





# CARRIE MAE WEEMS

Three Decades of Photography and Video



Over the past thirty years, Carrie Mae Weems (b. 1953) has longed to insert marginalized peoples and hidden histories into the canonical record. She does this not only to bring erased experiences to light but to provide a more multi-dimensional picture of humanity that ultimately will spur greater awareness and compassion. Weems believes strongly that “my responsibility as an artist is to . . . make art, beautiful and powerful, that adds and reveals; to beautify the mess of a messy world, to heal the sick and feed the helpless; to shout bravely from the roof-tops and storm barricaded doors and voice the

specifics of our historic moment.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, her art does effectively provoke contemplation on equality as it relates to race, gender, and class. Weems is also interested in questioning who constructs power paradigms, histories, and identities, how they are formed, and why. In recent years, she has moved beyond the specific to address broad humanitarian struggles against entrenched, oppressive practices. Although the subjects of her work are often African Americans, Weems wants “people of color to stand for the human multitudes” and for her art to resonate with audiences of all backgrounds.<sup>2</sup>

From a young age, Weems has sought to better understand the world surrounding her. She initially thought insight might be revealed through studying such fields as genetics, anthropology, or astronomy. With her parents’ blessing, she set out on her own at seventeen, leaving her family in Portland, Oregon, to explore the possibilities. Weems became involved in grassroots Marxist efforts, in keeping with a family tradition of political engagement, and joined Anna Halprin’s formally and ideologically progressive San Francisco Dancers’ Workshop. In 1974, a friend gave her a camera for her twenty-first birthday, and

she quickly realized its potential as a tool for tangibly expressing abstract political and social theories and for inciting change. Weems studied the work of such well-known documentary photographers as Henri Cartier-Bresson and Robert Frank. But, perhaps more importantly, by looking at images by Roy DeCarava and other African Americans, she also saw the medium’s ability to rewrite black cultural myths and provide counterpoints to negative perceptions and stereotypes. Weems pursued a formal education in photography, receiving a bachelor of fine arts degree from the California Institute of the Arts in 1981 and



Fig. 1: *Afro-Chic* (video still), 2010. DVD, 5 minutes, 30 seconds. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. © Carrie Mae Weems



Fig. 2: *Family Reunion* from *Family Pictures and Stories*, 1978–84. Gelatin silver print, 30 x 40 in. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. © Carrie Mae Weems



Fig. 3: *Untitled (Man and mirror)* from *Kitchen Table Series*, 1990. Gelatin silver print, 27 1/4 x 27 1/4 in. Collection of Eric and Liz Lefkowsky, 115-128.2010, promised gift to the Art Institute of Chicago. © Carrie Mae Weems. Photography © The Art Institute of Chicago

a master of arts degree from the University of California, San Diego, in 1984. During her studies, she became interested in the field of folklore, which she saw as an unmediated form of communication that provided authentic insight into a society's values and beliefs. Weems entered a graduate program in folklore at the University of California, Berkeley, and began to incorporate African American vernacular traditions into her photographs, the combination of which allowed her to articulate visually "real facts, by real people."<sup>3</sup>

In her earliest works, Weems photographed elements of surrounding communities and matters relating to contemporary African American identity. Dissatisfied with the representation (what few there were) of African Americans in general and the perception of black families in particular, she created an intimate yet unvarnished portrait of her own large and close-knit family in her first major series, *Family Pictures and Stories* (1978–84, [fig. 2](#)). Accompanying the frank black-and-white photographs are written captions and audio recordings, which provide more information on the family members, their interactions with one another, and their shared history. Weems bestows value on her family and, by extension, on other under-recognized peoples by giving artistic form to their largely ignored

experiences. During the 1980s Weems also examined general aspects relating to race and racism, often appropriating objects and words and re-presenting them as biting reminders of the persistence of bigoted attitudes. She investigated the way that elements of mainstream popular culture, such as racist jokes and black memorabilia, can perpetuate demeaning stereotypes. In *Kitchen Table Series* (1990, [figs. 3 and 4](#)), the artist continued to reject and redefine the way in which marginalized figures—in this case, "the other of the other," black women—are represented.<sup>4</sup> The photographs and text panels trace a period in a woman's life as she experiences the blossoming, then loss, of love, the responsibilities of motherhood, and the desire to be

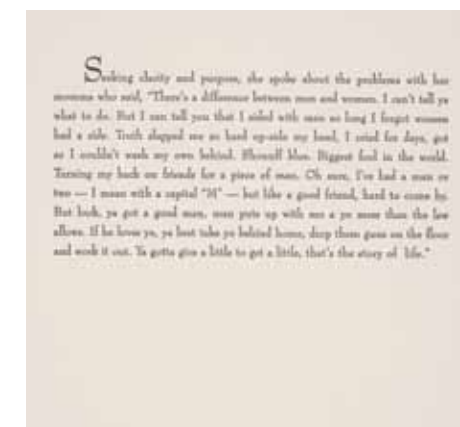


Fig. 4: Text Panel 7 (detail) from *Kitchen Table Series*, 1990. Screenprint on panel, 11 x 11 in. Collection of Eric and Liz Lefkowsky, 115-128.2010, promised gift to the Art Institute of Chicago. © Carrie Mae Weems. Photography © The Art Institute of Chicago



Fig. 5: *Listening for the Sounds of Revolution* from *Dreaming in Cuba*, 2002. Gelatin silver print, 28 1/2 x 28 1/2 in. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. © Carrie Mae Weems

an engaged member of her community. Throughout, the protagonist (Weems herself) evokes an underlying sense of strength and self-awareness. Although it features a black subject and is loosely related to her own experiences, the story is meant to cross racial and class boundaries, reflecting Weems's wish for the

personal to become universal and for the black figure to represent humanity as a whole.

A desire to further examine the underlying causes and effects of racism, slavery, and imperialism spurred Weems to travel widely, throughout the United States and

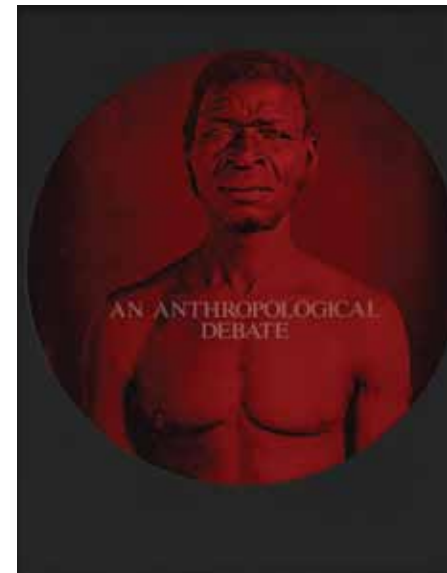


Fig. 6: *An Anthropological Debate* from *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*, 1995–96. Chromogenic print with etched text on glass, 26 1/2 x 22 3/4 in. Collection of The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift on behalf of The Friends of Education of The Museum of Modern Art. From an original daguerreotype taken by J.T. Zealy, 1850. Peabody Museum, Harvard University. Copyright President & Fellows of Harvard College, 1977. All rights reserved. Digital image © 2012, MoMA, N.Y.

beyond, to Africa, Europe, and the Caribbean. During extended visits to these places, she looked to the surrounding land and architecture to create a communion with the inhabitants, both past and present. She states, “I start every project by reading and by looking around in an attempt to develop a sense of place. . . . It’s often the little known facts and secrets that make a place/thing/person; the little things illuminate and reveal the essence of a thing.”<sup>5</sup> A sensitive portrayal of place results, as demonstrated through the *Sea Island Series*

(1991–92), in which the artist documents the unique Gullah communities off the coasts of South Carolina and Georgia. Photographs, text panels, and inscribed ceramic plates related to Gullah folklore commemorate the existence and endurance of little-known African and related African American traditions. *The Louisiana Project* (2003), commissioned as part of the bicentennial celebration of the Louisiana Purchase, is a critical examination of the racial complexities distinct to Louisiana as well as the relationship between the New South and its antebellum history. Like New Orleans, Cuba has long captured Weems’s imagination due to its particular place within the African diaspora as well as the Cold War. Her 2002 series devoted to the island (fig. 5) ruminates on its slave-based sugarcane and tobacco industries, the spirit and legacy of the revolution that ushered in the longest-surviving communist state in the Western Hemisphere, and the present condition of ordinary citizens now cut off from both American and Russian resources.

In addition to identity and place, Weems has made several series in response to specific historical situations—both well known and more obscure. *The Jefferson Suite* (1999), for example, was inspired by DNA tests that proved there had been a sexual relationship between Thomas Jefferson and his slave



Sally Hemings. It explores the capacity of science to provide historical correctives and so-called advancements such as cloning and eugenically engineered babies. Weems laid out the history of black subjects in photography and the larger social perceptions that can accompany them in the series *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* (1995–96, [fig. 6](#)). She appropriated historical images, including nineteenth-century daguerreotypes of slaves and inscribed them with such labels as “You became a scientific profile,” “a negroid type,” and “an anthropological debate.” Weems ultimately dismantles these negative intentions through her intervention and gives voice to the disempowered subjects. A more recent work, *Constructing History: A Requiem to Mark the Moment* (2008) presents reenactments of important moments in the quest for civil rights, such as the assassinations of John F. Kennedy (which she entitles *The First Major Blow*) and Martin Luther King, Jr. Weems notes that this history, while exceedingly tragic, is what made it possible for a white woman and a black man to compete for the Democratic presidential nomination, as was taking place when she was creating the series: Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama were “standing on the ashes and spirit of all that has come before.”<sup>6</sup>

Weems has also created work that transcends concerns about race, gender, or class, especially as experienced in the United States, to address the abiding, universal pursuit for equality and justice. In the installation *Ritual and Revolution* (1998, [fig. 7](#)), she broadens the geographic and historical scope of her focus through photographs of ancient Assyrian steps, Mayan courtyards, and crumbling Greek sculptures printed onto thin muslin scrims. As the viewer walks through the hanging layers of delicate fabric, one is forced to consider the inevitable passage of time, fall of empires, and struggles for power. Weems commemorated International Workers’ Day (May 1), a once-important day of demonstration by laborers, in the series *May Days Long Forgotten* (2002, [fig. 9](#)). Charming photographs of young African American girls wearing floral garlands and reclining in a pastoral setting link a seemingly innocent celebration of spring with a call to social action. The artist continued to reflect on the collective human experience in the series, *Roaming* (2006, [cover](#)), in which she wanders like history’s ghost through the streets of Rome and other Italian sites pondering our past and present condition.

Since her first documentary photographs of the mid-1970s, Weems’s work has become increasingly



Fig. 7: *Ritual and Revolution* (detail from installation at P-P-O-W Gallery, New York), 1998. Eighteen digital photographs on muslin banners with audio component, dimensions variable. Collection of Peter Norton. © Carrie Mae Weems



Fig. 8: *Coming Up for Air* (video still), 2003–04. DVD, 52 minutes, 29 seconds. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. © Carrie Mae Weems

conceptual. An in-depth knowledge of history, political theory, philosophy, literature, and folklore, in addition to art and film criticism, adds multiple layers of complexity and meaning. Over the years she has moved from square-format black-and-white pictures to experiment with color, digital photography, various substrates, and moving images. Throughout is an economy of

form and a stripped-down aesthetic, which leaves only the key signifiers of the work's intended message. In addition to photographer, Weems sees herself as a storyteller, and words—either written or spoken—have played a critical role in her career. Text composed by the artist in styles ranging from vernacular to poetic often complements her photographs either as stand-alone

panels (fig. 4), or inscriptions on the photographic paper or mat, or etched into the frame's glass (fig. 6). The spoken word, a vibrant mode of communication in both African and African American cultures, is also incorporated into works in the form of audio recordings. Weems uses her rich voice to great effect as orator in both *Ritual and Revolution* and the video portion of *Constructing History: A Requiem to Mark the Moment* (2008). In addition to activating the space and providing further meaning, the narrative components create an environment in which the viewer can partake in multiple levels of engagement: looking, reading, and listening.

Another significant methodology for Weems is the performative aspect of her expressions. As evident in her early days as a dancer with Anna Halprin, Weems assumes great control and awareness of her body and its place and movement in relation to others. Since *Kitchen Table Series*, Weems often physically inserts herself into images, becoming both subject and photographer, performer and director, and blurring the distinction between participant and observer. Her reasons for doing this vary from the practicality of using an available body to the conceptual desire to “inscribe my presence in the things I consider important. I . . . insert myself as the narrator of

history.”<sup>7</sup> She wants to use her “own skin to sympathize and experience something larger.”<sup>8</sup> The figure, often dressed in a simple, long black dress is not meant to be a self-portrait; rather, she represents Weems's alter ego or muse, a witness and guide leading one through history. Whether it be her own “acting,” that of collaborators, or of viewers themselves as they walk through an installation, Weems believes that “through the act of performance, with our own bodies, we are allowed to experience and connect the historical past to the present—to the now, to the moment. By inhabiting the moment, we live the experience; we stand in the shadows of others and come to know firsthand what is often only imagined, lost, forgotten.”<sup>9</sup>

Although Carrie Mae Weems employs a variety of means and addresses an array of important issues, an overarching yearning to better understand the present by closely examining her surroundings and the past is found throughout her deeply meaningful artistic endeavors.

Kathryn Delmez

Curator

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## Notes

1. Carrie Mae Weems, "Carrie Mae Weems: Biography," <http://carriemaeweems.net/bio.html> (accessed June 18, 2012).
2. Vivian Patterson, *Carrie Mae Weems: The Hampton Project* (New York: Aperture Foundation, in association with Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, Mass., 2000), 80.
3. Andrea Kirsh and Susan Fisher Sterling, *Carrie Mae Weems* (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of Women in the Arts, 1993), 13.
4. See Michele Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (New York: Warner Books, 1980).
5. Patterson, 78.
6. *Carrie Mae Weems*, interview by Mark Anthony Neal, *Left of Black*, episode 21, February 14, 2011.
7. Patterson, 79.
8. Weems interview by Neal.
9. *Constructing History: A Requiem to Mark the Moment* (Savannah: Savannah College of Art and Design, 2008), unpaginated.

**Cover:** *A Broad and Expansive Sky—Ancient Rome from Roaming*, 2006. Digital chromogenic print, 73 x 61 in. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. © Carrie Mae Weems

**Inside front cover:** *Looking High and Low* (detail) from *Africa*, 1993. Screenprint on paper, 180 x 26 1/2 in. each panel. From an original endpaper design and engraving by John Farleigh in *The Adventures of the Black Girl in Her Search for God*, by George Bernard Shaw, New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1933. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York



Fig. 9: *After Manet* from *May Days Long Forgotten*, 2002. Chromogenic print, 33 3/16 in. diameter. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 2006.33. © Carrie Mae Weems



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