

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.

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[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. **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. **Pomellato** ring. **Christian Louboutin** shoes. Weems's own earrings and ring. Photograph by Mickalene Thomas. Sty led 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 Image © Carrie Mae Weems, Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shilman 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.



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.”

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In our 2019 Greats issue, T celebrates the people who have inspired us to forge a different world of our own. See more.

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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



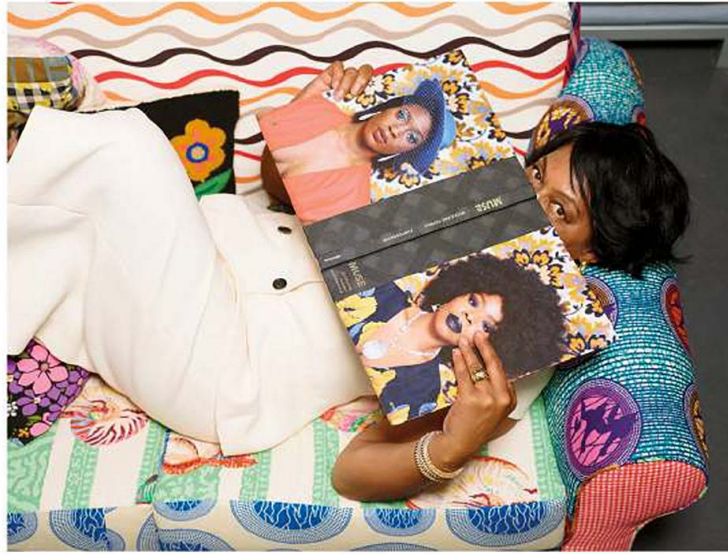
The singer Eartha Kitt.
Carrie Mae Weems, "Slow Fade to Black #1 (Eartha)," 2009-2010. © Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

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 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 Shlona 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. **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

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 Lescage

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.



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.



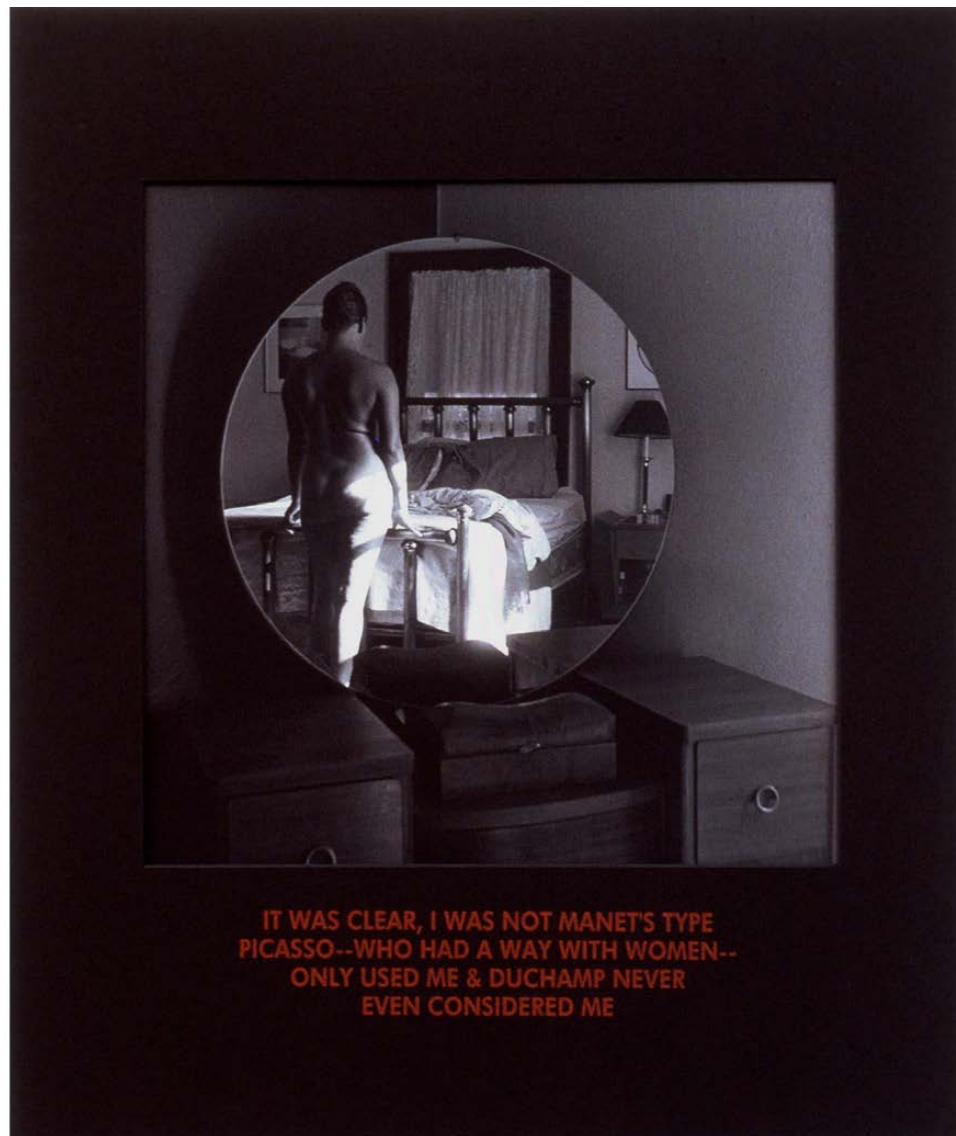
Carrie Mae Weems, "Untitled (Woman Brushing Hair)," 1990, from "The Kitchen Table Series." © Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

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.



"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.

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.



"Untitled (Man Reading Newspaper)" © Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

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.

The series is most known for its black-and-white photos, 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.



"Untitled (Woman and daughter with children)" © Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

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.



"Untitled (Woman and phone)" © Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

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.

This interview has been edited and condensed.

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HARRY DODGE
& STANYA KAHN
by Michael Smith

CARRIE MAE
WEEMS
by Dawoud Bey

GUY MADDIN &
ISABELLA ROSSELLINI

JACQUES ROUBAUD
by Marcella Durand

BILL CALLAHAN
by Jon Raymond

NATURE THEATER
OF OKLAHOMA
by Young Jean Lee

NAM LE
by Charles D'Ambrosio

DIKE BLAIR &
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CONVERSATIONS BETWEEN ARTISTS, WRITERS, ACTORS,
DIRECTORS, MUSICIANS—SINCE 1981

BOMB
BY DAWOUD BEY

CARRIE MAE WEEMS



Mourning from the *Constructing History* series, 2008, archival pigment print, 61 x 51 inches. All Weems images courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

In 1976 I had been making photographs for a couple of years. I had certainly been looking at a lot more photographs than I had actually made. From looking at photographs in books and magazines and going to exhibitions of pictures by Mike Disfarmer at MoMA, Richard Avedon at Marlborough, and haunting whatever other places there were to see photographs in New York in the early 1970s, I had begun to educate myself, with the intent of adding something to the conversation through my own pictures.

The artist Janet Henry, who was from the same Jamaica, Queens neighborhood that I lived in, had gotten a job in the Education Department at the Studio Museum in Harlem, then located above a Kentucky Fried Chicken on 125th Street and Fifth Avenue in a large second floor loft space. When Frank Stewart, the museum's staff photographer and photo teacher, left to do a commissioned project in Cuba, Janet called me and asked if I would take over the class. On the first day of class a few students straggled in. One of them, a seemingly shy woman with big expressive eyes, introduced herself, "Hi, my name is Carrie. Do you think I could be a photographer?" she asked, holding her Leica camera in her hand. That began what has now been 33 years of friendship and camaraderie with one of the most brilliant people I know.

From the very beginning, Carrie Mae Weems has had a sharp intelligence that was looking for a way into the world. From her early documentary photographs to the more expansive and materially varied recent works, she has consistently set out to visually define the world on her own terms and to redefine for all of us the nature of the world that we are in. After all these years I still anticipate her work with a fresh sense of wonderment knowing that her restless search for the deeper meaning of things will yield a continuing rich trove of objects and images. On a Sunday morning in May I called from my home in Chicago to reconnect with my dear friend while she was traveling in Seville, Spain.

—Dawoud Bey

Dawoud Bey: We're doing this interview while you're in Europe, and of course I'm wondering what you're working on there; I know you were in Rome previously, and now you're in Seville. What's going on over there?

Carrie Mae Weems: When I first decided to return to Rome, I wanted to relax a little bit because I was working very hard and I knew that I needed a mental *break* before I had a mental *breakdown*. I decided to leave the country and come to a place that I knew and felt comfortable in. I also wanted to finish some aspects of the work that began in Rome in 2006. So I've been standing in front of all these monuments and palazzos, thinking about questions of power. I've stayed because I'm working on an exhibition here that opens in October, and wanted to see the space and start preparing the work for the exhibition and the catalogue.

DB: Your work has had a very grand sweep since we first met in 1976. I would say you began in a kind of documentary mode, turning your camera on aspects of your surrounding world that allowed you to visually talk about the things that you were seeing and the things that had value or meaning for you. Your *Family Pictures and Stories* brought those observations closer to home in an autobiographical way and also

began to bring a shift through the introduction of a textual voice into your work. Since that work you have deployed a range of strategies in realizing your ideas. I'm wondering if you could go back for a minute and just talk briefly about where you were in 1976 when you had decided that the camera was going to be your voice. What influenced you and who were your models at that point?

CMW: We were young. *(laughter)* It's wonderful to have the benefit of hindsight. I think often about planning retrospectives—I've got one coming up this fall in Seville at the Contemporary and one at the Frist Center for Contemporary Art in Nashville in 2011. They give me the chance to look back over the work, over my history. The thing that surprises me most about the early work is that it's not particularly different from the work I'm making now. Of course I was trying to find a unique voice, but beyond that, from the very beginning, I've been interested in the idea of power and the consequences of power; relationships are made and articulated through power. Another thing that's interesting about the early work is that even though I've been engaged in the idea of autobiography, other ideas have been more important: the role of narrative, the social levels of humor, the deconstruction of documentary, the construction of history, the use of text, storytelling, performance, and the



role of memory have all been more central to my thinking than autobiography. It's assumed that autobiography is key, because I so often use myself, my own of experience—limited as it is at times—as the starting point. But I use myself simply as a vehicle for approaching the question of power, and following where that leads me to and through. It's never about me; it's always about something larger.

In *Family Pictures and Stories*, I was thinking not only of my family, but was trying to explore the movement of black families out of the South and into the North. My family becomes the representational vehicle that allows me to enter the larger discussion of race, class, and historical migration. So, the *Family* series operates in this way, as does the *Kitchen Table* series. I use my own constructed image as a vehicle for questioning ideas about the role of tradition, the nature of family, monogamy, polygamy, relationships between men and women, between women and their children, and between women and other women—underscoring the critical problems and the possible resolves. In one way or another, my work endlessly explodes the limits of tradition. I'm determined to find new models to live by. Aren't you?

DB: Can you talk about some of the earlier relationships that shaped you? I know how important those early relationships were to my formation, and I think yours, too—to realize that there were indeed black people who were out there making this work. There had been black artists making work for a very long time, but of course they were largely invisible—we didn't know but maybe one or two. So to discover a whole community of them to whom we had access was just amazing. It was like, We're *not* invisible, there are others like us. We were in fact part of a long and rich tradition, and it's not merely located in the past.

CMW: It's fair to say that black folks operate under a cloud of invisibility—this too is part of the work, is indeed central to the work. The stuff that I'm doing right now has so much to do with this notion of invisibility. Even in the midst of the great social changes we've experienced

just in the last year with the election of Barack Obama, for the most part African Americans and our lives remain invisible. Black people are to be turned *away* from, not turned toward—we bear the mark of Cain. It's an aesthetic thing; blackness is an affront to the persistence of whiteness. It's the reason that so little has been done to stop genocide in Africa.

This invisibility—this erasure out of the complex history of our life and time—is the greatest source of my longing. As you know, I'm a woman who yearns, who longs for. This is the key to me and to the work, and something which is rarely discussed in reviews or essays, which I also find remarkably disappointing. 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. But in the face of refusal, I insist on making work that includes us as part of the greater whole. Black experience is not really the main point; rather, complex, dimensional, human experience and social inclusion—even in the shit, muck, and mire—is the real point. This is evident in video works like *In Love and in Trouble*, *Make Someone Happy*, *Mayflowers*, and *Constructing History*. But again, these ideas are rarely discussed. Blackness seems to obliterate sound judgment, reason.

DB: There was a wonderful article in the *New York Times* two or three weeks ago about Mickalene Thomas and her work.

CMW: Right, I haven't read it but I keep hearing about it.

DB: There's a wonderful point where she talks about your work, and it being absolutely formative to her own sense that she could *do this*, that she could talk about what she wanted to through her work. Even though it's a second-hand kind of relationship, which is very different from the community in New York that we came out of, surrounded by people like Frank Stewart, Adger Cowans, Lorna Simpson, Shawn Walker, Beuford Smith, Tony Barboza ... I honestly don't know what I would have ended up doing in the absence of that community of support.

CMW: It's been critical to have some of these artists as mentors and fellow travelers. My first encounter with black photographers was as an 18-year-old, when I saw the *Black Photographers Annual*. I remember standing in the middle of the floor flipping the pages, seeing images that just blew me away, like a bolt of lightning. I truly saw the possibility for myself—as both subject and artist. I knew that I would emulate what they had begun. Shawn Walker, Beuford Smith, Anthony Barboza, Ming Smith, Adger Cowans, and, certainly, the phenomenal Roy DeCarava. Of course, this comes back to you; because you were one of my first teachers. You too showed me the possibilities, showed me a path—I love you for it. But



above: *The Capture of Angela* from the *Constructing History* series, 2008, archival pigment print, 61 x 51 inches.

below: *Untitled* from the *Kitchen Table Series*, 1990, silver print.



above: *Matera* from the *Roaming* series, 2006, digital C-print, 73 x 61 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

below: *Jewish Ghetto* from the *Roaming* series, 2006, digital C-print, 73 x 61 inches.

I also learned to *create* a path; finding my own nuanced voice on that road toward self-definition, as well as defining/describing a people and our historical moment. Sometime in the early 1980s, traditional documentary was called into question, it was no longer the form; for my photographs to be credible, I needed to make a direct intervention, extend the form by playing with it, manipulating it, creating representations that appeared to be documents but were in fact staged. In the same breath I began incorporating text, using multiples images, diptychs and triptychs, and constructing narratives.

DB: I'm also thinking about the Studio Museum in Harlem and the way in which that institution looms very large in this conversation. It's been there since 1976, and as I think about the artists who continue to come out of that institution, I can't imagine where else those artists would have emerged from in its absence. That was obviously the rationale for its existence; there was no other place that could have provided that extraordinary level of support.

CMW: The Studio Museum was *home* for us. Many of my most important relationships were formed there. Of course, meeting you was of singular importance in my life; meeting Ed Sherman, incredible. We're still in touch to this day. It was a place that offered opportunity, a place for engaged social dialogue, not just about photography, but around the arts in general. When I lived in San Francisco before moving permanently to New York, I would fly to events at the Studio Museum. I remember Michelle Wallace's talk on her book *Black Macho and the Myth of the Super Woman*: there must have been 500 people there, folks standing in the rafters. Debates went on for weeks after. It was a place not only for artists but for the black intelligentsia in the city. Now, Thelma Golden is there re-engendering the place. Listen, the Studio Museum is my home away from home. It's where I go to find out what's going on in African-American—and *African*—culture and art. As much as we attempt to work in a number of other kinds of institutions, it's still the Studio Museum that first and foremost recognizes our contributions.

DB: I don't know if I've ever asked you this, but given that in 1976 you came to New York by way of California, what originally brought you to the Studio Museum community?

CMW: Even as a girl of 14, I knew I was going to live in New York. I'm from Portland, Oregon, which was a very small town not long ago. It's changed tremendously in the last 15 years. I *knew* that I was going to be an artist; what kind of artist, I didn't know, but I knew that my comfort would be found in the world of art. I came to New York when I was 17 and turned 18 with a big, fine gay boy who took me to see James Brown. But I was young and ill-formed for the city; I went back to San Francisco. My

boyfriend gave me my first camera for my 21st birthday and it changed everything.

In the mid-'70s I started thinking about returning to New York, but I loved San Francisco, so I lived bi-coasta for a long time. I came to New York to figure out how to study and be connected to the art of photography. I had nobody to introduce me. It's possible that Jules Allen, who was also living in San Francisco, told me about the Studio Museum. I don't know how else I would have found out about it. As soon as I came back to New York in my early twenties, I went there to take classes.

DB: There are some things that I want to ask you that are more specific to your work. Things I haven't actually asked you but have thought about for some time. One has to do with an aspect of your work in which you are, conceptually, both in front of and behind the camera. You're the subject and you're the photographer. Certainly the earlier *Kitchen Table* series introduced that idea quite forcefully. More recently there's a recurring figure that has been appearing in your work; what I would call a silent witness to history. This woman, although we can't always see her face, seems to be a kind of omnipotent presence, signaling perhaps that what she bears witness to is more high charged than what we might think. She seems like a witness who, through *witnessing*, almost carries the weight of each place. This woman—this avatar—who is she? What's her function in relation to places and the narratives you're constructing?

CMW: I call her my muse—but it's safe to say that she's more than one thing. She's an alter-ego. *My* alter-ego, yes. But she has a very real function in my work life. I was in the Folklore program at UC Berkeley for three years, working with Alan Dundes on the strategy of participant observer. I attempt to create in the work the simultaneous feeling of being *in it* and *of it*. I try to use the tension created between these different positions—I am both subject and object; performer and director. I only recently realized that I've been acting/performing/observing in that way for years—the work told me.

The muse made her first appearance in *Kitchen Table*: this woman can stand in for me and for you; she can stand in for the audience, she leads you into history. She is a witness and a guide. She changes slightly, depending on location. For instance, she operates differently in Cuba and Louisiana than in Rome. She's shown me a great deal about the world and about myself, and I'm grateful to her. 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 in circumstances seldom seen.

Much of my current work centers on power and architecture. For instance, I find myself traveling in Seville, Rome, and Berlin. It's been implied that I have no place

Europe. I find the idea that I'm "out of place" shocking. There's a dynamic relationship between these places: the power of the state, the emotional manipulation of citizens through architectural means, the trauma of the war, genocide, the erasure of Jews, the slave coast, and the slave cabins. Here I can see an Egyptian obelisk in every major square, one riding on the back of Bernini's sculpture. The world met on the Mediterranean, not on the Mississippi—these things are linked in my mind. From here, Africa is just one giant step away. Spain is closer than Savannah, Rome closer than Rhode Island. Mark Antony lost his power languishing in the arms of Cleopatra; Mussolini established Italian colonies in Egypt; the Moors and Africans controlled the waters of Spain, leaving their mark in the Alhambra. Money was minted there, not in Maine. See what I mean? I'm not here to eat spaghetti. I'm trying in my humble way connect the dots, confront history. Democracy and colonial expansion are rooted here. So I refuse the imposed limits. My girl, my muse, dares to show up as a guide, an engaged persona pointing toward the history of power. She's the intended consequence of the Western imagination. It's essential that I do this work and it's essential that I do it with my body.

DB: How do you think about what the next piece of this conversation is as you construct this narrative?

CMW: I'm a woman who's engaged with the world. I feel at home in Seville as in Spanish Harlem. *(laughter)* So I have these curious interests. I'm walking down curious streets trying to connect the dots. For instance, in Seville I wanted to see some flamenco dancing. I jumped into a cab and the first music I heard was Cuban music. I've been thinking about flamenco for years because I love its form. In Spain, the gypsies are the greatest dancers of flamenco. It's more related to African dance and blues than the Spanish Cha-cha-cha. If I want to know something about the African influence on dance, then I need to know Mississippi and go to Cuba, Brazil, and Spain, because it's how you connect the dots. I can't connect them from my living room. So when I'm thinking about a project, I'm thinking about the dots; the way in which something starts small and radiates out to points of contact. If I can connect things and understand them with my mind and body, I might be able to use them. It keeps me out in the world, even when I would prefer to be home, in bed and near my band.

DB: What about form? There's the *how*, but there's also the *what*.

CMW: I think the *how* is the most difficult and rewarding. Sometimes my work needs to be photographic, sometimes it needs words, sometimes it needs to have a relationship to music, sometimes it needs to have all three and become a video projection. I feel more comfortable working without my muse. I've figured out a way of making

pictures that suggests that something is being witnessed. The most recent work, *Constructing History*, does this.

DB: Over the years you've been particularly adept at not only merging idea with an engaging material form, but creating evolving material forms in the sense of process.

CMW: The work tells you what form it needs to take. What's important is knowing when to put your ego aside so you can see what the work wants to be. Being sensitive to the world around you and paying attention to your aesthetic tools ... Once you know that you can make it, you get out of the way. There's also economy of means. I'm not interested in stomping around the world with thirteen cameras, ten lenses, umbrellas and stands, and all that bullshit. I move around with an old beat-up camera, a fucked-up tripod, and as much film as I can carry. Then I just trust that I know what I'm doing with this little black box and that's it's going to be okay. I *hate* the idea of spending \$100,000 on a bullshit photo shoot. It's so stupid. I believe in using economy—but not when buying shoes. *(laughter)*

DB: What have you seen in Seville that's made you smile recently?

CMW: This morning I was at Feria, a traditional fair that happens every year in Seville, and there were two little girls whose mother was pushing them in a stroller. They had on *crazy-ass* flamenco dresses. They were like three years old, wearing these *amazing* dresses—flowers and ribbons in their hair. Seville is a place where ideas about clothes, dress, presentation, sexuality, engagement, and tradition are so rooted. It was thrilling and lovely to see. I've been out and about, and, of course, keeping my ears open for music.

DB: Talking with you over the years, I've been acutely aware of a particular cultural wellspring of references that run through your work and indeed through you, informing both the production of your work and the way you choose to be in the world. One of those strong references is music. A while back I was listening the poet Quincy Troupe read his work and just as clear as day I was hearing John Coltrane, who Quincy later confirmed as a strong influence. I often hear music when I look at some of your work, too, and even when I hear you speak. So I'm wondering what role music plays in your personal life, your creative and intellectual life; how you have drawn from it?

CMW: Music has saved my life, more than once. Abbey Lincoln is my favorite, I listen to her music often. She sets the tone—she's a woman of yearning and of longing. Miles's forlorn trumpet sets the pace and Jason Moran carries the melodic line. Like Monk, I'm spinning, but humming along.

aperture

Vision & Justice: Around the Kitchen Table

Carrie Mae Weems combines performance and narrative to dynamic effect. For the “Vision & Justice” issue, *Aperture* invited voices from the fields of theater, photography, and art history to reflect on one of her most iconic projects.



Carrie Mae Weems, *Untitled (Man smoking)*, 1990 © the artist and courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Robin Kelsey

Kitchens and streets. You could write a history of the twentieth century through that pairing. If the city street is a place of random encounter, of hustle and protest, the kitchen is a place of intimate habit, of sharing and aroma. Emotional distance is routine on the street, but excruciating in the kitchen. Yet if such a history is worth writing, it is because these two places are by no means discrete. The street presses into the kitchen, stocking shelves and burdening conversations. The kitchen is a delicate sanctuary, vulnerable to the threat of violence, and to the prejudice and fear that abound outside. But the kitchen has a subtle power of its own. It bears an improvisational capacity to bind subjects in shared experience, and to restore and refashion them in the midst of struggle.

In the *Kitchen Table Series*, Carrie Mae Weems takes these issues on with verve. The second photograph in the sequence depicts the protagonist drinking and playing cards with a man. A bottle of whiskey, a pair of mostly emptied tumblers, a dish of peanuts, some discarded shells, and a cigarette pack: these things constellate into a still life, lit by the glowing bulb above. The peanuts, cigarettes, and whiskey tie the kitchen into a larger economy and its history. As agricultural products grown mainly in the South, they mix into this leisurely moment signs of labor, suffering, and migration. A history of many streets, of rural South and urban North, has seeped into the scene, which recalls, in smoky black and white, earlier meditations on exodus and hope.

The streets of New York also arrive via the photographs on the back wall. At the center is an image of Malcolm X at a rally. The photograph was taken in 1963, but the popular poster featuring it dates to 1967. To the right is a familiar photograph from 1967 by Garry Winogrand, showing a light-skinned woman and a dark-skinned man in Central Park carrying chimpanzees dressed like children. Using racism and fears of miscegenation to make a joke, the Winogrand photograph exemplifies the troublesome role that humor plays in both exposing and perpetuating stereotype. These icons of the 1960s, blurred in the kitchen by a cigarette haze, elicit memories of turbulent race relations on New York streets. By enfolding these icons in a Roy DeCarava-esque 1950s mood, Weems layers the photograph with traces of formative decades.

Invoking these layers in 1990, Weems raises questions concerning their legacy for art and life. Consider the subtle play of mouths and hands linking the central poster to the foreground figures. While Malcolm X points toward the unseen crowd and seems on the verge of forcefully speaking, the protagonist holds her cards in her left hand while curling her right in front of her mouth. Her male companion offers a mirror image, cards in his right hand, his left holding a cigarette to his lips. In the kitchen table scene, the blazing public oratory of Malcolm X has turned inward. With cards held close, canny glances directed sidelong, mouths hidden, these players work the interior. The politics of the street have folded into a private circuit, an exchange predicated on a shared history and bound by the rules of a game. Although we can read the signs, we remain at the far end of the table, uncertain of the rules, and not privy to this intimacy and its unspoken content.

Robin Kelsey is Shirley Carter Burden Professor of Photography at Harvard University.



Carrie Mae Weems, *Untitled (Woman brushing hair)*, 1990 © the artist and courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Katori Hall

In my world, the kitchen table ain't never been just for eating. Friday night "fish frys" segued into Saturday night hair fryings on the weekly. Till this day, I still have nightmares about the hot comb. I remember Mama would tell me to hold my ear down, and my body would just recoil, bracing for my skin's possible kiss with a four-hundred-degree iron. The worst was when she told me to duck my head down so she could snatch my "kitchen." Honey, let me tell you, it is a brave girl who submits the nape of her neck to that fire. Perhaps it is the reason why the delicate hairs that stake claim there have themselves been called "the kitchen," as they are so often tortured into submission in the space that bears their name.

As barbaric as this nighttime ritual of singed hair may seem to some, it is the tenderness served up to us tender headed that has left its indelible mark. The kitchen is a place to be burned, but it is a space to be healed as well.

In this image from the *Kitchen Table Series*, Carrie Mae Weems gives viewers the privilege to witness this remarkable, ordinary-extraordinary ritual. Playing that everywoman we all have been at one time or another, the photographer herself sits in a black slip, cigarette just a-dangling, head cocked to the side, seeking solace against the belly of a kitchen beautician. Is it a sister? A mama? An auntie? A lover? Whoever we imagine, this image of blissful domestic intimacy reminds us all of the women who, while scratching that dandruff right on out, offered an ear as a cup for our tears. We couldn't afford to sit on a therapist's couch, and—even for those who could—Vanessa down the way could give you a mean Kool-Aid tip and advice on how to give that usher cheating with-a yo' husband *Heyell*. The beautician's chair in that kitchen was a healing throne. Fixing food ... fixing hair ... fixing poor souls.

Katori Hall is a writer and playwright from Memphis, Tennessee. Her recent plays include The Mountaintop and Hurt Village.



Carrie Mae Weems, *Untitled (Woman and daughter with makeup)*, 1990 © the artist and courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Salamishah Tillet

When my daughter, Seneca, was a nine-month-old, she would crawl over to the mirror every morning. There, she greeted herself with a wide, near toothless smile marked by such gusto that I wasn't quite sure if she knew who was staring back at her.

In 1949, French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan famously diagnosed this moment of child self-recognition as the “mirror stage,” that critical phase of human development in which the baby sees herself as distinct from—not, as she previously assumed, one with—her mother. He theorized it was the collapse of the human ego, our first real trauma, that led us to forever construct everyone else as the “other” as we learned to live as fractured selves.

But what if Lacan was wrong? At Carrie Mae Weems's kitchen table, we witness another mirror stage: a mother with a lipstick in hand fixed on herself, her young daughter in a miniature version of the same pose. Even without looking at each other, they synchronize this gender performance. A mother who teaches her girl-child the fragile ways of femininity even as the mother does not fully embrace or embody these same terms of womanhood for herself.

But that is my cursory read. Weems's genius has always been to reveal, consistently and with newness, in familiar and foreign settings, what poet Elizabeth Alexander calls “the black interior,” a vision of black life and creativity that exists “behind the public face of stereotype and limited imagination.” To tap “into this black imaginary,” Alexander writes, “helps us envision what we are not meant to envision: complex black selves, real and enactable black power, rampant and unfetishized black beauty.”

In this context, then, their self-gazing is a reparative act. A mother and a daughter (and we, always we) learning a far more valuable lesson: to be able to see each other, their black woman and black girl selves, in spite of the gendered and racial invisibility into which they both were born.

I still see glimpses of Weems's radical vision when my now three-year-old daughter looks in the mirror, not every day and without a toothless grin; she has a sly, wiser smile. Reflected back is a child who hasn't been taught to un-love herself, who hasn't yet been asked, as W. E. B. Du Bois once wrote of his boyhood, “How does it feel to be a problem?”

Instead, she is in process, an unfolding subjectivity, still waiting to live out the many possibilities of black interiority that Weems's *Kitchen Table Series* has already given us.

Salamishah Tillet is Associate Professor of English and Africana Studies at the University of Pennsylvania.



Carrie Mae Weems, *Untitled (Eating lobster)*, 1990 © the artist and courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Dawoud Bey

Oh, the blues ain't nothin'
But a woman lovin' a married man
Oh, the blues ain't nothin'
But a woman lovin' a married man
Can't see him when she wants to
Got to see him when she can

"The Blues Ain't Nothin' But ... ???"

—Georgia White

Looking at this photograph, one can almost hear it. And what one hears is the blues by way of the harmonica being played. The harmonica wasn't always considered a blues instrument, you know. It was originally a German instrument, used to play traditional waltzes and marches of a decidedly European persuasion. But once the small instrument found its way to the southern part of the United States, and the black communities and musicians there, well ... you *know* what happens when black folks get their hands on something. It becomes something else, molded to the idiosyncratic, emotional, and cultural shape of black southern tradition. In this case, an extension of black expressivity of a vernacular kind, played within the context of a music that came to be called the blues. Originally meant to be played by blowing into it, the harmonica, when it reached the black South, underwent a transformation.

Instead of simply blowing, black southern harmonica players realized that sucking at the instrument, and the reeds within, yielded a more plaintive sound and a different pitch, one more akin to the bending of notes on a guitar—the better to exact a more human, expressive tonality from the instrument. In so doing, black blues harmonica players found yet another way to bring an individual sense of black vocality to an instrument not necessarily made to speak that particular musical language.

The blues, of course, are about finding the good in the bad, playing through the pain to extract the joy and the lesson within. The scenario presented in this Carrie Mae Weems photograph from the *Kitchen Table Series* contains all of the tensions and dualities embedded in the blues: His succulent lobster is completely eaten, while hers remains untouched. His glass is almost empty, while hers is full. Eyes closed, they are both lost in the shared moment. As he plays, she sings and touches his face tenderly, cigarette dangling from her free hand. A man and a woman, lost in a beautiful, poetic, and forever enigmatic moment.

Dawoud Bey is a photographer based in Chicago.



Jennifer Blessing

Carrie Mae Weems's landmark *Kitchen Table Series* opens with a photograph of a woman caught between her reflection and a faceless phantom of a man. The final chapter of that unfolding story, the denouement after a violent off-camera climax, begins with a woman directly addressing the viewer, no longer surrounded by her lover, her friends, or her daughter. Weems's grand finale, the last word of chapter and verse, is a woman playing solitaire. Having liberated herself from a bad relationship and the social constrictions of motherhood, her protagonist relaxes with a smoke, a glass of wine, and some chocolates—perhaps a valentine from a new suitor? Placed just before this picture, the closing text panel in the series announces, “Presently she was in her solitude.” Though her bird has literally and figuratively flown the coop, the woman seems unconcerned rather than lonely, defeated, or abandoned.

Kitchen Table Series, however, is not a story about simple justice served. The teller of this tale is neither saint nor sinner; the moral is not black or white but rich shades of gray. The measured photographic chronicle is countered by the raucous accompanying texts, which describe a far darker narrative echoing with a chorus of voices—those found in vernacular expressions, rhymes, and lyrics—coalescing into that of the imperfect heroine. The last text panel features lines from “Little Girl Blue,” a song immortalized by Ella Fitzgerald and Nina Simone, whose vocal shadings, we can imagine, provide a ghostly sound track for the woman playing solitaire, who is also a lady singing the blues about a man who done her wrong. She's a little girl blue looking for a blue boy, who can only ever count on raindrops, who tells it like it is.

The woman is playing the game of solitaire, but is she also playacting as solitaire, a character like a jester, a harlequin, a domino? Just as the mute image is haunted by Nina Simone's voice, its monochrome tonality calls for us to imagine the color of Weems's costume, perhaps a shimmering gold blouse festooned with a regal purple trompe l'oeil jewel necklace. Is she a clairvoyant, a light seer (as well as a light writer/photographer), reading the cards to foretell her future? The text panel tells us finding a man will “have to come later.” This picture suggests she is in no hurry, she holds all the cards, she's testing her luck before making her next move.

Jennifer Blessing is Senior Curator, Photography, at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York.

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Revisiting Carrie Mae Weems's Indelible Series — Almost Three Decades Later

By Hilary Moss

April 5, 2016

When they think of Carrie Mae Weems, most people picture a black-and-white image of the artist seated under a hanging lamp playing solitaire or a snapshot of her swooping down to embrace her partner as he reads the newspaper, both from her “Kitchen Table Series” — some of her most iconic work. Photographed from 1989-90, “Kitchen Table” earned labels like “career-making” and is considered the moment when Weems, 62 — who has received the MacArthur “genius” grant and U.S. Department of State’s Medal of Arts — “found her artistic voice.” Institutions including the Museum of Modern Art, the Guggenheim, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Seattle Art Museum and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art have exhibited part of, or the entirety of, the 20 photos and 14 text panels during the last three decades. But, despite the series’ significance, and its total adaptability, it hadn’t been published on its own — until now. The idea came about when the graphic designer Takaaki Matsumoto approached Weems several years ago. “‘Kitchen Table’ has been printed many times, but never as a stand-alone book,” she says. “This is the first time that anyone has asked to focus on the series as its own entity. I am grateful to him for both designing and publishing the work, because it needed to stand on its own.”

“Carrie Mae Weems: Kitchen Table Series” (\$50, Damiani/Matsumoto Editions), on sale now, puts on the printed page her meditation on domesticity and different relationships — with romantic partners, friends, and oneself — and the ways in which black women are portrayed. She made the photographs, divisible into a set of vignettes, in her Northampton, Mass., apartment and developed the film at Hampshire College, where she taught. Although Weems is the protagonist, these aren’t self-portraits: “She’s a character,” Weems says. “I use my body as a stand-in, but I never think of it as being about me. Rather, the character helps to reveal something that is more complicated about the lives of women.”

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.”

In book form, “Kitchen Table” is more intimate, Weems notes. Unlike the experience of meandering through a museum, stepping back to appreciate the images and nearing the text panels to skim them, the pace of exploration is now in a person’s hands. She and Matsumoto spread out the series — and essays by the scholars Sarah Lewis and Adrienne Edwards — over 86 pages, supplying ample space to absorb it. Weems remarks, of “Kitchen Table” in particular, “It has clearly touched the lives of a great many people. It touches a chord and speaks to something that’s fairly universal.” And, something that’s continuously fresh. “The thing that is fascinating is that the work seems to exist in its own time,” she says. “It is difficult for one to sense when it was made. The photographs could have been made 20 years ago or yesterday.” For all of this, she’s proud. She adds, laughing: “I’ve learned a great deal about myself through this work and it still surprises me.”

W

The Art Issue

Mary J. Blige
by Carrie Mae Weems



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plus

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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.



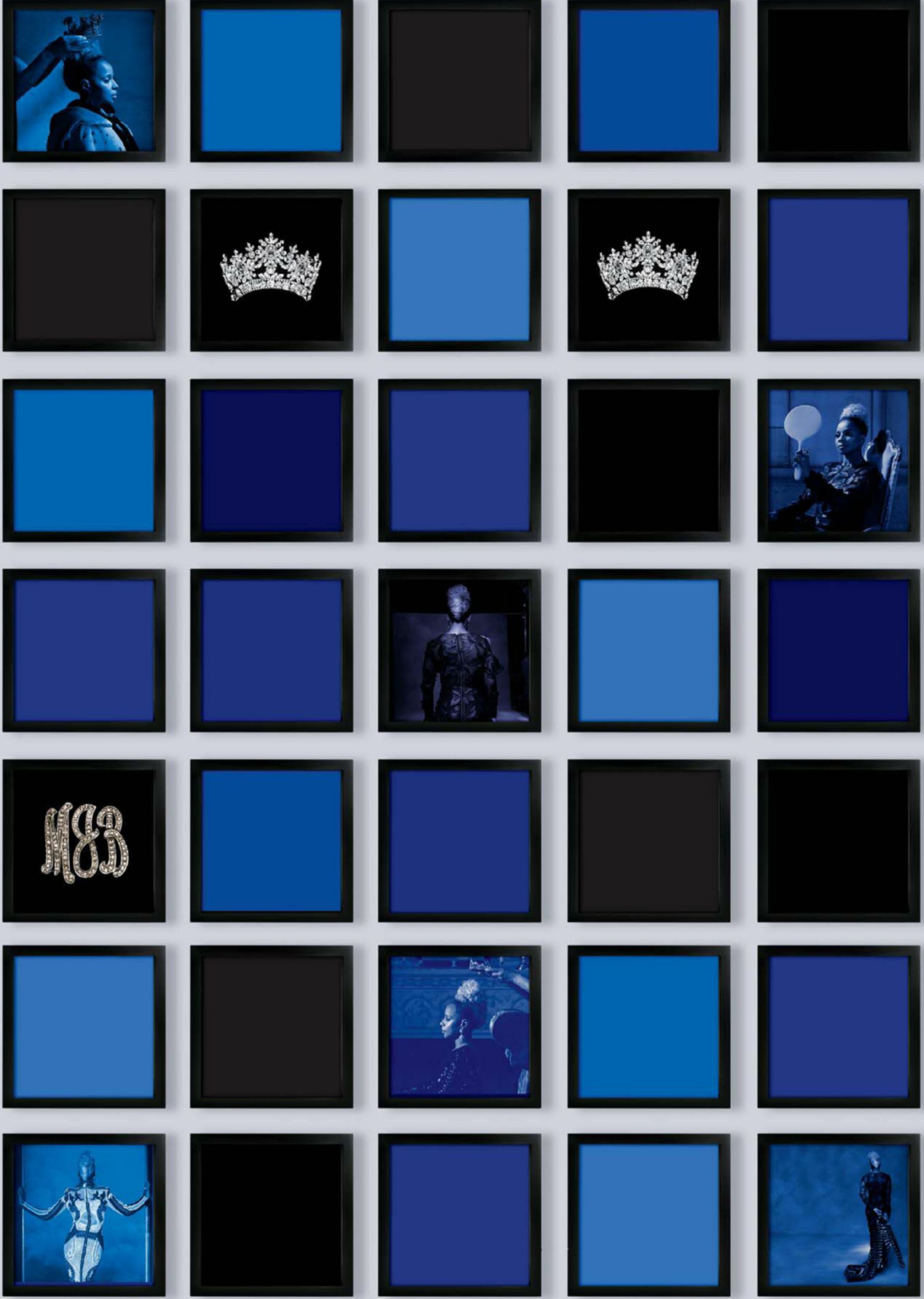
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This page: Pologeorgis coat; Gucci jacket; Fred Leighton tiara and necklace; stylist's own earrings. Opposite: Balmain dress; Jacob & Co. earrings; Munnu the Gem Palace ring.



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.