—*The Kitchen Table Series*—and that really hit me. She photographed people seated around a table to explore the complexities of marriage, gender, and family relationships, and that particular series of photographs reminded me of my own family. It was the first time that I saw contemporary work that resonated with me closely and sort of touched home. I wasn't really familiar with as much art and art history as I am today, and I didn't think art could do that. To see it in a museum and to see myself in the work, it was a profound and transforming moment in my life—emotionally, physically, and spiritually. I visited that show nine or 10 times, and from there I decided I was going to pursue art. I thought if art can do that, whatever that was, that's what I want to do. I thought if that's the power of being a creative person, then I would like to be that person. And I've told Carrie that. We spoke about

October 3, 2014 4:49 pm

Snapshot: 'Untitled' (1990), by Carrie Mae Weems

By Matthew Bremner

The US artist discovered a magazine of images from African-American artists, which sparked her passion for photography

US artist Carrie Mae Weems is best known for her photography. Born in Portland, Oregon, in 1953, she first studied in San Francisco with the modern dance pioneer Anna Halprin.

It was there that Weems, while still a teenager, discovered The Black Photographers Annual, a magazine of images from African-American artists. The discovery hit the young Weems like a “lightning bolt” and sparked her passion for photography.

She went on to study at the California Institute of Arts and later at the University of California. Since then, Weems' work has appeared in more than 50 shows. She was awarded a MacArthur “genius grant” in 2013 and earlier this year the Guggenheim museum in New York held a retrospective of her photography.

Weems has maintained that her “primary concern in art, as in politics, is the status and place of Afro-Americans in [America]”. The image above is from “The Kitchen Table” series (1989-90), in which Weems distilled complexities of race, class, and gender into the story of a black Everywoman.



'The Kitchen Table' series forms part of the artist's first UK solo exhibition. 'Color: Real and Imagined' runs from October 10-November 15 at the Pippy Houldsworth Gallery, London houldsworth.co.uk

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This page and opposite: Carrie Mae Weems, *Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me—A Story in 5 Parts*, 2012, digital video projection, stage, curtains, stanchions, Mylar, sound. Installation views, Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh.

CLOSE-UP

Specters of History

HUEY COPELAND ON CARRIE MAE WEEMS'S *LINCOLN, LONNIE, AND ME*, 2012



HAVE WE ALL BEEN SLEEPING on Carrie Mae Weems? The question might sound counter-intuitive, considering the esteem with which the artist has been held since her emergence in the 1980s—if not altogether off the mark, given the successes she has enjoyed in the past year. Highlights include a MacArthur “genius” award, a magisterial display of her “Museum” series at the Studio Museum in Harlem, and the star-studded “Past Tense/Future Perfect” conference organized around her work at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, the last stop of “Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video,” the artist’s traveling retrospective. In a word, Weems’s profile has never been higher. But, arguably, we have yet to receive a full accounting of her recursive and affecting practice, which embraces an ever-increasing array of lens-based media in order to reactivate historical memory. Indeed, as *New York Times* critic Holland Cotter noted, the Guggenheim’s showing was both a needed intervention and a “galling” “shame,” offering a scaled-down version of an already partial survey that was infelicitously shoehorned into the museum’s annexes rather than allowed to unfurl in Frank Lloyd Wright’s coiled rotunda.



Carrie Mae Weems, *Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me—A Story in 5 Parts*, 2012, digital video projection, stage, curtains, stanchions, Mylar, sound. Installation views, Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh.



Where black artists are concerned, such accommodating half measures on the part of “mainstream” New York institutions should come as no surprise—just think back to the Museum of Modern Art’s hanging of Wifredo Lam’s *The Jungle*, 1943, next to the coatroom for decades. Still, it is unfortunate, if not surprising, that no venue in Weems’s adopted city has thus far mounted a comprehensive exhibition of her practice or shown the recent work that spurred my initial query, a production that holds its own alongside her most renowned photo-texts such as “The Kitchen Table Series,” 1990, and “From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried,” 1995–96. For, whether holding out eloquent fabulations of black intimacy or critiquing the visual construction of racialized subjectivity, Weems’s art has consistently blended vernacular and high-cultural traditions from a uniquely feminist African-diasporic perspective that is nearly without parallel in the visual arts.

The same might be said of the piece in question, *Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me—A Story in 5 Parts*, 2012, which was commissioned by and debuted at the Mattress Factory in Pittsburgh as part of the exhibition “Feminist and . . .” alongside new works by Julia Cahill, Betsy Damon, Parastou Forouhar, Loraine Leeson, and Ayanah Moor. Weems’s contribution was subsequently shown at LOOK3 in Charlottesville, Virginia, and at Chicago’s Rhona Hoffman Gallery last fall in the context of a small but revelatory exhibition, “Slow Fade to Black” (its title a nod to Weems’s photographic series from 2010), that featured a selection of the artist’s recent

work. *Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me* was located upstairs from the main gallery, sequestered in a room all its own. Yet in this case—as with this year’s staging of Kara Walker’s ghostly monument *A Subtlety* in a condemned Williamsburg sugar factory—such apparent spatial relegation was fitting, especially given the technical and experiential demands of the work, a complex video installation that mobilizes old and new visual technologies to mesmerizing effect.

After brushing aside heavy blackout shades, you enter a darkened room—that ubiquitous mise-en-scène of contemporary image projection—only to immediately confront an environment more redolent of the nineteenth century: a theatrical stage framed by heavy bloodred curtains and set off with velvet ropes. In the work’s eighteen-and-a-half-minute video projection, life-size floating figures succeed one another on center stage, occasionally wreathed by falls of snow or whiffs of vapor that bring to mind the fog that enveloped artist Terry Adkins in Lorna Simpson’s *Cloudscape*, 2004. The procession of luminous apparitions in Weems’s video—broken up at times by moments of silence during which the stage is empty—is accompanied by an equally varied array of sounds, beginning with Blind Willie Johnson’s nearly wordless classic “Dark Was the Night, Cold Was the Ground,” whose melancholic strains set the visuals in motion as a tap dancer materializes out of the darkness and lures you into the work’s thrall.

As its title spells out, *Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me* is the artist’s meditation on her relationship to history in general and to two figures in particular: the

American president and Weems’s sometime collaborator, the artist and activist Lonnie Graham. In the second of the work’s loosely demarcated sections, Weems’s impossibly resonant voice—part Kathleen Turner, part Eartha Kitt, but always inimitably her own—recites and revises Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, while fragments of her 2008 reenactment of John F. Kennedy’s assassination, taken from her video *Constructing History: A Requiem to Mark the Moment*, 2008, float above the stage. These images are succeeded in part three by archival footage of ’60s busing protests and a spoken commentary by Graham on the difficulty of effecting social transformation.

In so framing American history as a racialized theater of deadly repetition, the piece explores both the tragedies of the past and the ways in which their farcical returns might be negotiated. These pressures are indexed by subsequent figures who function as icons of black spectacularity, from the anonymous boxer plotting his next moves both in and out of the ring, to the artist herself, done up as a trickster whose seductive laughter in part four quickly transmutes into a demonic threat: “I am gonna destroy ya,

Weems’s work underlines how projections, absences, and the shapes we give to them remain central to the rescripting of the historical past and to the workings of the modern imagination itself.



Carrie Mae Weems, *Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me—A Story in 5 Parts*, 2012, digital video projection, stage, curtains, stanchions, Mylar, sound. Installation views, Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh.



because I want you to feel the suffering that I know. It’s not gonna be pretty, Oh! Revenge is a mutha-fucka.” The closing section of the video recasts these considerations by foregrounding questions of gender, holding out a retinue of images from art history and popular culture to the tune of Neil Diamond’s “Girl, You’ll Be a Woman Soon,” as performed by Urge Overkill on the *Pulp Fiction* sound track. Accordingly, in this chapter, Weems gingerly suits herself up in a Playboy Bunny costume, presents an artist and her female model in a send-up of the classic scenario, and shows off her own re-creation of the splayed female nude at the center of Marcel Duchamp’s last work, *Étant donnés*, 1946–66.

Like Weems’s practice more broadly, *Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me* cannibalizes aspects of her previous projects and remixes them with other sources so that they might be redeployed to flesh out the larger history to which they already belong. Although the piece purportedly represents a narrative—hence the subtitle *A Story in 5 Parts*—it is one that moves spirally, constantly looping back on itself to discover its own difference. All this makes a certain sense in light of the historical and technical inspiration for the work, which does not merely refer to nineteenth-century performative traditions of an episodic bent but actively extends them. In particular, Weems’s projection owes its eerie effect to the “Pepper’s ghost” illusion invented by British civil engineer Henry Dircks and perfected in 1862 by John Henry Pepper, the director of London’s Royal Polytechnic Institution and a critic of spiritualist discourses, who used the

device to show off and ultimately debunk the theatrical tricks exploited by all manner of hucksters.

Pepper’s namesake technique, which enables objects and actors to appear onstage as projected spectral images, trades on a deceptively simple optical manipulation: A plane of glass is placed at a forty-five-degree angle between the stage and a hidden adjoining chamber, or “blue room,” located beneath it. When appropriately illuminated, objects and actors in the chamber appear on the glass and before the audience as dematerialized versions of themselves. As film scholar Laurence Senelick succinctly explains, the ghost effect relies upon the ability of glass to function transparently and reflectively at once, “just as in a brightly lit room at night one may see oneself reflected in a window-pane as far ‘outside’ the window as one stands before it in the room.” This illusion was enabled by the advances in glass-manufacturing technology that rendered modern cities sites of visual reflection and display, handily feeding into a Victorian investment in phantasmagoria that continues apace, from the “Ghosts of the Library” display at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum in Springfield, Illinois, to the appearance of an uncannily animated Tupac Shakur alongside a live Snoop Dogg at the 2012 Coachella music festival.

In Weems’s hands, the illusion is likewise technologically updated—Mylar replaces glass, and a projected video image takes the place of live actors—but her work does more than make the immaterial manifest. It underlines how projections, absences, and the shapes we give to them remain central to the

rescripting of the historical past and to the workings of the modern imagination itself, which is predicated on what literary theorist Terry Castle has called the “‘ghostifying’ of mental space.” These processes have been a key preoccupation of the artist’s practice, yet in *Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me*, Weems emphasizes the critical possibilities of visual technologies still capable of undoing—and so making visible—the means of appearance within Western culture, whose economies of thought and commerce are always haunted by the specter of blackness.

Weems’s turn to an actual theater of phantasms is thus particularly apt because it enables us to think anew about the culturally specific visual forms constructed to materialize the racial imaginary. Through its dramatic production of deep illusory space, so often enlisted in the maintenance of ideological ruses, the work highlights its own conceit, not only calling us back into the arena of political contestation but also encouraging us to look more closely at the realms opened up by Weems’s previous work in photography and video. Her art—too often flattened into a caricature of its reparative content—always cuts deep into the space of representation, asking us to look hard *into* the image, even when it is patently two-dimensional. *Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me* freshly reveals the ways in which Weems’s art draws our attention to worlds, both real and imagined, that continue to be haunted by apparitions who will have been heard only if we now awake. □

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[CULTURE]

ART STYLE THEATER



Wangechi Mutu, *The Storm Has Finally Made It Out Of Me Alhamdulillah*, 2012.
Collage on linoleum, 73" x 114" x 4".

Art

Top of the Class

Contemporary art can challenge our perceptions of race, identity or gender on a visceral level. Here, we highlight 10 black artists whose disruption of conventional practices have significantly impacted the art world.

BY LARRY OSSEI-MENSAH

LaToya Ruby Frazier

This recent winner of the prestigious Guna S. Mundheim Berlin Prize oscillates between social documentary and 19th and early 20th century influenced portraiture. She has exhibited her arresting photographs at the Brooklyn Museum and the Whitney Museum's 2012 Biennial.

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye

The UK-based figurative painter constructs raw imagery from both memory and her imagination. She utilizes historical painting to not only create visually lush narratives, but to also debunk racial stereotypes. Last year, she was a finalist for the distinguished Turner Prize (Steve McQueen won in 1999).

Wangechi Mutu ↑

The Kenyan-born and Brooklyn-based Mutu utilizes several mediums to dissect postcolonialism, globalization and feminism but she is best known for her majestic collages of the female form. Her latest exhibition, *A Fantastic Journey*, will be on view starting September 19 at The Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art at Northwestern University.

Carrie Mae Weems

This 2013 recipient of a MacArthur Genius Grant is an artistic titan. Her photographs and video work investigate concerns related to race, gender and class. Weems's dynamic career spans over three decades and places her at the vanguard of contemporary art.

Kehinde Wiley

Redefining the portrayal of black males in contemporary culture, Wiley juxtaposes heroic portrait paintings of urban males with references to Europe's Old Masters—actively reframing the narrative of the black male body one brushstroke at a time. This fall, he will exhibit his latest project *The World Stage: Haiti* at Roberts & Tilton in Los Angeles.

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND SUSANNE VIELMETTER LOS ANGELES PROJECTS



Carrie Mae Weems:
Untitled (Woman and daughter with children), from the "Kitchen Table Series," 1990, gelatin silver print 27¼ inches square. Courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

HOME

by Carrie Mae Weems

CURRENTLY ON VIEW
"Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video," at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, through May 14.

CARRIE MAE WEEMS is an artist based in Syracuse, N.Y.

SIX OR SEVEN MONTHS AGO, I'd been on the road for a while, traveling a lot. I just could not wait to get home: to wake up in my own bed, be in my own sheets, bathe in my own tub, smoke in my own living room. To be with all the furniture and art that I live with, all the stuff that I've accumulated over the years, that's taken on a certain kind of meaning for me. In some ways, home is my muse. It's the space that allows for deep contemplation, deep reflection. Somewhere you can go to smell yourself, to nourish and replenish yourself, and to protect yourself. Home gives me those four walls that I need between me and the rest of the immediate world.

I could never be a homeless person, rootless. I can go out on the limb quite far, but I have to have someplace to scurry back to, to make a nest of the ideas and pieces of material that I've acquired while out there, to sort of sink into, you know. As a visual artist, there are times I must leave; I have to travel. If I'm working on museums [as a subject], I'm looking at museums all over the world—not in Syracuse, my primary home, where there's only one. But I need to get home in order to understand whatever I've seen out there. So there's home, but there's also the psychological space that home creates.

The thing about being home on this particular occasion: I was just dying to hear really good music. I got back from wherever I had been at around three o'clock in the afternoon. I went into my kitchen and pulled out my music, my computer, and I decided to listen to really extraordinary voices. I'm very interested in all kinds of music, and all kinds of singing voices. From three o'clock in the afternoon until about two in the morning I just sat in one place listening to them; from Sarah Vaughan to Frank Sinatra to Aretha Franklin. Or Aretha Franklin remixing Glen Campbell, then back to Glen Campbell to rethink Aretha. The thing that became clear to me in this moment, maybe for the first time, was that the really great singers, almost without exception, usually only sang. They seldom played piano or did a song-and-dance act. The great singers mostly just sang.

How do you get close to the bone in your work? You don't do it by trying to be a jack-of-all-trades. You can only do it by sinking deep, by going deep into the structure of the thing. I'm just a photographer, a visual artist, mining the same territory again and again and again, in hopes of getting closer in my lifetime to the full nature of my own voice and the complexity of being alive.

This "sounding out" is my deepest muse, if you want to call it that. How things are made to sound in the world, and how close you can get to the authentic, complex soundings of the world. I have been listening to Louis Armstrong for 45 years, and still, every time I hear him, my mind is blown by the places he is able to take us in our own imaginations. The music delivers us to the deepest part of ourselves. So the question is, Will I ever be able to come close to even an approximation of that?

It's really difficult to truly see your own work, though you are seeing it all the time, since you're always making it. My work endlessly surprises me. I think, "I made that? Hmmm . . . not bad for a girl!" With the Guggenheim survey up, I'm learning a great deal about myself. I don't think of myself as a great artist, by any stretch of the imagination. I've seen great art, and my work is not that. I do, however, have a unique voice. I'm aware that it's situated in a very particular space in the art world, and that it's been very important—that a lot of people have paid attention to it—from how the photographs are structured in, say, the "Kitchen Table Series" [1990], to the way I've used language in that and other series, such as "Africa" [1993] or "From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried" [1995-96]. I've figured out a way to use voice and language with the image in a rather unique and meaningful way.

Men and women have come to me as a result of their encounters with my work over the years. It presents the possibility of generating certain kinds of dialogue that might not happen otherwise. A couple I know went to see my show. He's black and she's white, a very old friend of mine. They've been dating for 17 years. She



Aretha Franklin singing in the Atlantic Records studio, New York, Jan. 9, 1969. Photo Michael Ochs. © Getty Images.

said, "We came to your show and had conversations like we've never had before." Another friend wrote me: "I'm standing in front of your work and a man is talking to his son for the first time about race." That is an accomplishment. In conversations like these you discover your voice in relation to someone that you thought you knew, someone that you love.

I'm dying to get home. I have some work I really want to make. I want to be back in my studio and listening to music. Right now, I'm paying attention to radio and television personalities from the past—hosts and announcers. There was such an art to them, from Groucho Marx to Nat King Cole to Steve Allen to Dick Cavett. They were great personalities of voice and sound—and they had such incredible shows! Today, authenticity is not really being looked for. Until the early '70s, you didn't want 15 singers on the radio who sounded the same. Now that's a given, that they sound alike. There's been a homogenization of culture and language and style that has ruined the possibility of an authentic voice.

I was just given a BET [Black Entertainment Television] award. I was seated next to Aretha Franklin, Berry Gordy was across from me, and Smokey Robinson was behind me. So many of the younger performers were just horrible—so fake, I was embarrassed for them. And then Aretha took the stage and sang "A Change Is Gonna Come." Unbelievable. That *odor*! That depth! You have to be kind of ugly to sing like that—you can't be way up here to get down. It is so important to really discover your voice, to allow it to speak through, and to not be afraid of being different. ○

—As told to Faye Hirsch

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THE TRIUMPH OF CARRIE MAE WEEMS

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A **Q&A**
WITH **Carrie Mae
Weems**

By Charmaine Picard



Elegant and graced with a rich, melodic voice, Carrie Mae Weems is an imposing figure on the artistic landscape. Through documentary photographs, conceptual installations, and videos, she is known for raising difficult questions about the American experience. When the MacArthur Foundation awarded her a 2013 “genius” grant, it cited Weems for uniting “critical social insight with enduring aesthetic mastery.” The artist and activist is the subject of a major traveling career retrospective, which was at Stanford University’s Cantor Arts Center in the fall and opens January 24 at its final stop, the Guggenheim Museum in New York.

CHARMAINE PICARD: What was it like studying at the California Institute of the Arts in the late 1970s?

CARRIE MAE WEEMS: They didn’t always know what to do with this brown woman taking brown photographs. I arrived there when I was 27 years old, and I knew that I wanted to research women photographers; I knew that I wanted to learn who the black photographers were; and I knew that I wanted to build my own archive of their work. My best friend was filmmaker Catherine Jelski. The graduating class before mine was strong, with Mike Kelley, Jim Shaw, and Tony Oursler. John Divola, Jo Ann Callis, and John Baldessari were teaching there at the time. Divola apologized to me a few years ago because he thought he could have been more supportive. The field was more limited then. We knew all of the great male artists—and I don’t have a problem with them—I’m just saying, move over a bit, folks!

Your late friend Mike Kelley said of your photographs, “Her images are obviously constructed and don’t present themselves as being factual—rather, they have a mythic dimension that forces you to deal with them in a more complex way.” Because you often appear in the images, do people assume they’re autobiographical?

The only time I tried to deal in a small way with autobiography was in *Family Pictures and Stories* (1981–82), but I produced that work a long time ago, when I was a graduate student. In some ways it’s like Cindy Sherman’s use of self-portraiture—you understand it as conceptual-based work that explores issues of sexuality, self-construction, and other themes.

Both you and Kelley are receiving career retrospectives this year—his, unfortunately, is posthumous. Did you keep in touch with him?

Mike graduated a year before I did, and we hung out together in L.A. We dated for a while. He was like my boyfriend; he was my guy. We kept in touch on and off over the years. Passages in life can be pretty difficult, and I can understand why you would like to leave it behind; but if you could just hold on for one more day, sometimes it breaks. He just couldn’t hang on for one more day, and that’s unfortunate. It’s a tragedy.

You’ve long merged art and social activism. Recently, you brought attention to gun violence in Syracuse by launching a public art campaign, using signage and billboards, called Operation: Activate. And in 2012 you founded a summer program for teens called the Institute of Sound + Style, where students learn career skills. Do you consider these initiatives part of your art practice?

I’ve been interested in social engagement for a very long time, and these projects are very much a part of my art practice, allowing me to work in a more immediate way with specific issues. The work is different than what I might create for a museum exhibition or a show at the Jack Shainman Gallery, but they overlap, and I bring the same skill set and ideas to the work.

How have you funded these initiatives?

I used my own money and worked with a group of wonderful graduate students I met through a class that I taught with David

Ross at Syracuse University. I haven’t made a billboard for the past year, but I will probably make one again now that I have money from the MacArthur fellowship. I’m starting to partner with other people because they have additional resources that they can bring to the table—whether it is camera equipment, recording equipment, or musical knowledge. I think that having other people involved is really important to keep the institute alive and infuse it with fresh ideas.

To coincide with the U.S. presidential election in 2012, you produced a video on Barack Obama suggesting that he is judged by different criteria than past presidents have been. Can you speak about this work?

The first video I made about Obama was in 2008, and it looks at the tension between Obama and Hillary Clinton. The 2012 piece was an attempt to understand how difficult it’s been for him to govern because of the harsh backlash from the far right and from liberals as well. The patterns that govern racism are so entrenched that his hands are tied, and it’s so, so painful to see.



Last Song, 2012.
From the series “An Essay on Equivalent, See.” Digital C-print, 33½ x 22¼ in.

OPPOSITE:
Carrie Mae Weems,
2013.

Are the president and Mrs. Obama familiar with your work?

Yes, my work has been at the U.N. and in various American embassies, and it was also hanging in former U.N. ambassador Susan Rice's apartment. Michelle was very moved when she saw "From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried," 1995–96, at MOMA and said, "I have to call the president. He has to come and see this." When I met her at the White House, it was really wonderful. She said to me, "Carrie Mae Weems, I'm so glad to meet you." And I said, "I'm so happy to meet my first lady!" Getting older is interesting because I'm starting to feel like an elder stateswoman and with that comes a certain kind of recognition. And there's something lovely about how Michelle Obama might greet me as an older woman whom she respects.

Have you learned anything about your past work while putting together your retrospective?

I was taking a group of people through my exhibition at the Cantor Center, and there was a self-portrait that I made 30 years ago, with my back toward the camera. That figure became important in the development of three series of works: "Roaming," 2006; "The Louisiana Project," 2003; and "Dreaming in Cuba," 2001. That thread was picked up from 30 years ago and pulled through several bodies of my work. There are also visual and emotional patterns that were set very early on and a way of working with the camera that was also set a long time ago, so visually the work has a certain type of consistency. The poet and writer Amiri Baraka called it the *changing same*.

How have you moved away from your early photography and videos and pushed your work into new terrain?

The series I'm working on now is called "Equivalents," and this work is some of the most ephemeral that I've made. These images are more open than, say, "From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried." Something like "Equivalents" has more air around it, and its meaning fluctuates and it's harder to pin down. Alfred Stieglitz came up with the idea of Equivalents, and I was thinking about the importance of certain artists, like Duchamp, in my life, the importance of Magritte as an artist in my life, the importance of Lorna Simpson in my life, as well as Steichen and Stieglitz. So I was remaking the impossible but adding an extra layer of mediation.

I also just recently finished a project on W.E.B. Du Bois. I've been thinking a long time about contemplative spaces for important African-American figures, and I realized that there are so few of them in the country. So when given the chance to create a project around Du Bois, I started thinking that this is the time to create a memorial garden. I had a new variety of peony named for him that is slated to go into a new garden at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. It's called the Du Bois Peony of Hope. It's white with a beautiful citron-yellow center and can be installed outside the museum or in gardens across the country.

In what ways, if at all, has your Jewish and Native American ancestry influenced your ideas?

My grandfather on my mother's side was Jewish. There's a deep link between African-Americans and Jews, and it's something

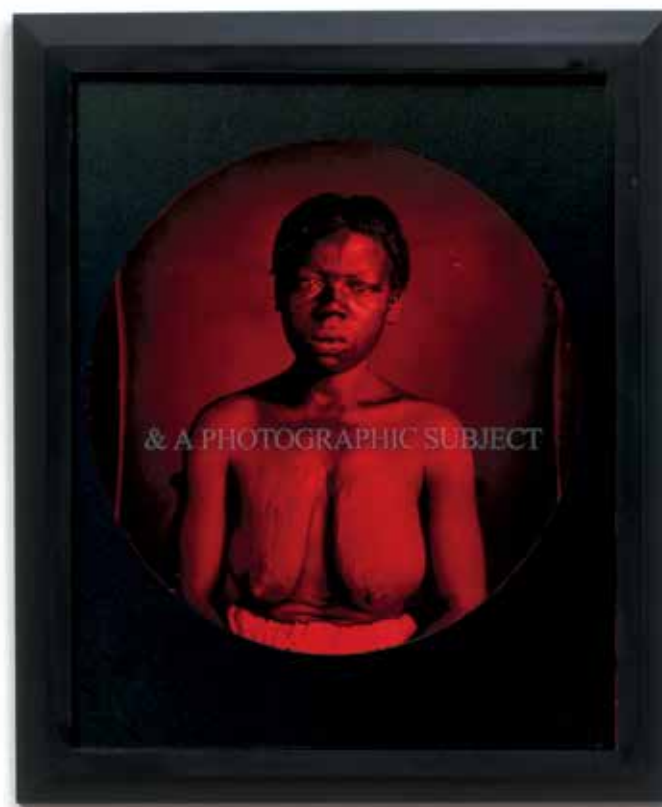
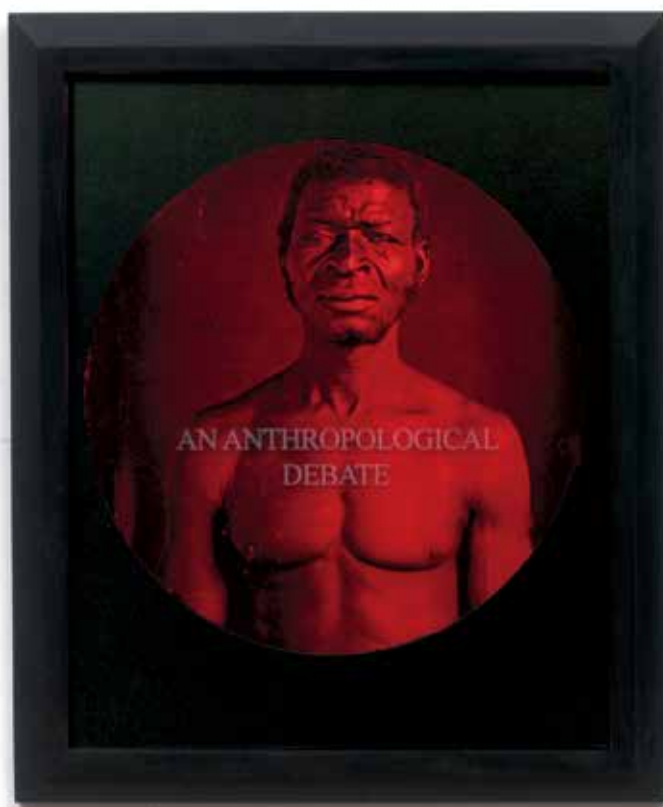
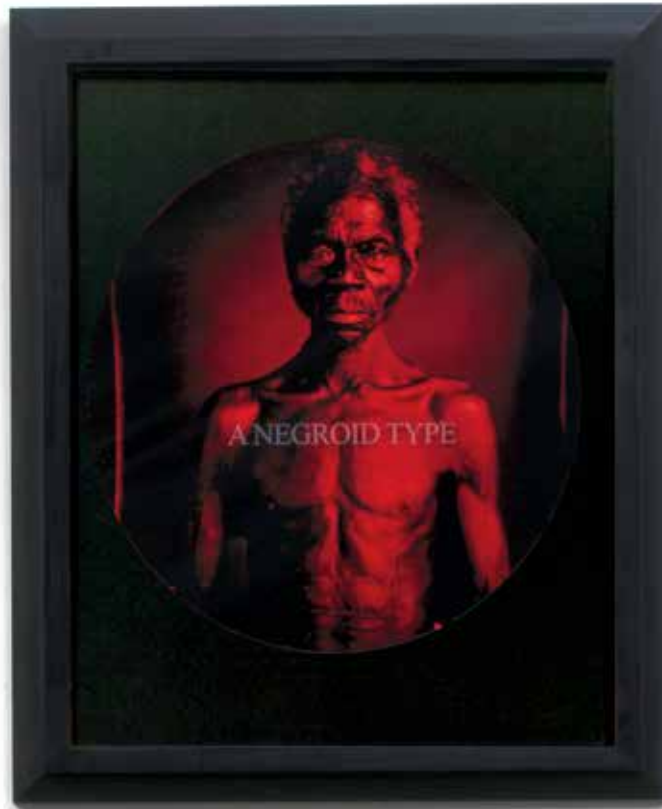
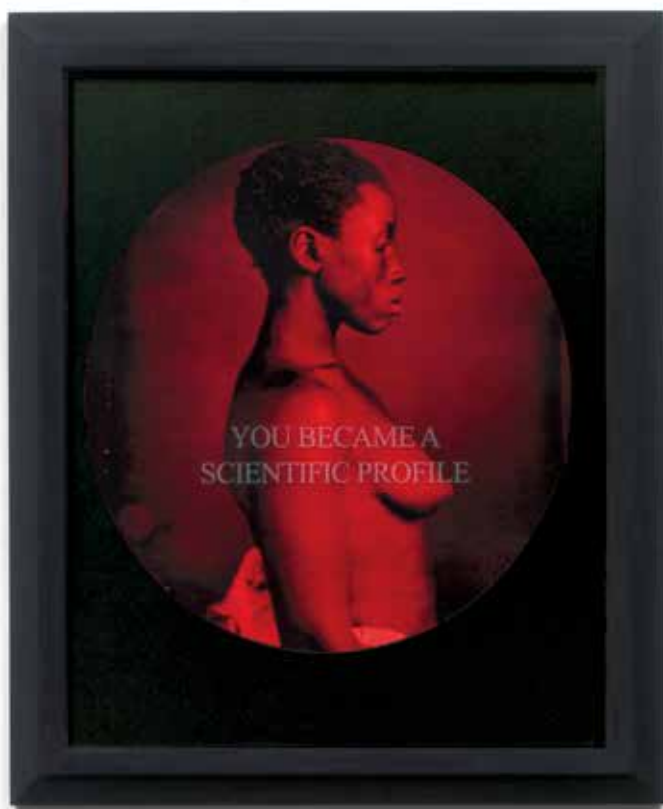
"African-American artists are still considered outliers, and people don't know how to integrate them into broader themes."

Still from *Afro-Chic*,
2009–10. Video,
5 min. 30 sec.

OPPOSITE:
A Scientific Profile,
1995–96.
From the series
"From Here I Saw
What Happened
and I Cried."
C-prints with etched
text on glass,
each 26½ x 22¾ in.



GABOR SZITANYI, CARRIE MAE WEEMS, AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY



that I've always wanted to explore. There was a larger project that I had hoped to do in Israel that, unfortunately, didn't come to fruition. I'm sensitive to people who have been scorned for what they look like or believe in or who have been under attack. One of the projects that I want to present and produce in my public programs at the Guggenheim is a night on Black and Jewish comedy. I think that there's a shared sense of struggle in the country, and that, I think, forms an incredible bond between these two apparently very different groups of people. It will be interesting to have these ideas rub up against one another.

Would you like to see your work presented differently in the future?

I would really like to see a well-curated show that has the power

to break through narrow confines of race in order to bring together really smart artists. For instance, nobody has organized a show with Lorna Simpson and Cindy Sherman, or Carrie Mae Weems, Robert Frank, and Gary Winogrand.

African-American artists are still considered outliers, and people don't really know how to integrate them into broader themes. People frame my work in terms of race and gender and don't integrate it into broader historical questions, and I think that limits the possibilities of what the public is allowed to understand about our production in the country. It's one of the reasons that I'm interested in using my platform at the Guggenheim to bring forth voices that are rarely heard together. If you invite only African-Americans to the table, then you're participating in your own isolation. **MP**

The New York Times

ART REVIEW

Testimony of a Cleareyed Witness

Carrie Mae Weems Charts the Black Experience in Photographs



Carrie Mae Weems A 2002 self-portrait, taken in Santiago de Cuba, is in a show of her work at the Guggenheim Museum. Collection of the artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

By HOLLAND COTTER

Published: January 23, 2014

Color and class are still the great divides in American culture, and few artists have surveyed them as subtly and incisively as Carrie Mae Weems, whose traveling 30-year retrospective has arrived at the Guggenheim Museum. From its early candid family photographs, through series of pictures that track the Africa in African-America, to work that explores, over decades, what it means to be black, female and in charge of your life, it's a ripe, questioning and beautiful show.

All the more galling, then, that the Guggenheim has cut it down to nearly half the size it was when originally organized by the Frist Center for the Visual Arts in Nashville and split it between two floors of annex galleries, making an exhibition that should have filled the main-event rotunda with her portraits, videos and installations into a secondary, niche attraction.

Ms. Weems was born in Portland, Ore., in 1953, to a family with sharecropper roots in Tennessee and Mississippi. The early civil rights years and the traumatic, nomadic 1960s were the years of her youth, and she did a lot of living fast. By her mid-20s, she had studied dance; had a child; worked in restaurants, offices and factories; spent time in Mexico, Fiji and New York; and begun a long-term commitment to grass-roots socialist politics.



Suzanna DeChillo/The New York Times

In 1974, she picked up a 35-millimeter camera, and five years later, at 27, she enrolled at the California Institute of the Arts near Los Angeles to study photography. She went on from there to earn a master of fine arts degree from the University of California, San Diego, followed by a stint at Berkeley studying folklore. Zora Neale Hurston, a writer and anthropologist of black life was a hero.

Ms. Weems didn't get much faculty notice in art school, but that seems not to have mattered. As early as 1978, she had begun the photographic series titled "Family Pictures and Stories," which became her M.F.A. graduate show in 1984 and is the earliest work at the Guggenheim.

The series, made up of snapshotlike photographs of her family, was a product of Ms. Weems's abiding interest in black culture and her gifts as a born storyteller. It was also a reaction to the 1965 government-issued Moynihan report that had cited family instability as the cause of the "deterioration" of African-American life.

Her response was to document, visually and verbally — she recorded an oral history to accompany the pictures — the everyday life of her own multigenerational family, one that had its share of dysfunction but was, over all, loving and mutually supportive, Ms. Weems herself being a very together product of it.

This was in no way a black-pride exercise. She understood the Moynihan report for what it was, a way to deflect attention from the reality that what the black family was up against was a long and continuing history of racism. It was that history she tackled next, first in carefully composed studio photographs of models enacting stereotypes (“Black Man Holding Watermelon”), then in still life arrangements of racist tchotchkes (Mammy and Sambo salt-and-pepper shakers), and finally, in 1989-90, in mug-shot-style portraits of African-American children.

She titled these portraits collectively “Colored People” and tinted the prints with monochromatic dyes: yellow, blue, magenta. The results were beautiful — and Ms. Weems puts a high value on formal beauty — but the colors carried complex messages. They are reminders that the range of skin colors covered by “black” is vast. But they also suggest that the social hierarchies arbitrarily built on color are operative as a kind of internalized racism among African-Americans who privilege light shades of brown skin.



"Wilfredo, Laura, and Me (from Dreaming in Cuba)" (2002). Collection of the artist. Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

The fullest development of this investigation of racism and its consequences comes in the extraordinary and now classic pictorial essay called “From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried,” which makes as powerful an impression today as it did when it was new in 1995.

In this work, made up of 33 separate prints, all of the images are lifted from found sources, the main one being an archive of 1850 daguerreotype images of African-born black slaves in South Carolina. The portraits were commissioned by the Harvard scientist Louis Agassiz to prove his theory that blacks constituted a separate and inferior race, and the men and woman presented, stripped to the waist or naked, were intended to be evidential specimens, nothing more.

Ms. Weems adds the more. She has tinted all the pictures blood red and printed words over the images, some descriptive (“A Negroid Type”), others in the form of direct address (“You became a scientific profile”), still others passionately tender (“You became a whisper, a symbol of a mighty voyage & by the sweat of your brow you laboured for self, family & other”). The work is both an indictment of photography as enslavement, and a homage to long-dead sitters, transplanted Africans, who, under unknowable duress, gave their bodies and faces to the artist, to us, and to history.

Ms. Weems honed to this quasi-anthropological model in much of her art from the early 1990s. Her folklore study led her to explore the black Gullah communities which, because of their isolation on islands off the coast of Georgia and South Carolina, had retained strong traces of West African origins. The immersive “Sea Islands Series” that resulted, combining photographs,

words and objects, is mesmerizingly atmospheric, as are two bodies of work that emerged from her travels in Africa itself.

In this series, Ms. Weems maintains the stance of omniscient, commenting observer, though this position was changing. In 1990, in what is probably her best known piece, the “Kitchen Table Series,” she introduced herself directly into the picture, playing the leading role in a carefully scripted and staged fictional narrative that unfolds in chapters over nearly two dozen photographs.

The action takes place in a narrow room neutrally furnished with a wood table and chairs; a bright lamp, which becomes a kind of interrogation light, hangs overhead. In a succession of tableaux vivants, Ms. Weems plays a contemporary Everywoman, initiating a relationship and agonizing over the direction it takes, bonding with female friends, raising kids, and finding her footing in solitude, with each phase of the story narrated in text panels.

The photographs are lush, the writing inventively colloquial, the forward pace engrossing. This is political art, but primarily in the personal-is-political sense. Issues of race and class are certainly there, but subsumed into the universal realities of life lived, daily, messy, crowded, at home.

In a sense, much of the rest of Ms. Weems’s art radiates out from this point: from home, you might say, into the world, with the artist often appearing, anonymous, back to us, in the distance, a silent witness in places where her ancestors would probably only have been present as slaves: at a 19th-century plantation house in Louisiana, for example, and among classical ruins in Rome.

A set of recent pictures by Ms. Weems that will be on view at the Studio Museum in Harlem as a supplement to the Guggenheim show make a somewhat different, but even more immediately pertinent point. Titled “The Museum Series,” it shows the artist dwarfed by the facades of international art institutions — the Louvre, the Tate Modern, and so on — which, to quote the Studio Museum news release, “affirm or reject certain histories through their collecting or display decisions.”



“A Single’s Waltz in Time” (2003). Collection of the artist. Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

The Guggenheim, with its smallized, to-the-side display of Ms. Weems’s show, edges toward rejecting, even as it appears to be affirming. Instead of a full retrospective, it delivers a career sampler when it has the space and resources to do so much more.

Why didn’t it show, for example, the full “Sea Islands Series” rather than just excerpts? Why, as the last and crowning stop on the exhibition tour, didn’t it add material, fill the survey out, bring in important missing pieces like “The Hampton Project,” Ms. Weems’s haunting 2000 multimedia essay on institutional racism as it applied to both African and Native Americans?

Maybe there were problems with loans, with schedules. Whatever. Where there's a will there's a way. It's a shame.

That said, the curators — Kathryn E. Delmez at the Frist Center and Jennifer Blessing and Susan Thompson at the Guggenheim — have done a solid job within their restrictions. And Ms. Weems, now 60 and much honored, is what she has always been, a superb image maker and a moral force, focused and irrepressible, and nowhere more so than in the videos that round out the show.

The short, funny 2009 fashion shout-out called “Afro-Chic” celebrates a revolutionary style while making cool-eyed note of its marketing. And in the 2003-4 compilation called “Coming Up for Air,” screened in the museum’s New Media Theater, Ms. Weems returns, with a few misfires but with a truly impressive, try-harder wisdom, to themes she started with: the rifts created by race and class, the possibility of building bridges with beauty, and the reality that the politics of living are individual, familial and universal.

“Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video” runs through May 14 at the Guggenheim Museum, 1071 Fifth Avenue, at 89th Street; 212-423-3500, guggenheim.org. “Carrie Mae Weems: The Museum Series” opens on Thursday and runs through June 29 at the Studio Museum in Harlem, 144 West 125th Street; 212-864-4500, studiomuseum.org.

A version of this review appears in print on January 24, 2014, on page C25 of the New York edition with the headline: Testimony of a Cleareyed Witness.

A PLACE AT THE TABLE

Carrie Mae Weems's cultural diplomacy at the Guggenheim

BY ANDREA K. SCOTT

January 27, 2014

In 1990, the American photographer Carrie Mae Weems staged a series of black-and-white scenes at her own kitchen table, starring herself, alone and with other models. These weren't straight-up self-portraits any more than Cindy Sherman's "Film Stills" were outtakes from movies. Alternating the pictures with framed panels of folkloric text, Weems distilled complexities of race, class, and gender into the story of a black Everywoman who was defined not just by her relationships—as a lover, mother, breadwinner, friend—but by her comfort with solitude. In the process, she elevated the sapless polemics of identity politics to the lush realm of neorealism.



"Untitled (Woman Playing Solitaire)," from the "Kitchen Table Series" (1990), by Carrie Mae Weems.

Weems is now sixty. Since that career-making project, her gimlet-eyed, starkly lyrical meditations on what constitutes ideas of difference have earned her a MacArthur "genius" grant, a Medal of Arts from the U.S. State Department, and a survey of thirty years' worth of work that opens this week at the Guggenheim. (The exhibition was organized by the Frist Center for the Visual Arts, in Nashville, Tennessee; New York is its fifth and final stop.)

"Of course, I'm thrilled," Weems said, several days before the show opened. "I'm the first African-American woman to have a retrospective at the Guggenheim. Not to sound pretentious, but I *should* be having a show there. By now, it should be a moot point for a

black artist—but it’s not.” She said she’d be just as happy if the museum were surveying someone else, mentioning a few mid-career names, including Lorna Simpson, Mickalene Thomas, and Lyle Ashton Harris. “Of course, I might be lying to myself,” she said. “But I’m not as interested in my own career as I am in moving a kind of cultural diplomacy forward.”

One such advance followed Weems’s 1995 series “From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried,” for which she enlarged daguerreotypes of African-American subjects, colored them red, and overlaid them with text. A portrait of a young woman, who is naked and turned sideways in front of the camera, reads, “You became a scientific profile.” Superimposed on another photograph, of an elegantly attired woman gazing frankly ahead, are the words “Some said you were the spitting image of evil.” The original pictures are in the archives of Harvard University, which threatened to sue Weems over their use but ended up acquiring the series for its collection.

Still, for an artist whose subsequent works have been set against the monuments of ancient Rome and the museums of Europe—not to mention the fabulous fashion show Weems staged for her 2009 color video “Afro-Chic”—the label “political” can feel constraining. “I think it’s the easiest way of dealing with me,” Weems said. “It’s expedient, just like reducing things to my race or my gender. But I am not a political artist.” On April 25, she will gather a group of artists, writers, choreographers, and musicians for a weekend of public programs at the Guggenheim, to join her in “thinking about what the cultural process of brown people has been.” The title of one event reads like a synopsis of Weems’s historical consciousness, her spirit of optimism, her fascination with language, and her sense of humor: “Past Tense, Future Perfect.” ♦

PHOTOGRAPH: COURTESY ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

WALL STREET JOURNAL

A Star Three Decades in the Making

By ELLEN GAMERMAN | JANUARY 23, 2014

Carrie Mae Weems is finally getting the star treatment that has largely eluded her during her career.

The artist's first New York museum retrospective opens Friday at the Guggenheim. "Carrie Mae Weems : Three Decades of Photography and Video" examines race, class and gender with work that includes posed domestic scenes, historic re-enactments and pieces using appropriated objects.



Carrie Mae Weems's 'Untitled (Woman and Daughter With Makeup),' from her 'Kitchen Table Series,' 1990, will be on view at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. © Carrie Mae Weems/Collection of Eric and Liz Lefkowsky/The Art Institute of Chicago (photo)

The exhibition is the latest in a spate of honors for Ms. Weems. In September, the MacArthur Foundation awarded her a "genius grant" worth \$625,000—a moment she celebrated by donning a tiara, evening gown and fake jewels. Next month, she will join Aretha Franklin among the artists celebrated at the annual BET Honors, established by BET Networks, news she greeted with a near swoon.

"It was like, 'No, this can't be happening to me. Aretha Franklin and Carrie Weems? I mean, come on,'" Ms.

Weems said.

The Guggenheim exhibit, the last stop in a show that started at the Frist Center for the Visual Arts in

Nashville, Tenn., presents some of Ms. Weems's best-known photographs, including mocked-up family tableaux shot in a documentary style from her 1990 "Kitchen Table Series."

"She's really been on our radar since the 'Kitchen Table Series'—that's now almost 25 years," said Jennifer Blessing, the Guggenheim's senior curator of photography. Of Ms. Weems's retrospective, she said: "It was certainly time."

Another series in the show, "From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried," features a range of blood-red-tinted and text-covered daguerreotypes, some incorporating pictures of slaves.

The work has a charged history: Harvard University threatened to sue Ms. Weems after she used images of slaves featured in photos owned by the school. The artist argued that even if she didn't have a legal case, she had a moral one, and she told the school she welcomed a lawsuit. No court battle ever materialized, and Harvard later acquired the pieces.

Ms. Weems's artwork is hard to categorize—she has gotten a peony named after W.E.B. Du Bois and posed as an aging Playboy bunny struggling to get into her outfit in a hologram-like video installation.

Because she can appear as a character in her photos, she has drawn comparisons to Cindy Sherman, whose artwork has generally commanded higher prices.

For example, Ms. Weems's high-profile photo projects, including the "Kitchen Table Series," are priced at New York's Jack Shainman Gallery from \$50,000 to \$125,000 for the series, while Ms. Sherman's auction record for a single piece is \$3.9 million.

"Carrie hasn't received the attention she deserved for quite a while," said Kathryn Delmez, a curator at the Frist who worked closely with Ms. Weems on the show, adding that she was particularly surprised that major museums didn't own more of her work.

This month, two institutions bought pieces by Ms. Weems: the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University in Durham, N.C., and the National Gallery of Art in Washington.

Ms. Weems grew up in Portland, Ore., part of an extended family of more than 300 people. After she turned 16, she had her only child, a daughter, and left home.



A blood-red-tinted and text-covered daguerreotype incorporating the picture of a slave is part of Ms. Weems's exhibit at the Guggenheim. MoMA/President & Fellows of Harvard College

She joined a dancer's workshop in San Francisco before getting introduced to Marxism and working as an organizer. A friend gave her a camera for her 21st birthday, and about a decade later she was studying photography at the California Institute of the Arts on her way to a master's degree from the University of California, San Diego. She now lives in Syracuse, N.Y., with her husband.

These days, the artist is focused on a new project, "Swinging Into 60," mostly video and writing that connects her age—60 years old—to the decade of the 1960s.

"It gives me this wonderful double entendre about what it means to age in this culture, what it meant to come up in this amazing moment in our contemporary history," she said.

Besides the Guggenheim, the Studio Museum in Harlem is featuring Ms. Weems's work this winter. An exhibit opening at the Studio Museum on Thursday includes photos of a black-clad Ms. Weems with her back to the camera, dwarfed by the imposing facades of institutions such as the British Museum and the Louvre.

In these shots, she almost looks locked out of the art establishment. She isn't—at least, not anymore.



Carrie Mae Weems, Guggenheim, New York – review

By Ariella Budick
January 29, 2014

The American artist's photographs combine confessional ferocity and clinical coolness



Carrie Mae Weems's 'Afro-Chic' (2010)

"I am not a political artist," Carrie Mae Weems recently told *The New Yorker* magazine, trying to wriggle out of a box she has spent much of her career constructing. Her finest photographs have always been intricate and nuanced, but also so direct that they invite simplistic interpretations: an archetype of the strong black woman, a protest against prejudice, an indictment of slavery. A new retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum recycles some of these blunt readings, but it also invites viewers to see beyond slogans to subtlety.

The fulcrum of her career is the "Kitchen Table Series" (1990), a suite of self-portraits in which the artist functions less as protagonist than as projection. She is a Weems-ish character whose story is "loosely related to the artist's own experiences", as a Guggenheim text panel puts it.

A saga of waxing and waning love plays out around the kitchen table, beneath the deep-shadowed glow from an overhead lamp. In the opening frame, Weems – or rather, “Weems” – gazes past a vanity mirror, into the camera, wearing a wry, sceptical expression. The source of her amusement is presumably the man behind her chair, who is hunched over her shoulder in an inveigling embrace. The scene has a smoky retro glamour. His dark suit frames her soft floral kimono, and a black fedora masks his inclined face. A half-full bottle of whisky, a couple of highball glasses and a packet of cigarettes join a comb and brush on the table. The scene is a mash-up of atmospheric Dutch interiors and *Citizen Kane*. Still life contends with sexual drama.

Two panels of writing – not museum texts, but an integral part of the piece – intervene, and the words, like the images, are deceptively straightforward and elaborately stylised. The man “is definitely in the mood for love. Together they were falling for that ole black magic. In that moment it seemed like a match made in heaven. They walked, not hand in hand, but rather side by side . . . thanking their lucky stars with fingers crossed.”

Weems has strung together this necklace of hackneyed phrases from pop songs and pulp novels, but it’s hard to gauge her level of irony. As the relationship inches from infatuation to estrangement, the prepackaged prose drops away, and the language becomes more analytical: “She insisted that what he called domineering was a jacket being forced on her because he couldn’t stand the thought of the inevitable shift in the balance of power.” Spoken like a therapist.

Small details loom in this claustrophobic setting, taking on outsized significance. The table nearly fills one corner of the room, so that people and chairs are always pushed up against it. A poster of Malcolm X disappears from the back wall, replaced by a painted still life, then a caged bird and a Peruvian tapestry. It’s an almost sacramental space, a kitchen where hardly anyone eats or smiles. The protagonist finds comfort in her daughter, her mother and her friends. But in the end she is alone, elbows planted firmly on the table, playing a contemplative game of solitaire. The series is typically read as an affirmation of independent, resilient womanhood, but there are no triumphal fanfares here. The tone is more fatalistic than celebratory.

In the two decades since “Kitchen Table”, Weems has never quite matched its perfect synthesis of autobiography, appropriation, politics and sheer enchantment. She came close, though, in a 1995-96 series that confronts race more directly, “From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried”. It began with a collection of small mid-19th-century daguerreotypes of South Carolina slaves, which the Harvard naturalist Louis Agassiz commissioned to support his theory that blacks belonged to a separate species. Weems rephotographed these tainted images, printed them large, and tinted them blood-red. She framed them under glass and etched missives on the panes. To a sequence of four naked torsos: “You became a scientific profile . . . a negroid type . . . an anthropological debate . . . a photographic subject.”

Weems is doing more than just tut-tutting at a scientist’s dehumanising classification. She is challenging her own medium. First these individuals were bought and exploited, then photography reinforced the violence; capturing them with the lens recapitulated the power relations of slavery. Now she tries to reverse the process, redeeming anonymous ancestors and folding solemn instants back into an ongoing story. She reaches beyond Agassiz’s slave portraits to address a black Union soldier: “You became a whisper, a symbol of a Mighty Voyage & by the sweat of your brow you laboured for self family & other.”

Weems doesn’t confine herself to 19th-century documents. She also appropriates Garry Winogrand’s 1967 picture of a mixed-race couple in the Central Park Zoo cradling a pair of chimps dressed in human

clothes. It's a charged image to begin with, buzzing with ambiguities. Is Winogrand, a white photographer who chronicled America during the Civil Rights movement and Vietnam, buying into atavistic fears of miscegenation, or is he mocking them? Is this a racist photo or a protest against bigotry? Weems adds an extra tangle in the superimposed caption, which announces that "some laughed long & hard & loud". She doesn't tell us who's laughing, or at whom, and there's really no way to know.

Although it's made from found images, "From Here I Saw What Happened" feels as personal and passionate as the documentary-style pictures Weems shot of her extended family in the late 1970s and early 80s. Those candids were meant to rebut a 1965 government report blaming "the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society" on the breakdown of black family life. Accompanied by Weems's recorded narration of various relatives' stories, the photographs represented family as a complex organism, at times chaotic and dysfunctional but never reducible to stereotype.

Her least successful works – a black man hoisting a watermelon, for example, or a black woman brandishing a fried chicken leg – tip into stridency. She gets trapped by the clichés she's trying to dismantle. At other times, her anger dissipates into fuzzy generalities, as in the many self-portraits in which she turns away and gazes over some European beauty spot. At her best, Weems mixes confessional ferocity with clinical coolness, and the combination lifts her beyond crude assertions into the realm of human complexity.

Until May 14, guggenheim.org

A concurrent show, 'Carrie Mae Weems: The Museum Series', opens on January 30 at the Studio Museum in Harlem and continues until June 29. studiomuseum.org

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ARTnews

Chatting With MacArthur Winner Carrie Mae Weems

BY **ROBIN CEMBALEST** POSTED 10/01/13

The artist, activist, and educator on winning the “genius grant,” bringing color to the Guggenheim, and changing the world one flower at a time

“**W**hat with planning for her retrospective at the Guggenheim, helping inner-city youth enter the music business, fighting gun violence in an advertising campaign, and managing to get a peony named after an African American hero, [Carrie Mae Weems](#) was pretty busy even before she got The Call last week from the [MacArthur Foundation](#). So the news that she won a “genius grant” added another whirlwind of activity on her already intimidating schedule.

“I was floored,” the artist said on the speakerphone from her car as she raced between engagements in Syracuse, New York, where she lives and teaches. “It was the most ridiculous thing I’d ever heard.”

Along with the 23 other MacArthur recipients this year, Weems will receive \$625,000 over the next five years, no strings attached.

“I’ll buy a new dress and a new pair of shoes for sure,” she says. “But everything will go back into my work because that’s what I do. It will go to the projects I care about.”

A charismatic artist, activist, and educator, Weems is best known for installations, videos, and photographs that invite the viewer to reflect on issues of race, gender, and class.



MacArthur Carrie Mae Weems

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN
GALLERY, NEW YORK.



Carrie Mae Weems, *Forbidden Fruit*, from “Madingo Series,” 2009-10, oil on canvas.

©CARRIE MAE WEEMS. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK.

A wry wit infuses even her most uncompromising works, which comment on stereotypes, slavery, miscegenation, and the exclusion of blacks—as artists and subjects—from Western art history. Her traveling retrospective, which began at the Frist Center in Nashville last year and opens at its final stop, the Guggenheim, on January 24, includes the naughty “Ain’t Jokin’” series (1987-88); “The Kitchen Table Series” (1990) photographs of domestic scenes that inspired Mickalene Thomas to be an artist; and the fabulous Afro-Chic fashion video (2009), among some 200 objects Weems has produced over the last three decades.

She’s been talking to Guggenheim staff about ways to jumpstart a demographic shift in the museum’s typical audience.

“I want to make sure I have a dynamic presence of people of color flowing through the space,” she says. One idea she’s thinking about is a live-broadcast performative conversation, maybe something along the lines of Jon Stewart’s *Daily Show*. Maybe with a comic and a house band.

“There could be a night around art and activism, with people who are troubling the waters, as they say,” she comments. “A night called *Laughing to Keep from Crying* or, *Jewish Comedy*, *Black Comedy*, and the *Power of Resistance*.”

Weems knows that many communities are unlikely to connect with her work in an art setting, so in 2002 she founded an artists collective, *Social Studies 101*, to reach a more diverse and often more marginalized audience.

Their projects include Operation: Activate, a public-art campaign in Syracuse that fights gun violence with missives everywhere from



Carrie Mae Weems, *Mirror Mirror*, from the series “*Ain’t Jokin’*,” 1987-1988, gelatin silver print.

©CARRIE MAE WEEMS. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK.

billboards to matchbooks to newspapers fliers and advertising circulars. “As militants you were feared,” reads one. “As thugs you are only despised!”

Another Social Studies 101 project is the Institute of Sound + Style, a program introducing high school students to careers in music, fashion, and other creative fields. “It’s a space that engages them in understanding what is possible in their own lives, as workers and contributing members of society,” Weems says. “You can be more than a rapper, you can be a sound engineer. You can be a graphic designer, involved in the creation of popular culture.”

An advocate of social practice before its current status as an art-world buzzword, Weems is delighted to see more people in the art world deploy their creative energies to affect change in the real world. “It’s an interesting cultural and political moment,” she says. “It’s all shifting. People are figuring out how to deal with what’s coming down the track.” The next shift, she hopes, will be the growth of an infrastructure to help artists develop their work in this arena. “Any university worth its salt needs to start paying attention,” she says.



Carrie Mae Weems & Social Studies, Operation: Activate, 2011.

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK.

describes as a feature-length mock autobiography using herself as the main character.

Weems has begun to make a mark in the horticultural world too. Working with landscape architect Walter J. Hood, she collaborated on the concept for the Du Bois Memorial Garden, in honor of the civil rights leader, writer, and sociologist who founded the NAACP. The proposal is part of “Du

She’s also got a movie going. Weems has begun shooting footage for a project about people who grew up in the ’60s—the Baby Boomer era—who are now turning 60. “It’s this wonderful double entendre,” says the artist, who was born in Portland, Oregon, in 1953. She hopes to use part of the grant to edit footage and move forward with the film, which she



The Du Bois Peony of Hope, officially named by the American Peony Society, is part of a Du Bois Memorial Garden that Weems designed in collaboration with landscape architect Walter J. Hood.

COURTESY THE ARTIST.

Bois in Our Time,” an exhibition at the University Museum of Contemporary Art at the University of Massachusetts Amherst (up through December 8) that unites artists and scholars to investigate Du Bois’s legacy.

In another unexpected recent triumph, Weems happened to contact the American Peony Society when there was a naming opportunity for a flower. So now there is a William E. B. Du Bois Peony of Hope, a white blossom with a bright yellow center that will anchor the memorial garden and is also available from Hollingsworth Peonies at \$88 a root.

Meanwhile, notes Weems, as humbling and validating as the MacArthur is, it hardly means an end to her fundraising. “At the end of the day \$100,000 a year is just kind of normal,” she comments. “You still need to raise money.

“It’s important to keep people who care about social justice engaged. It’s a way to be part of the project. I support a lot of stuff because I just want to be a part of it.”

The New York Times

Lens

PHOTOGRAPHY, VIDEO AND VISUAL JOURNALISM

The 'Genius' of Carrie Mae Weems

By JAMES ESTRIN

Published: September 25, 2013



"Mourning," from "Constructing History." 2008. Carrie Mae Weems, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, NY

Estrin, James. "The 'Genius' of Carrie Mae Weems." *The New York Times*, 25 September 2013. Online.
<http://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/09/25/the-genius-of-carrie-mae-weems/?_r=1#/15/>.

Among the recipients of the 2013 MacArthur fellowships is Carrie Mae Weems, whose varied interests and skills encompass photography, film and activism. Though known for work that tackles questions of race and gender, she says it addresses “unrequited love” and the human condition. Her conversation with James Estrin has been edited.

Q.

Congratulations, on the MacArthur. It’s pretty wonderful.

A.

It is beyond wonderful. I feel like I am dancing in the stratosphere. I am sitting here with my tiara on and all of my fake jewels, and a bottle of Champagne that’s half empty. Or should I say half full?

Q.

This is a lovely validation of the work that you’ve been doing for so long. Do you have plans for what the money will enable you to do?

A.

Actually there’s a project I’ve been thinking about for the past year. It’s about women who are turning 60, but it’s also about those people who came of age in the 60s. I’ve spent years shooting lots of video and stills, and I want to do a feature-length film about a woman turning 60 who came of age in the 60s and use that as a metaphor to examine what it means to come of age in one of the most exciting and tumultuous periods of the 20th century.

Q.

Will that be a documentary?

A.

It’s not a documentary, it’s more of a fictional autobiography. I have a lot of footage, now I have this emotional freedom to work on it. Maybe to figure out some quiet time to really sink my teeth into this work that I have wanted to do for a long time, but now I can actually do it without having to think about paying the rent.

Q.

That’s pretty amazing.

A.

It is. It’s extraordinary. I am honored, I am floored, I am beyond gaga and I am even a little cocky and giddy.

Q.

You have this large body of work from over two decades dealing with race and gender and identity. Is that a fair way to characterize it?

A.

That's the way most people do so, I think that's fair.



From "The Kitchen Table Series." 1990. Carrie Mae Weems, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, NY

Q.

How would you characterize it?

A.

I always think about the work ultimately as dealing with questions of love and greater issues of humanity. The way it comes across is in echoes of identity and echoes of race and echoes of gender and echoes of class.

At the end of the day, it has a great deal to do with the breadth of the humanity of African-Americans who are usually stereotyped and narrowly defined and often viewed as a social problem. I'm thinking that it's not about social problems, that it's about social constructions. The work has to do with an attempt to reposition and reimagine the possibility of women and the possibility of people of color, and to that extent it has to do with what I always call unrequited love.

Q.

Which is sort of the human condition.

A.

Exactly, exactly exactly, exactly. It becomes race as a shortcut and gender as a shortcut to the larger questions of humanity on any given subject.

Q.

You started out working in modes that are often documentary but also conceptual. Your projects are very much about ideas and thoughts

A.

Yes, well I started as a documentary photographer. Then, at a certain point, I realized that that really wasn't what I wanted to do. That it wasn't quite my way of working. But referencing documentary was important. So for instance, the [kitchen table](#) — which has all the markings of documentary photography — isn't at all. It's highly constructed. So I learned fairly early on that photographs are constructed. These can be constructed, and these realities can be as poignant and meaningful as something that was "documentary in nature," so that you were able to arrive at and deal with multilevels of complexity, tiers of complexity, around the construction of photographs.

That idea really challenges me, and excites me and engages me, that it doesn't have to be the "real moment as seen spontaneously in life," but that it can be constructed in my living room, my dining room, in my kitchen, in my backyard, and it can be equally honorable, if not more so, than the actual "document" of that reality.

Q.

What are you dealing with in “The Kitchen Table Series”?

A.

The kitchen table stories is really a play around notions of family. It's really about how one comes into their own.

What are the issues that surround monogamy and polygamy? What are the issues that surround motherhood and friendship — compassion? Those are the qualities that are dealt with, and of course it's really a mock documentary; it's a mock biography of one woman's journey as she contemplates and negotiates what it means to be a contemporary woman who wants something different for herself. And it's been very interesting, because even though it's anchored around a black woman, my hope was always that it would be understood as a condition of women. And it exceeded my expectations, because women around the world relate to that piece, as do men. They see themselves in it.

Q.

Can you tell me about your move to film and how that happened?

A.

At a certain point, I realized that I didn't know how to make photographs sing in a certain way, and I was becoming increasingly interested in composers and music and how one uses the voice. Film and video really allowed me to work across all of those interests in a single project. I could use voice and rhythm and work with the composers and use music to effect a certain visual image.

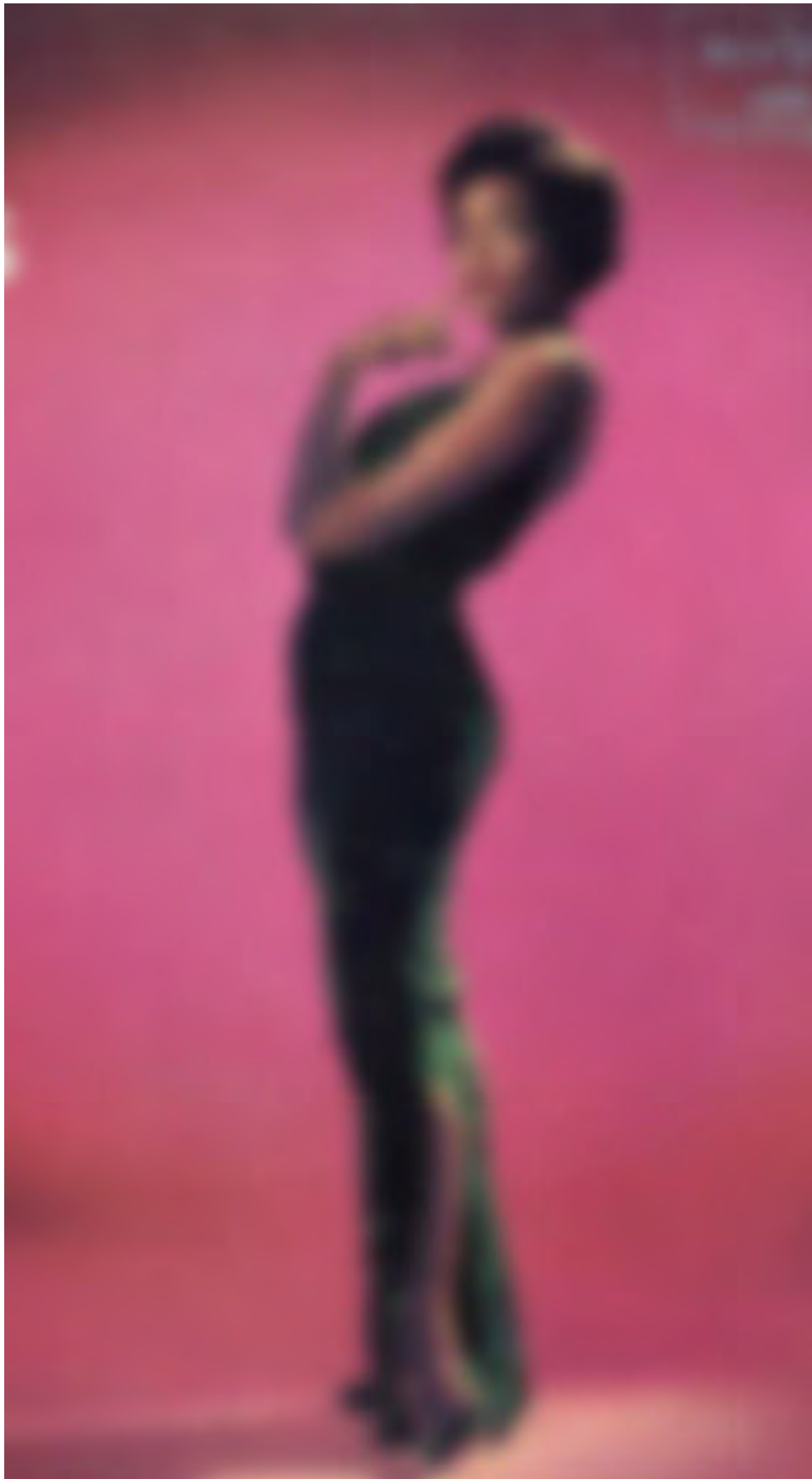
I love working with film, and even though — you know, every time I finish a project, I swear that I'm not going to make another film. It's so difficult. There are so many aspects, so many parts and so many people that need to be involved. Invariably, as soon as I've finished one project, I start thinking about the next, because I love the form.

Q.

Have you given up photography?

A.

Not at all. I still make photographs all the time, and I will continue to do so.



Eartha Kitt. From the series "Slow Fade to Black." 2010. Carrie Mae Weems, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, NY

Estrin, James. "The 'Genius' of Carrie Mae Weems." *The New York Times*, 25 September 2013. Online.
<http://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/09/25/the-genius-of-carrie-mae-weems/?_r=1#/15/>.

Q.

You're involved in Syracuse, in a program with young people in the community?

A.

Yes. Several years ago, there was a child killed in Syracuse — caught in the cross-fire of gangland violence. And I remember the day so clearly, because it was a snowy day in Syracuse, and I was exhausted. I thought I would just spend the morning in bed reading the newspaper and drinking coffee and looking at books and just relaxing. And I go into the kitchen, I saw this headline about this child that had been killed, and I was so upset about it that I immediately went to the studio and started working. And I started this series — a billboard project, actually, a public-art project, using billboards and broadsides and leaflets and a whole host of materials that I could use to do what I call “activating” the community around the issue of violence. And I did that for months and months and months, and it was the only thing I worked on, desperately, and getting things out there in the public.

Then I realized that I also needed to have another kind of response, and not just a response of being reactionary, or reactive, to a condition, but deciding to lead another kind of campaign.

I wanted to do a project that really focuses on young people that gets them engaged and involved in the arts. And so what do young people care about? They care about fashion. They care about music. They care about popular culture, and they care about sex. So I came up with this idea of doing an institute, the Institute of Sound and Style, that introduces kids to different aspects of popular culture — as technicians, as videographers, as photographers, as recording engineers.

You don't have to be a rap singer, that you could be an engineer, that you didn't have to be in the photograph, that you could make the photograph.

It's a summer program, we run for four weeks over the course of the summer. We pay kids, because all the kids are desperately poor and need to be paid. We give them at least the minimum wage, and we train them in various aspects of the arts, giving them the skills that they need — and introducing them to the skills and ideas that they need to fashion another life for themselves. And it's truly one of the most exciting things that I'm involved in.

It's really a fabulous project, and I tell you, I get as much out of it as the kids. So that's what I'm working on, that's my heart's desire. And we take donations.



Follow [@macfound](#), [@JamesEstrin](#) and [@nytimesphoto](#) on Twitter. Lens is also on [Facebook](#).

Carrie Mae Weems Wins \$625,000 MacArthur “Genius” Award

by Brian Boucher

Artist Carrie Mae Weems is one of 24 recipients of this year's fellowships from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, commonly referred to as "genius" grants. Over five years, she will take home \$625,000. At 60, Weems is the oldest recipient this year.

For more than three decades, Weems has worked principally in photography and video, often combining text with images of Africans and African-Americans to explore the complex history of black identity in America.

"It is Weems's conviction that radicalism and beauty are complementary, not antithetical, that gives her work its distinctive edge," wrote Ernest Larsen in *A.i.A.* in 1999.

In a [video](#) on the foundation's website, Weems pushes back at simplistic views of her and her work: "My disadvantage is that for the most part, . . . I'm viewed only in relationship to my black subjectivity, even though I'm a very complex woman working on many, many different levels."

She also relates her initial disbelief, when she got the call, at being chosen for the grant.

"Not me! Can't be me. Gotta be a mistake," she says. "You know, I put my head down and I cried."

ARTFORUM

MAY 2013

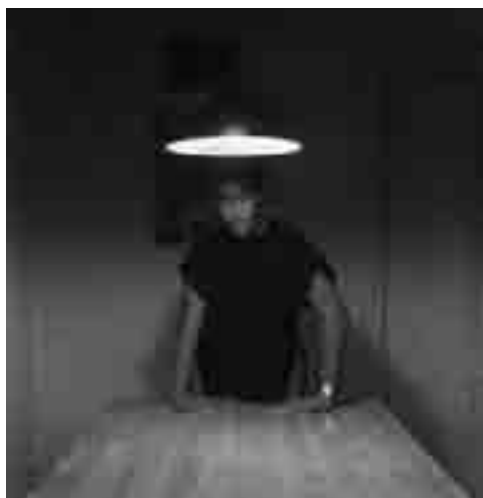
CRITICS' PICKS—Portland, OR

Carrie Mae Weems

PORTLAND ART MUSEUM

1219 SW Park Avenue

February 2–May 19



Carrie Mae Weems, *Untitled*, 1990, gelatin silver print, dimensions variable. From the “Kitchen Table Series,” 1990.

The likeness of Portland, Oregon native Carrie Mae Weems is often at the center of her work. This spectacular retrospective, aptly taking place in her hometown, reveals the diverse ways in which Weems combines photography’s documentary, portrait, and pictorial traditions in dramatic multi-image serial narratives exploring history, family, community, and place. For instance, in the “Kitchen Table Series,” 1990, Weems casts herself as a woman who begins and ends a romantic relationship, then weathers its dissolution in the company of friends and family, and, in the last few images of the twenty-part work, “finds” herself through the empowerment of self-representation. In the most powerful of these images, we see Weems adorned in a plain black shirt standing at the head of the table, palms flat on the table and elbows extended in a gesture of resolve, staring straight-on into the camera confronting the gaze of the viewer. Weems describes the “Kitchen Table Series” as the locus of her transformation into a performer. However, Weems’s representational agenda expands far beyond self-identity: “I use myself simply as a vehicle for approaching the question of power. It’s never about me; it’s always about something larger.”

Weems’s broader, humanistic concerns are also exemplified by her use of image, audio, text, and, occasionally, moving image, to create what seems like a reparative and holistic vision of overlooked people and their histories. Her subjects include: families of color (*Family Pictures and Stories*, 1978–84); black women artists (*Slow Fade to Black*, 2010); and political activism (*May Days Long Forgotten*, 2002). In *Slow Fade to Black*, Weems enlarges and blurs historic publicity photographs of black women singers, hanging them, like much of her work, in staggered grids and rows that transform the walls of the museum into a new territory of the artist’s making.

— Stephanie Snyder

CARRIE MAE WEEMS

11/28/12

FRIST CENTER FOR THE VISUAL ARTS

by lilly wei



NASHVILLE Carrie Mae Weems's first retrospective, "Three Decades of Photography and Video," curated by Kathryn E. Delmez, is an engrossing, overdue look at an artist whose name is often better known than her work, with the exception of her acclaimed series "Kitchen Table" (1990).

Each black-and-white photograph in that suite (shown here in its entirety) is staged with Weems (b. 1953) at a kitchen table, often with other people. The domestic tableaux suggest cycles of love, friendship, motherhood and solitude in the life of a spirited, clear-eyed, tough-minded black woman, "the other of the other," as the artist, quoting Lacan, put it in her talk at the center. Wry wall panels are linked to a narrative tradition also tapped by Faith Ringgold's story quilts. The word, written or spoken or both, has been integral to Weems's practice from the beginning, as have a certain classic formality and theatricality.

Occupying the ample galleries of the Frist Center's ground floor, the show begins with Weems's early series "Family Pictures and Stories" (1978-84), which features middle-class African-Americans. Here the artist rebuts the stereotype of black families as atomized, feckless and rootless. It is her own family (she grew up in Portland, Ore.) that she

shows—an extended, interwoven multigenerational clan in all its complex, functional and dysfunctional humanity—accompanied by text and audio recordings that recount the lives of individual members.

The show's selection of around 225 photographs, videos and installations is largely thematic and loosely chronological. Its walkabout format invites viewers to delve, at will, into issues of otherness, race, gender, identity, class, history, migration and place. Weems has a lot on her mind, including the black body and social marginalization. Many of her images are barbed and politically incorrect: for example, the picture of a young black man with an Afro, holding a watermelon, from the series "Ain't Jokin'" (1987-88). Weems is particularly concerned with black women and how they are portrayed, remembered and forgotten. Her appropriated, softly blurred images of Nina Simone, Josephine Baker, Marian Anderson and others in the series "Slow Fade to Black" (2010) offer a poignant assessment of uncertain celebrity.

Weems turns to disturbing 19th-century daguerreotypes in the series "From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried" (1995-96). Photographs of slaves she has stained blood-red are labeled with phrases like "A Negroid Type" or "You Became Playmate to the Patriarch." In "The Hampton Project" (2000), Native Americans are shown in enlarged before-and-after pictures, their traditional bearing and attire suddenly transformed by white influences, a change that raises difficult questions about assimilation and difference.

In "Roaming" (2006), a series of large-scale photos taken in Italy, Weems addresses these conundrums in a manner reminiscent of Korean artist Kimsooja's persona, Needle Woman. Positioning her robed, regal self with her back to us, the artist gazes at the Old World. Does she belong? Is she an interloper? Like a solemn muse, black or otherwise, she seems to ask: Who writes history? Who rewrites it, and where and what is our place in it?

History is also evoked in the installation *Ritual to Revolution* (1998), its hanging muslin scrims conjuring the history of the world through translucent pictures, and in "Constructing History: A Requiem to Mark the Moment" (2008), a video and photo series reenacting crucial events from the Civil Rights movement. Weems takes due note of social progress, but also its glacial pace. The latest work in the show, the video installation *Cornered* (2012), utilizes two adjoining screens mounted in a corner. On the opposing sides, groups of people protest angrily for and against desegregation during the 1965 Boston riots, the looped news footage slowed to match the tempo of Samuel Barber's elegiac "Adagio for Strings," the only sound.

Photo: Carrie Mae Weems: The Edge of Time— Ancient Rome, from the series "Roaming," 2006, digital chromogenic print, 73 by 61 inches; at the Frist Center for the Visual Arts.

ARTFORUM

OCTOBER 2012

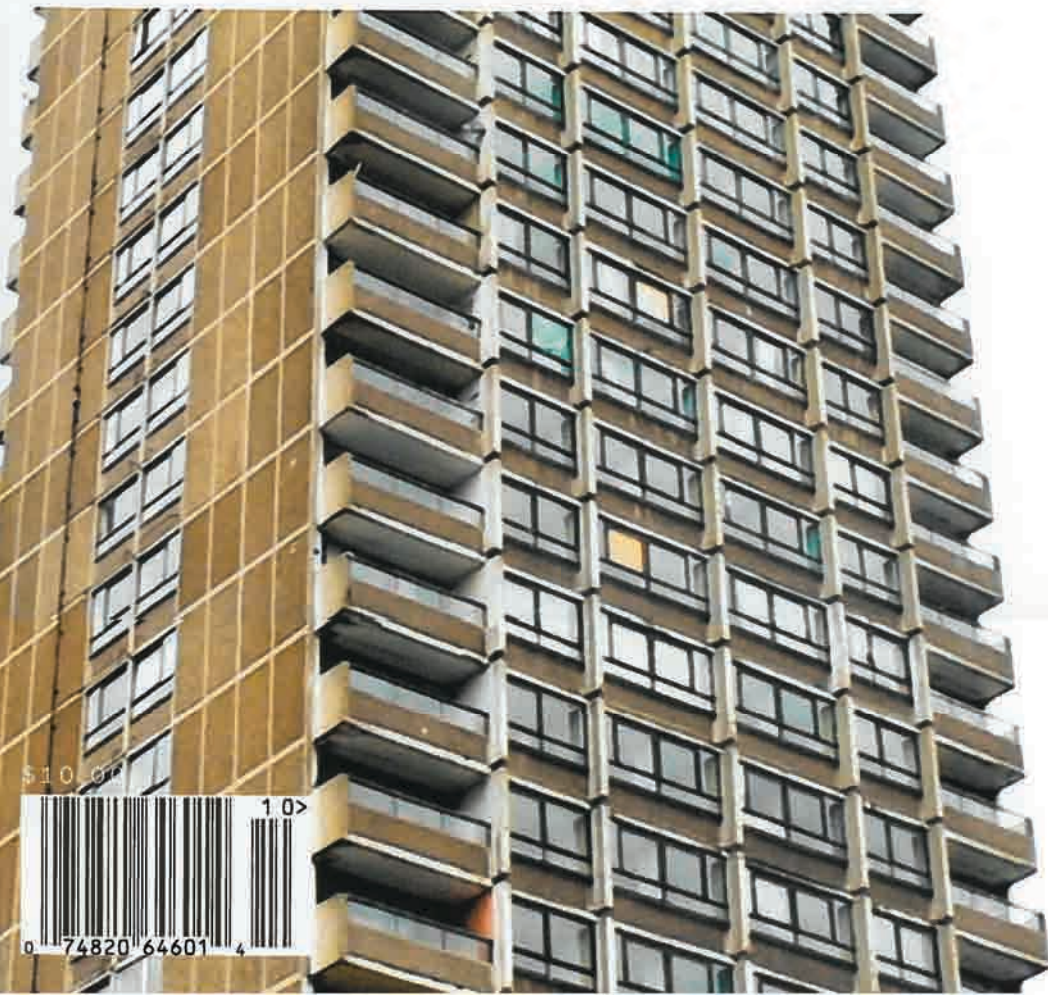
I N T E R N A T I O N A L

FALL PREVIEW

CHRIS JOHANSON

LUKE FOWLER

ART AND ARCHITECTURE:
A ROUNDTABLE



0 74820 64601 4

From left: Alberto Burri, *Combustione Plastica* (Plastic Combustion), 1958, burnt plastic and acrylic on canvas, 38½ x 33". From "Destroy the Picture: Painting the Void, 1949–1962." Ken Price, *Snail Cup*, 1968, glazed ceramic, 2½ x 5¼ x 2½".



NASHVILLE

"CARRIE MAE WEEMS: THREE DECADES OF PHOTOGRAPHY AND VIDEO"

FRIST CENTER FOR THE VISUAL ARTS • September 21, 2012–January 13, 2013 • Curated by Katie Delmez

The nationwide tensions surrounding the presidential election provide an appropriate backdrop for a retrospective devoted to Carrie Mae Weems, an artist who consistently challenges us to think about how we arrived at where we are now. In the lead-up to Barack Obama's first election, Weems made the series "Constructing History: A Requiem to Mark the Moment," 2008, revisiting political assassinations of the past century to recall the loss on which our history is built. This exhibition of two hundred works—thirty years' worth of photographs, text, and video—and the accompanying catalogue will bear out Weems's compassionate focus on politics, history, and subjectivity and, all told, are sure to stir our emotions. *Travels to the Portland Art Museum, OR, Feb. 2, 2012–May 19, 2013; Cleveland Museum of Art, June 30–Sept. 29, 2013; Cantor Arts Center, Stanford University, CA, Oct. 16, 2013–Jan. 5, 2014; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Jan. 24–Apr. 23, 2014.*
—LaToya Ruby Frazier

LOS ANGELES

"DESTROY THE PICTURE: PAINTING THE VOID, 1949–1962"

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART • October 6, 2012–January 14, 2013 • Curated by Paul Schimmel

Always gifted at brushing canonical histories against the grain, Paul Schimmel now gathers an international cross section of postwar abstraction that challenges the old modernist story of the "integrity" of the picture plane. The show's nearly one hundred works inventory multifarious assaults whereby canvases were sliced, punctured, buried, bandaged, shackled, bound—and confronted with a gargantuan flamethrower. This grouping and the related catalogue will provide new ways of looking at major artists such as Jean Fautrier, Lucio Fontana, and Rauschenberg along with focused rediscoveries of underknowns including Alberto Burri, Gérard Deschamps, Manolo Millares, Salvatore Scarpitta, and Chiyu Uemae. Offering a prehistory to the recent Los Angeles art Schimmel has valiantly championed, the show may be a culmination of the curator's work at LA MOCA, but it also promises an argument for why this should not be his final project there. *Travels to the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Feb. 16–June 2, 2013.*
—George Baker

"KEN PRICE SCULPTURE: A RETROSPECTIVE"

LOS ANGELES COUNTY MUSEUM OF ART • September 16, 2012–January 6, 2013 • Curated by Stephanie Barron

With his "Snail Cups," 1965–68; "Curios" (cabinets), 1972–78; and a quarry's worth of psychedelic philosopher's stones, the late Ken Price was the hairy potter our greed-driven times needed—one who conjured wonder from base materials. The wand that chose him was a paintbrush, and the canvas (or support) he championed—bowing to and freaking with influences and peers as various as Antoni Gaudí, Magritte, and John Altoon—was fired clay. Let's just hope, for an artist who so exuberantly shrugged off the quandary of craft versus art, that LACMA's exhibition, including almost one hundred sculptures dating from 1959 until 2011 and a dozen late works on paper, isn't overengineered by its guest designer, Frank O. Gehry. The catalogue essays, especially Dave Hickey's rhetorical glazing, should keep the gaze fixed on Price's funky magic despite the goings-on. *Travels to the Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas, Feb. 9–May 12, 2013; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, June 18–Sept. 22, 2013.*
—Bruce Hainley

"ZARINA: PAPER LIKE SKIN"

HAMMER MUSEUM • September 30–December 30 • Curated by Allegra Pesenti

Since the early 1960s, Indian-born American artist Zarina Hashmi has developed a minimal artistic language that balances materiality with themes of home, displacement, and memory. Her first retrospective—long overdue—features approximately sixty pieces from the past five decades and includes prints, paper-pulp casts, and sculptures. While the influence of Zarina's studies of mathematics and architecture are evident across her oeuvre, rarely seen early relief prints such as *In the Woods I*, 1971, manifest the importance and impression of nature in her practice, and recent works such as the obsidian-covered *Dark Night of the Soul*, 2011, suggest a subtle turn toward contemplative spirituality—aspects that are further explored in the exhibition's catalogue with essays by Allegra Pesenti, Aamir Mufti, and Sandhini Poddar. *Travels to the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Jan. 25–Apr. 21, 2013; Art Institute of Chicago, June 27–Sept. 22, 2013.*
—Beth Citron

Thursday, September 20, 2012 | By Deborah Willis

Carrie Mae Weems: A Look Back on Three Decades



© Carrie Mae Weems / The Art Institute of Chicago

Untitled (Eating lobster)

from *Kitchen Table Series*, 1990.

The cover image of Carrie Mae Weems's engaging book finds the artist and photographer wearing a long black dress as she stands at the shoreline with her back to the camera, looking at the ocean. It looks as if she is contemplating the morning. We, the "reader" or "viewer," wait in anticipation to open the book and look into her world. The cover image is our invitation! The photograph is from Weems's *Roaming* series from 2006. She becomes our narrator to history. She states: "This woman can stand in for me and for you; she leads you into history. She's a witness and a guide." Weems is an art-photographer, performance artist, activist and videographer—well known for her photographic series and multi-screen projections relating to themes focusing on family, beauty and memory. For the last 25 years, she has relied on stories from the 'kitchen table' and of life in the low country of South Carolina, antebellum New Orleans, cities in Senegal, Cuba, Ghana and Italy to create a body of work that engages in history. An artist concerned with iconography, she has constructed a series of works questioning black women's presence in popular and material culture as well as art history. Throughout her 30-odd year career, Weems has re-staged historical moments and created images that re-imagined everyday life from family stories to political history. Weems focused her camera on her own body to create multiple conversations. She interrogates and assembles old stereotypes and disassembles them.

In 1992, she refused to accept the scientific racism that prevailed in the 19th century circulating about black Americans. In re-imagining the photographed experiences of some of the blacks enslaved on a South Carolina plantation photographed by J. T. Zealy, a daguerreotypist commissioned by zoologist Louis Agassiz, Weems used the narrative of slavery and re-purposed the images. The title of her series *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* is a text and image installation of large scale framed images printed with a red tint, possibly to signify the life's blood still flowing through the memory of their enslaved experience.

Born in Portland, Oregon, and now living in Syracuse, N.Y., photo-artist Weems interweaves a narrative of black female subjectivity, black beauty and the gaze in her work on beauty. Weems's photographs are 'performing beauty' through lighting, posing, acting and fashion. Weems confronts historical depictions and restages them with 'what if...' questions. In her series, *Not Manet's Type*, Weems critiques the white male art "masters," and how beauty is defined through their paintings. The ironic series of five self-reflexive photographs with text, questions not only Manet but also Picasso, DeKooning and Duchamp.

Weems is the ideal model and she is well informed about the history of art, using her own partially dressed and nude body. The posing reveals her formal training as a photographer, and her choice of props is influenced by her sharp observation as a builder of ideas. The series' power lies in her narrative voice and her ability to create a scene. At first glance, it looks as if the photographs are all the same because of the square format and the centered art deco-style vanity dresser. The setting is the bedroom, a private but inviting space. We, the viewer, peer through the square mat into the round mirror that frames her body, which lends an effect of peeping at a private moment. Her sensitivity to the historical gaze is quite evident, the time of day, the lace on the brass bed, the large white vase holding dried flowers, and the art work framed on the wall offer a sense of reality, as the bright sun bleaches the lower half of her body and the bed. Weems stands with her back to the viewer; the bold red text reads:

"It was clear, I was not Manet's type... Picasso—who had a way with women only used me & Duchamp never even considered me."

The series' text clearly shows her vulnerability as she attempts to empower her image. The next images states:

"Standing on shakey [sic] ground I posed myself for critical study but was no longer certain of the questions to ask."

Women artists like Weems, Barbara Kruger, Cindy Sherman, Lorna Simpson, Renee Cox and Carla Williams challenge ideas of beauty and desire, which are both critical components in Weems's work. All of these artists dare her viewer to rethink their understanding and the positioning of contemporary art practices. Mirrors are often found in Weems's self-portraits; she's gazes at her statuesque frame which is reflected in the mirrored image. Gates states, "An artist does not make a work called *Not Manet's Type* (1997) without a keen sense of her own authority, a respect—not reverence—for those artists who came before her, and an ability to laugh in the midst of serious thinking."

Deborah Willis is a photographer, photo historian and professor at New York University. Her recent work includes a book and exhibition of the same title Posing Beauty in African American Culture on exhibit at the Figge Art Museum in Davenport, Iowa.

Willis's writing is featured in Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video, which will be released by Yale University Press in October.

A retrospective exhibition of the same name is also on view at the Frist Center in Nashville from Sept. 21, 2012 to Jan. 13, 2013.

It will then travel to the following locations:

Portland Art Museum: Feb. 2–May 19, 2013

Cleveland Museum of Art: June 30–Sept. 29, 2013

Cantor Center for Visual Arts, Stanford University: Oct. 16, 2013–Jan. 5, 2014

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York: Jan. 24–April 23, 2014

The New York Times

ART & DESIGN

Photographer and Subject Are One



Carrie Mae Weems/Art Institute of Chicago

Carrie Mae Weems in a photo from her "Kitchen Table Series."

By HILARIE M. SHEETS

Published: September 12, 2012

WHEN Carrie Mae Weems was first teaching photography in the late 1980s at Hampshire College in Massachusetts, she was struck by the difference in how her male and female students presented themselves in pictures. "The women were always turning away from the camera, always in profile," said Ms. Weems, demonstrating by obscuring her face seductively with her graceful hands. "They never squared themselves. The boys were squaring themselves."

At night she would return to her studio to work on her own photographs that told a different story. She centered herself at the end of a kitchen table and composed vignettes about the life cycle of a romance, the camaraderie among female friends, the demands of motherhood and finally her solitude, all unfolding at the table under a harsh, expository overhanging light. These photographs in "Kitchen Table Series," completed in 1990, are accompanied by 14 panels recounting the path of a 38-year-old woman with a

“bodacious manner, varied talents, hard laughter, multiple opinions,” as a panel says, who resists classification and embraces complexity.

Using herself as a surrogate for all self-possessed women and controlling the narrative as both subject and photographer, Ms. Weems found her artistic voice. The series was shown widely, including at the Museum of Modern Art in “Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort” in 1991.

“I emerged in that incredible moment in the 1980s when all kinds of social questions about subjectivity and objectivity, about who was making, who was looking” were being asked, Ms. Weems said in a recent interview at the Jack Shainman Gallery in Chelsea, which represents her work. She, along with fellow African-American artists like Glenn Ligon, Lorna Simpson and Gary Simmons, began to receive more recognition than black artists had previously seen. “There was a real shift,” she said.

The painter Mickalene Thomas was inspired to become an artist after seeing “Kitchen Table Series” at the Portland Art Museum in Oregon as a student in the early 1990s. “It was the first time I saw work by an African-American female artist that reflected myself and called upon a familiarity of family dynamics and sex and gender,” Ms. Thomas said. Now 59, Ms. Weems is having her first comprehensive retrospective, which opens on Friday at the Frist Center for the Visual Arts in Nashville and includes some 225 photographs, videos and installations, from her earliest, never-before-published ’70s documentary photographs influenced by Roy DeCarava and Henri Cartier-Bresson to brand-new pieces referring to works by Marcel Duchamp and Ana Mendieta, among other artists. It will travel to the Portland Art Museum in Oregon, where she grew up and is home to almost 400 members of her close-knit extended family, as well as to the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Cantor Center for Visual Arts at Stanford University and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York.

“When you’re talking about Carrie Mae Weems, you’re going to talk about race and gender and classism,” said Kathryn Delmez, curator of the exhibition. “But I really think it goes beyond that to her desire to insert all marginalized people into the historical record, as she says, to tell the stories that have been ignored or forgotten or erased. Through Carrie’s lens she’s looking at who’s writing history, who has the power to influence other people’s lives.”

In her series “From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried” (1995-96), for instance, she appropriated 19th-century daguerreotypes of slaves and presented them tinted blood red and etched with text like “An Anthropological Debate,” “Some Said You Were the Spitting Image of Evil” and “You Became Playmate to the Patriarch.”

“What can this black body project, and how will that projection be understood and received no matter how you attempt to shift it?” Ms. Weems asked. “It’s laid with a certain kind of history that’s almost insurmountable. I’m always attempting to push against it, to insist that there be another kind of read.”

In person Ms. Weems has a regal bearing and easily forges moments of intimacy. Her strong physical presence and rich, melodic voice are central to her still photos and video pieces over the decades, in which

she sees herself serving variously as alter ego, muse and witness to history. She studied movement at Anna Halprin's progressive Dancer's Workshop after moving to San Francisco at 17.

For her 20th birthday her boyfriend gave her a camera. "Suddenly this camera, this thing, allowed me to move around the world in a certain kind of way, with a certain kind of purpose," she said. In 1976 she moved to New York to study photography at the Studio Museum in Harlem and then returned west to earn a bachelor of fine arts degree at the California Institute of the Arts in 1981. She received a master of fine arts degree at the University of California, San Diego, in 1984.

During her schooling she started "Family Pictures and Stories," completed in 1984. Ms. Weems, who had her own daughter at 16, grouped candid black-and-white photographs of her sprawling middle-class family, in which she is one of seven children, with text and audio recordings about the members' lives, especially the older generation's experiences in Tennessee and Mississippi before moving to Oregon. Responding to the 1965 Moynihan Report that asserted that African-American communities were in shambles because of weak family structures, Ms. Weems put forward an authentic and unvarnished portrait of a strong African-American family as she knew it. It was the beginning of using herself as a stand-in for a larger subject and integrating word with image to approach different levels of storytelling.

In "Not Manet's Type" (1997) she used caustic humor to expose the invisibility of women, especially black women, in the canon of art history. In the text accompanying photographs of herself undressed in her bedroom, she recognizes that she would not have been the preferred type of model for Manet, Picasso or Duchamp. "But it could have been worse/Imagine my fate had de Kooning gotten hold of me," she wrote, before stating that she would take "a tip from Frida" Kahlo and become her own model and creator.

Ms. Weems, who moved to Syracuse in 1996 to live with her husband, Jeff Hoone, and maintains a studio in Brooklyn, said she saw the same set of questions about power playing out in the art world as in society at large. "I can spend an evening at most art functions in New York City and not see a single other person of color," she said. "Now. Today. That's shocking to me."

In her "Museum Series," which she started in 2007, she photographs citadels of art like the Louvre, the British Museum and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. She appears in front of each august edifice in a long, black dress with her back to the camera, a wistful, solemn presence that suggests both a longing for admission and a testament to exclusion. She has similarly materialized before grand antebellum architecture embedded with the history of slavery in the "Louisiana Project" (2003) and on ancient streets in Europe in her 2006 series "Roaming."

Photographed from behind in all these images, Ms. Weems's elegant, silhouetted figure doesn't immediately announce her race. "We can set that aside," she said. She said she saw herself "functioning as a guide in an architectural place that asks another set of questions about power and relationships that perhaps then we can all then stand in front of. I am the first point of reference to the viewing. Then you come along with me, hopefully."

The New York Times

Two Artists Salute a Legacy



Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

Geri Allen, seated, and Carrie Mae Weems working on their show "Slow Fade to Black."

By [FELICIA R. LEE](#)

Published: June 14, 2012

POINTING her camera, the artist Carrie Mae Weems lobbed directions. "A little more smoke!" and "Women, raise your mirrors!" she instructed the performers gathered recently in a black-box theater on the Lower East Side. Geri Allen, the jazz pianist and composer, sat nearby, scribbling notes.

Ms. Weems, known for photography and film projects that plumb issues of race and gender, was filming the *Persuasions*, four men tricked out in purple suits, in a flirtatious encounter with three female singers in regal black turbans.

"Trust me, love me, feel me," the men crooned.

"Can I trust you?" the women cooed back.

"What happened to 'No, no, no'?" Ms. Weems asked.

"It sounds great," Ms. Allen shouted from the sidelines. "Just do more!"

Ms. Allen and Ms. Weems were creating images for a multimedia show called “Slow Fade to Black,” set to have its premiere on Friday at [Celebrate Brooklyn!](#), the Prospect Park summer festival of performing arts and film. Marrying Ms. Weems’s images (on three giant screens) to original music by Ms. Allen, the show is among the festival’s 32 mostly free events, which began last week with the reggae star Jimmy Cliff and will end in August with the country singer Lyle Lovett.

“Slow Fade” is an unusual first-time festival collaboration for two African-American artists who tend to inhabit separate citadels of culture: museums and galleries for Ms. Weems, and concert halls and clubs for Ms. Allen. For this project the two will be joined by the Grammy-winning members of Ms. Allen’s trio, [Esperanza Spalding](#), a bassist and singer, and the drummer Terri Lyne Carrington.

Also part of the show are, among others, the tap dancer Maurice Chestnut; the singers Lizz Wright and Patrice Rushen; and Afro Blue, Howard University’s vocal jazz ensemble.

If the title “Slow Fade to Black” sounds familiar, it’s because it is the culmination of a project that began in 2010 and continued in 2011: a series of blurred, soft-focus photographs of famous black female performers like Eartha Kitt, Nina Simone and Marian Anderson. The title works in two ways, Ms. Weems said. The blurry photographs are a comment on the women’s receding from cultural prominence and the idea of a fade “to black” suggests a new generation of emerging black female artists. Many of the “Slow Fade” photographs will be projected while Ms. Wright sings on Friday. Ms. Allen composed a song to accompany the images.

“I first and foremost view this as an evening of music, centered on this idea of a woman’s journey, the span of a life,” Ms. Weems said recently as she and Ms. Allen dined in an Italian restaurant in the West Village.

“The journey is from your first feeling of emotion and love, the birth of your children, growing old,” she said. She and Ms. Allen are both in their 50s. They have known each other more than a decade and have worked together before.

Ms. Weems, tall and ebullient with a dash of curly hair, is perhaps best known for her 1990 project “Kitchen Table Series.” It deployed text and images to show a woman (Ms. Weems herself) sitting at the same kitchen table at various points in her emotional life.

More recently, her 2009 video project “Afro-chic” explored 1960s pop culture, concentrating on younger women. Ms. Weems’s 1995-96 project “From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried,” part of the permanent collection at the Museum of Modern Art, is a layered work consisting of about 30 representations of African-Americans in the history of American photography. They are accompanied by text that explores the history from Ms. Weems’s perspective, creating a counternarrative to the way the images were often intended.

In the Celebrate Brooklyn! project, “the images will inform the performance,” said Ms. Allen, a soulful, post-bop pianist whom [Ben Ratliff](#) of The New York Times recently called “one of the more important jazz

musicians of the last 25 years” and whose album “Flying Toward the Sound” made several “best of” lists for 2010. She is shorter and quieter than Ms. Weems, her face framed by locks.

While the overall structure of the show has been mostly sketched out, there will be plenty of improvisation as things get cooking, the women said. Sometimes the three screens will form a triptych or linger on Ms. Allen’s hands on the keyboard. Look for Ms. Allen and Ms. Rushen to perform a version of “Que Sera Sera” and for Ms. Allen’s contemporary arrangement of the spiritual “Oh, Freedom,” to be sung by Afro Blue. Images on the three screens will shift between video projections and the live action onstage.

The staged images of men and women that Ms. Weems created at the Lower East Side theater will be there too. They are intended as explorations of the nature of love, desire and female identity, examining women’s relationships to men, children and, most important, to themselves, she said. For example, the images show women looking at themselves and one another in mirrors or approaching a man who looks away.

“Will everyone in the audience pick up every nuance of the music or the images?” Ms. Weems asked. “Maybe not, but enough will, and we are excited about presenting this to an audience in Prospect Park.

“Geri is more introspective; I’m more visual and animated,” she continued. “I think those qualities are what we bring to the evening — the deep introspection on one hand, and this level of visual noise and visual sensuousness on the other.”

Ms. Weems, who is married and has an adult daughter, lives in Syracuse and Brooklyn. A single mother, Ms. Allen lives in New Jersey, with a hectic schedule that includes touring, caring for two teenagers (a third child is grown) and teaching music at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. The women mostly worked apart after an initial residency at Mass MoCA last year to jump-start the project.

It helped that the two had collaborated before. In 2009 Ms. Weems created an art film called “[Refractions: Flying Toward the Sound](#),” which explored Ms. Allen’s life as part of a larger look at women’s lives. The film uses Ms. Allen’s composition “Flying Toward the Sound,” a concert-length piano suite with pieces inspired by Cecil Taylor, McCoy Tyner and Herbie Hancock. Ms. Allen wrote the piece while on a Guggenheim fellowship. In turn, Ms. Weems’s film projections accompanied Ms. Allen’s concert performances of “Flying.”

“Slow Fade” was commissioned by Bric Arts Media Brooklyn, the festival producers, as part of a mission that includes bringing artists not usually associated with free festivals to Prospect Park, said Rachel Chanoff, the artistic director of Celebrate Brooklyn!

Ms. Allen and Ms. Weems have been established artists for years but they continue to come into their own. The first major museum [retrospective](#) of Ms. Weems’s work — some 225 photographs, videos and installations — begins on Sept. 21 at the Frist Center for the Visual Arts in Nashville. It will travel to the

Portland Art Museum in Oregon, the Cleveland Museum of Art and the Guggenheim Museum in New York.

“In Weems’s video work the scores are an integral part, and this festival is a way for the viewer to have an immediate, all-sensory experience in an unexpected way,” said Kathryn Delmez, the curator of the Frist retrospective.

Ms. Allen, known for her collaborations, has worked with a glossy roster of musicians that includes Betty Carter, Ornette Coleman, Charlie Haden and Ravi Coltrane. Her new trio with Ms. Carrington, who is in her 40s, and Ms. Spalding, who is 27, showcases her with a younger generation. Ms. Carrington’s album “Mosaic” (with various artists, including Ms. Allen) was awarded the 2011 Grammy for best jazz vocal album of the year. Mr. Chestnut can be heard on the album “Geri Allen and Timeline Live,” along with the bassist Kenny Davis and the drummer Kassa Overall, who will both perform on Friday.

Although “Slow Fade” begins through “the lenses of a black cultural experience, ultimately, it’s about the experiences of all women,” Ms. Weems said.

Mr. Chestnut, 28, speaking the other day, said, “I see it as just a celebration of this history — African-American jazz, tapping, as well as a tribute to women.”

At a recent rehearsal, at Ms. Allen’s suggestion, Ms. Weems read some Harriet Tubman quotations as part of the evening.

“I had no one to welcome me to this world of freedom,” Ms. Weems read in her husky, melodious voice.

Ms. Weems then told a story about how Tubman left her husband behind in one of her Underground Railroad excursions. Returning to find him with another woman, Ms. Weems said, Tubman simply asked the other woman to join her in escaping bondage.

Ms. Allen and Ms. Weems exchanged a knowing high five.

“Slow Fade to Black” is Friday night at 8 at the Prospect Park Bandshell, Prospect Park West and Ninth Street, Park Slope, Brooklyn; \$3 suggested donation; (718) 683-5600, bricartsmedia.org.

A version of this article appeared in print on June 15, 2012, on page C21 of the New York edition with the headline: Two Artists Salute a Legacy.



ABROAD



ELLSWORTH KELLY

"I wanted to give something to China as well as the U.S.," Kelly says of his installation "Beijing Panels," which hangs outside the U.S. Embassy in China. "It's good for our embassies to have great American art. We're all patriots and that's why we do this."

WITH THE NEGATIVE PRESS that the U.S. often garners abroad—whether about Wall Street corruption, intractable wars or a divisive presidential campaign—there's one category in which our standing remains untarnished: high art.

Like Jackson Pollock's drip paintings and Christo and Jeanne-Claude's wrapped buildings, contemporary American artists have a reputation for making beautiful, challenging work—and, in doing so, reflecting back who we are as a nation. Since 1986 the Foundation for Art and Preservation in Embassies (FAPE), a nonprofit now led by collector and philanthropist Jo Carole Lauder, has acted as a kind of global curator for our national psyche, placing preeminent American art in consulates and embassies around the world—and allowing luminaries like Ellsworth Kelly and Louise Bourgeois to serve as our cultural ambassadors abroad.

In the 1960s, the State Department inaugurated a program called Art in Embassies, primarily as a vehicle to provide temporary art for ambassadors' residences during their diplomatic tenure. In 1986, Leonore Annenberg, former chief of protocol for President Reagan and wife of former U.S. Ambassador to the U.K. Walter Annenberg, launched FAPE, along with other diplomats' wives. By exploiting their formidable connections to the artist and patron community, these women were able to help pay for extensive redecoration projects (including the U.S. Embassy's residence in London), fund much-needed restoration, and both purchase and solicit donations for embassies from preeminent artists to build what would become an enduring, important collection. Although the seeds of the foundation's legacy were growing, the scope was still small.

In 1996 leadership passed to Jo Carole Lauder, the wife of Ronald Lauder; she steered the foundation away from simply supplying loaner art to diplomatic residences and instead toward building a permanent collection at American embassies in more than 140 countries. Lauder quickly transformed what had been an elite, rarefied program into something more accessible and democratic. "Embassies are the visible face of our country," says Yale's fast-talking dean of art, Robert Storr, who moonlights as chairman of the organization's professional fine arts committee and guides its curatorial mission. "The art installed in and around

those government buildings allows foreigners to have a glimpse of our cultural production."

With certain site-specific installations, the art has been created with its architectural environment in mind. At the Charles Gwathmey-designed United States Mission to the U.N. in New York City (a federal building where dignitaries meet and greet), the State Department brought the foundation into the design process early, so Gwathmey could collaborate with artists as he designed the building. From the Sol LeWitt painting on the dome of the 70-foot-high rotunda to the spectacular Odili Donald Odita elevator mural, the art and architecture flow together seamlessly. Standing under the blue LeWitt dome, visitors are engaged with the art rather than just passively looking at it. "There are a lot of things in the USUN that are not standard issue," Storr explains. "The point is not to just put up feel-good art, but to pay close attention to a standard of sophistication. The one thing we don't do is just decorate."

"So many things in today's world are fleeting," adds Lauder. "Having facilitated the collaboration between our country's best architects and artists, I can see things

changing in a way that's wonderfully permanent.

At the American embassy in Beijing, visitors are greeted by two 18-foot-high sculptures by Ellsworth Kelly. Three aluminum panels are mounted on the outside—on one side, two red and one yellow, on the other, red, white and blue. "I am very particular about that's why I've done this," says the 88-year-old, laughing. "And because of Jo Carole!" Kelly also considered how Chinese citizens would react emotionally as they waited in line for their visas. "When people ask me what my paintings mean," he says, "I say, 'It's a question of what it means—ask yourself, how does it make you feel?'"

The foundation's president, Eden Rafshoon, runs the D.C. office, underscoring Kelly's point about the effects of modern art. "Whether people understand it or not, its mere presence works subliminally. If it's there, people would feel differently." In that way, in our embassies program waves a less obvious flag for America: proof that freedom of expression, opportunity, and unity through diversity are values which American artists stand for. ♦

PATRON SAINT

Jo Carole Lauder, right, and Odili Donald Odita in front of "Light and Vision," the elevator mural he created for the United States Mission to the United Nations (USUN) building in New York City.



"The point is not to just put up feel-good art, but to pay attention to a standard of sophistication. The one thing we don't do is just decorate."



RON GORCHOV

"The only comparison would be a duet in music," Gorchov says of the juxtaposition of his "Totem," a 19-foot-tall, hand-painted sculpture in the USUN building, with Sol LeWitt's painting on the dome of the rotunda above.



CHUCK CLOSE

"The embassies are full of paintings of dead white men," says Close, whose portrait of the late Roy Lichtenstein was created for the foundation's print collection. "I thought at least one of them ought to be an artist."





ODILI DONALD ODITA

"Growing up as a Nigerian in America, I have a sense of what it means to come to this country and make dreams come true," says Odita, whose mural surrounds the USUN-building elevators.





CARRIE MAE WEEMS

"They're like my little morsels, like little Lifesavers. I always want to consume them!" says Weems of her 42-panel work in the USUN lobby. "It delights me to look at that piece. I'm so honored that it's there."



BRICE MARDEN

"I tend not to think that the government is a very good client, so I tend to avoid it—but it's an important client," says Marden, whose "First Etched Letter" was made in a limited edition of 50 prints. "It's a chance to place some of your work where people are going to see it. You make the work hoping that it can have an effect."



Whether people understand it or not, the art's mere presence works subliminally.

In that way, the program waves a less obvious cultural flag for America.





JAMES ROSENQUIST

"Lauder and others are putting artwork in embassies so people can see what we're up to," says Rosenquist, who painted "The Stars and Stripes at the Speed of Light" for the foundation's print collection. "There's a history of America wanting to show the world that it's intelligent and has some feeling about art."

THE NEW YORK TIMES, FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 29, 2008

Art in Review

Carrie Mae Weems

A Survey

*Jack Shainman Gallery
513 West 20th Street, Chelsea
Through March 8*

I don't know why Carrie Mae Weems hasn't had a midcareer museum retrospective. No American photographer of the last quarter-century — her first solo show was in 1984 — has turned out a more probing, varied and moving body of work. None has made more adventurous use of the photographic medium, adding performance, film and installation to the serial print format. Ms. Weems has not wanted for institutional attention; but the topographical view that a retrospective offers is missing.

So "A Survey," her debut at Shainman, will have to do for now. The show takes Ms. Weems's work back to the early 1990s, with the haunting "Sea Islands Series" of photo-and-text pieces that evoke African-American lives off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia. It continues with bits from several

mid-1990s projects, among them the extraordinary meditations on the anthropology of race called "From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried" (1995). It comes up to date with photographs and videos from 2005-6, made when she was a fellow at the American Academy in Rome.

All together it's a lot, too much really for one gallery to comfortably handle, even with a crunched chronological span. The great early "Family Pictures and Stories" is missing and some large series are edited down to an image or two.

Drastic editing is a problem with art as ambitious as Ms. Weems's, for as often as not its full effect comes from a kind of cinematic accumulation and the variation of images and ideas. The resources of a museum would effortlessly finesse the problem, and transform a tight sampler survey into the expansive and immersive experience it deserves to be.

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