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THE TRIUMPH OF CARRIE MAE WEEMS

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Davina Semo

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A **Q&A**
WITH **Carrie Mae
Weems**

By Charmaine Picard



Elegant and graced with a rich, melodic voice, Carrie Mae Weems is an imposing figure on the artistic landscape. Through documentary photographs, conceptual installations, and videos, she is known for raising difficult questions about the American experience. When the MacArthur Foundation awarded her a 2013 “genius” grant, it cited Weems for uniting “critical social insight with enduring aesthetic mastery.” The artist and activist is the subject of a major traveling career retrospective, which was at Stanford University’s Cantor Arts Center in the fall and opens January 24 at its final stop, the Guggenheim Museum in New York.

CHARMAINE PICARD: What was it like studying at the California Institute of the Arts in the late 1970s?

CARRIE MAE WEEMS: They didn’t always know what to do with this brown woman taking brown photographs. I arrived there when I was 27 years old, and I knew that I wanted to research women photographers; I knew that I wanted to learn who the black photographers were; and I knew that I wanted to build my own archive of their work. My best friend was filmmaker Catherine Jelski. The graduating class before mine was strong, with Mike Kelley, Jim Shaw, and Tony Oursler. John Divola, Jo Ann Callis, and John Baldessari were teaching there at the time. Divola apologized to me a few years ago because he thought he could have been more supportive. The field was more limited then. We knew all of the great male artists—and I don’t have a problem with them—I’m just saying, move over a bit, folks!

Your late friend Mike Kelley said of your photographs, “Her images are obviously constructed and don’t present themselves as being factual—rather, they have a mythic dimension that forces you to deal with them in a more complex way.” Because you often appear in the images, do people assume they’re autobiographical?

The only time I tried to deal in a small way with autobiography was in *Family Pictures and Stories* (1981–82), but I produced that work a long time ago, when I was a graduate student. In some ways it’s like Cindy Sherman’s use of self-portraiture—you understand it as conceptual-based work that explores issues of sexuality, self-construction, and other themes.

Both you and Kelley are receiving career retrospectives this year—his, unfortunately, is posthumous. Did you keep in touch with him?

Mike graduated a year before I did, and we hung out together in L.A. We dated for a while. He was like my boyfriend; he was my guy. We kept in touch on and off over the years. Passages in life can be pretty difficult, and I can understand why you would like to leave it behind; but if you could just hold on for one more day, sometimes it breaks. He just couldn’t hang on for one more day, and that’s unfortunate. It’s a tragedy.

You’ve long merged art and social activism. Recently, you brought attention to gun violence in Syracuse by launching a public art campaign, using signage and billboards, called Operation: Activate. And in 2012 you founded a summer program for teens called the Institute of Sound + Style, where students learn career skills. Do you consider these initiatives part of your art practice?

I’ve been interested in social engagement for a very long time, and these projects are very much a part of my art practice, allowing me to work in a more immediate way with specific issues. The work is different than what I might create for a museum exhibition or a show at the Jack Shainman Gallery, but they overlap, and I bring the same skill set and ideas to the work.

How have you funded these initiatives?

I used my own money and worked with a group of wonderful graduate students I met through a class that I taught with David

Ross at Syracuse University. I haven’t made a billboard for the past year, but I will probably make one again now that I have money from the MacArthur fellowship. I’m starting to partner with other people because they have additional resources that they can bring to the table—whether it is camera equipment, recording equipment, or musical knowledge. I think that having other people involved is really important to keep the institute alive and infuse it with fresh ideas.

To coincide with the U.S. presidential election in 2012, you produced a video on Barack Obama suggesting that he is judged by different criteria than past presidents have been. Can you speak about this work?

The first video I made about Obama was in 2008, and it looks at the tension between Obama and Hillary Clinton. The 2012 piece was an attempt to understand how difficult it’s been for him to govern because of the harsh backlash from the far right and from liberals as well. The patterns that govern racism are so entrenched that his hands are tied, and it’s so, so painful to see.



Last Song, 2012.
From the series “An Essay on Equivalent, See.” Digital C-print, 33½ x 22¼ in.

OPPOSITE:
Carrie Mae Weems, 2013.

Are the president and Mrs. Obama familiar with your work?

Yes, my work has been at the U.N. and in various American embassies, and it was also hanging in former U.N. ambassador Susan Rice's apartment. Michelle was very moved when she saw "From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried," 1995–96, at MOMA and said, "I have to call the president. He has to come and see this." When I met her at the White House, it was really wonderful. She said to me, "Carrie Mae Weems, I'm so glad to meet you." And I said, "I'm so happy to meet my first lady!" Getting older is interesting because I'm starting to feel like an elder stateswoman and with that comes a certain kind of recognition. And there's something lovely about how Michelle Obama might greet me as an older woman whom she respects.

Have you learned anything about your past work while putting together your retrospective?

I was taking a group of people through my exhibition at the Cantor Center, and there was a self-portrait that I made 30 years ago, with my back toward the camera. That figure became important in the development of three series of works: "Roaming," 2006; "The Louisiana Project," 2003; and "Dreaming in Cuba," 2001. That thread was picked up from 30 years ago and pulled through several bodies of my work. There are also visual and emotional patterns that were set very early on and a way of working with the camera that was also set a long time ago, so visually the work has a certain type of consistency. The poet and writer Amiri Baraka called it the *changing same*.

How have you moved away from your early photography and videos and pushed your work into new terrain?

The series I'm working on now is called "Equivalents," and this work is some of the most ephemeral that I've made. These images are more open than, say, "From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried." Something like "Equivalents" has more air around it, and its meaning fluctuates and it's harder to pin down. Alfred Stieglitz came up with the idea of Equivalents, and I was thinking about the importance of certain artists, like Duchamp, in my life, the importance of Magritte as an artist in my life, the importance of Lorna Simpson in my life, as well as Steichen and Stieglitz. So I was remaking the impossible but adding an extra layer of mediation.

I also just recently finished a project on W.E.B. Du Bois. I've been thinking a long time about contemplative spaces for important African-American figures, and I realized that there are so few of them in the country. So when given the chance to create a project around Du Bois, I started thinking that this is the time to create a memorial garden. I had a new variety of peony named for him that is slated to go into a new garden at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. It's called the Du Bois Peony of Hope. It's white with a beautiful citron-yellow center and can be installed outside the museum or in gardens across the country.

In what ways, if at all, has your Jewish and Native American ancestry influenced your ideas?

My grandfather on my mother's side was Jewish. There's a deep link between African-Americans and Jews, and it's something

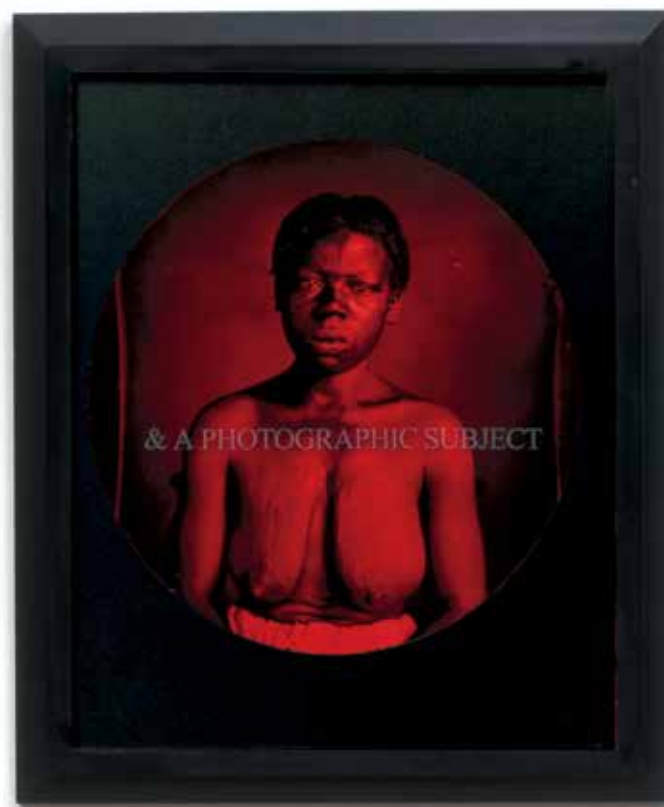
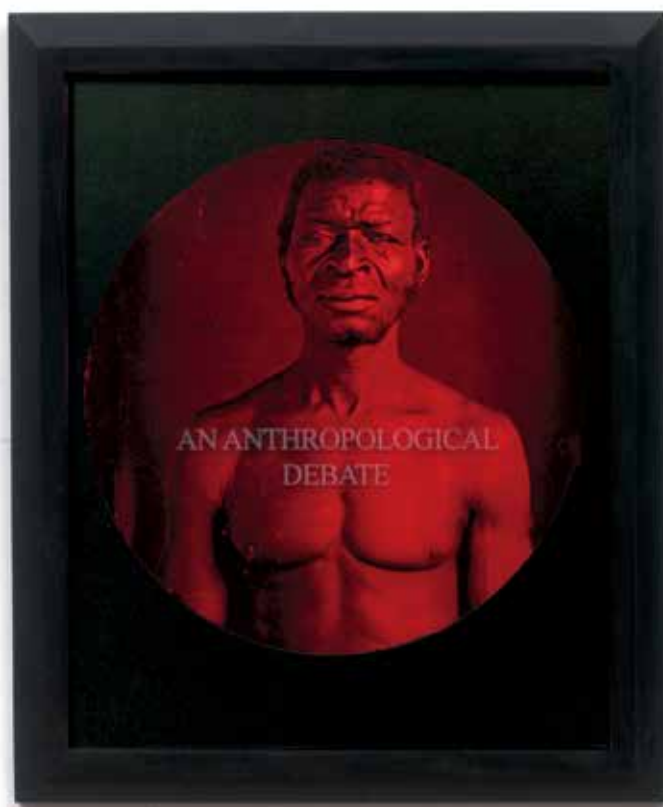
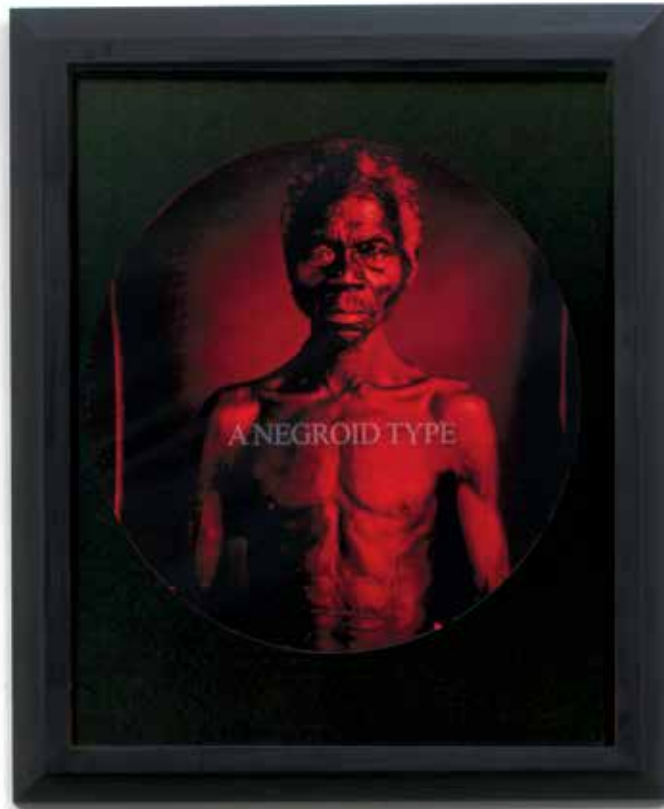
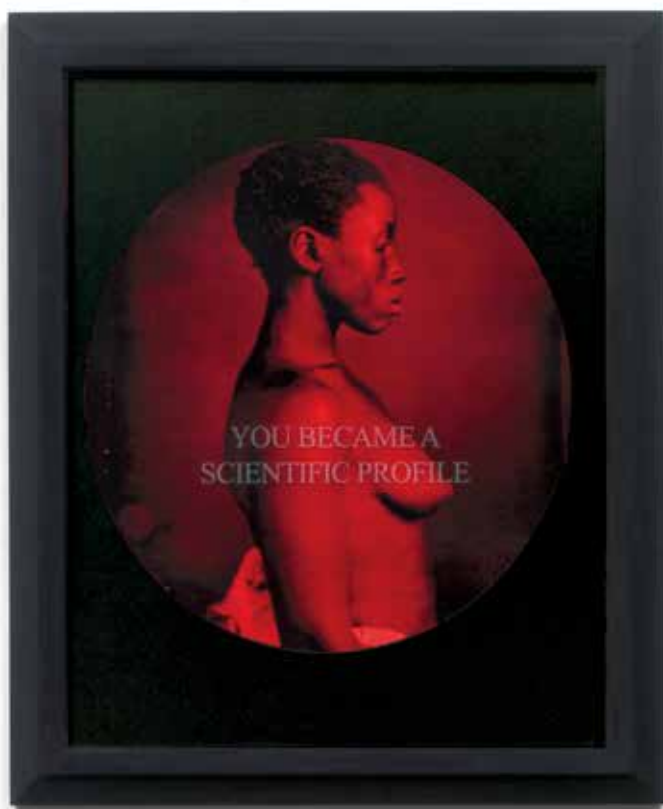
"African-American artists are still considered outliers, and people don't know how to integrate them into broader themes."

Still from *Afro-Chic*, 2009–10. Video, 5 min. 30 sec.

OPPOSITE:
A Scientific Profile, 1995–96.
From the series
"From Here I Saw
What Happened
and I Cried."
C-prints with etched
text on glass,
each 26½ x 22¾ in.



GABOR SZITANYI, CARRIE MAE WEEMS, AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY



that I've always wanted to explore. There was a larger project that I had hoped to do in Israel that, unfortunately, didn't come to fruition. I'm sensitive to people who have been scorned for what they look like or believe in or who have been under attack. One of the projects that I want to present and produce in my public programs at the Guggenheim is a night on Black and Jewish comedy. I think that there's a shared sense of struggle in the country, and that, I think, forms an incredible bond between these two apparently very different groups of people. It will be interesting to have these ideas rub up against one another.

Would you like to see your work presented differently in the future?

I would really like to see a well-curated show that has the power

to break through narrow confines of race in order to bring together really smart artists. For instance, nobody has organized a show with Lorna Simpson and Cindy Sherman, or Carrie Mae Weems, Robert Frank, and Gary Winogrand.

African-American artists are still considered outliers, and people don't really know how to integrate them into broader themes. People frame my work in terms of race and gender and don't integrate it into broader historical questions, and I think that limits the possibilities of what the public is allowed to understand about our production in the country. It's one of the reasons that I'm interested in using my platform at the Guggenheim to bring forth voices that are rarely heard together. If you invite only African-Americans to the table, then you're participating in your own isolation. **MP**

The New York Times

ART REVIEW

Testimony of a Cleareyed Witness

Carrie Mae Weems Charts the Black Experience in Photographs



Carrie Mae Weems A 2002 self-portrait, taken in Santiago de Cuba, is in a show of her work at the Guggenheim Museum. Collection of the artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

By HOLLAND COTTER

Published: January 23, 2014

Color and class are still the great divides in American culture, and few artists have surveyed them as subtly and incisively as Carrie Mae Weems, whose traveling 30-year retrospective has arrived at the Guggenheim Museum. From its early candid family photographs, through series of pictures that track the Africa in African-America, to work that explores, over decades, what it means to be black, female and in charge of your life, it's a ripe, questioning and beautiful show.

All the more galling, then, that the Guggenheim has cut it down to nearly half the size it was when originally organized by the Frist Center for the Visual Arts in Nashville and split it between two floors of annex galleries, making an exhibition that should have filled the main-event rotunda with her portraits, videos and installations into a secondary, niche attraction.

Ms. Weems was born in Portland, Ore., in 1953, to a family with sharecropper roots in Tennessee and Mississippi. The early civil rights years and the traumatic, nomadic 1960s were the years of her youth, and she did a lot of living fast. By her mid-20s, she had studied dance; had a child; worked in restaurants, offices and factories; spent time in Mexico, Fiji and New York; and begun a long-term commitment to grass-roots socialist politics.



Suzanna DeChillo/The New York Times

In 1974, she picked up a 35-millimeter camera, and five years later, at 27, she enrolled at the California Institute of the Arts near Los Angeles to study photography. She went on from there to earn a master of fine arts degree from the University of California, San Diego, followed by a stint at Berkeley studying folklore. Zora Neale Hurston, a writer and anthropologist of black life was a hero.

Ms. Weems didn't get much faculty notice in art school, but that seems not to have mattered. As early as 1978, she had begun the photographic series titled "Family Pictures and Stories," which became her M.F.A. graduate show in 1984 and is the earliest work at the Guggenheim.

The series, made up of snapshotlike photographs of her family, was a product of Ms. Weems's abiding interest in black culture and her gifts as a born storyteller. It was also a reaction to the 1965 government-issued Moynihan report that had cited family instability as the cause of the "deterioration" of African-American life.

Her response was to document, visually and verbally — she recorded an oral history to accompany the pictures — the everyday life of her own multigenerational family, one that had its share of dysfunction but was, over all, loving and mutually supportive, Ms. Weems herself being a very together product of it.

This was in no way a black-pride exercise. She understood the Moynihan report for what it was, a way to deflect attention from the reality that what the black family was up against was a long and continuing history of racism. It was that history she tackled next, first in carefully composed studio photographs of models enacting stereotypes (“Black Man Holding Watermelon”), then in still life arrangements of racist tchotchkes (Mammy and Sambo salt-and-pepper shakers), and finally, in 1989-90, in mug-shot-style portraits of African-American children.

She titled these portraits collectively “Colored People” and tinted the prints with monochromatic dyes: yellow, blue, magenta. The results were beautiful — and Ms. Weems puts a high value on formal beauty — but the colors carried complex messages. They are reminders that the range of skin colors covered by “black” is vast. But they also suggest that the social hierarchies arbitrarily built on color are operative as a kind of internalized racism among African-Americans who privilege light shades of brown skin.



"Wilfredo, Laura, and Me (from Dreaming in Cuba)" (2002). Collection of the artist. Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

The fullest development of this investigation of racism and its consequences comes in the extraordinary and now classic pictorial essay called “From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried,” which makes as powerful an impression today as it did when it was new in 1995.

In this work, made up of 33 separate prints, all of the images are lifted from found sources, the main one being an archive of 1850 daguerreotype images of African-born black slaves in South Carolina. The portraits were commissioned by the Harvard scientist Louis Agassiz to prove his theory that blacks constituted a separate and inferior race, and the men and woman presented, stripped to the waist or naked, were intended to be evidential specimens, nothing more.

Ms. Weems adds the more. She has tinted all the pictures blood red and printed words over the images, some descriptive (“A Negroid Type”), others in the form of direct address (“You became a scientific profile”), still others passionately tender (“You became a whisper, a symbol of a mighty voyage & by the sweat of your brow you laboured for self, family & other”). The work is both an indictment of photography as enslavement, and a homage to long-dead sitters, transplanted Africans, who, under unknowable duress, gave their bodies and faces to the artist, to us, and to history.

Ms. Weems honed to this quasi-anthropological model in much of her art from the early 1990s. Her folklore study led her to explore the black Gullah communities which, because of their isolation on islands off the coast of Georgia and South Carolina, had retained strong traces of West African origins. The immersive “Sea Islands Series” that resulted, combining photographs,

words and objects, is mesmerizingly atmospheric, as are two bodies of work that emerged from her travels in Africa itself.

In this series, Ms. Weems maintains the stance of omniscient, commenting observer, though this position was changing. In 1990, in what is probably her best known piece, the “Kitchen Table Series,” she introduced herself directly into the picture, playing the leading role in a carefully scripted and staged fictional narrative that unfolds in chapters over nearly two dozen photographs.

The action takes place in a narrow room neutrally furnished with a wood table and chairs; a bright lamp, which becomes a kind of interrogation light, hangs overhead. In a succession of tableaux vivants, Ms. Weems plays a contemporary Everywoman, initiating a relationship and agonizing over the direction it takes, bonding with female friends, raising kids, and finding her footing in solitude, with each phase of the story narrated in text panels.

The photographs are lush, the writing inventively colloquial, the forward pace engrossing. This is political art, but primarily in the personal-is-political sense. Issues of race and class are certainly there, but subsumed into the universal realities of life lived, daily, messy, crowded, at home.

In a sense, much of the rest of Ms. Weems’s art radiates out from this point: from home, you might say, into the world, with the artist often appearing, anonymous, back to us, in the distance, a silent witness in places where her ancestors would probably only have been present as slaves: at a 19th-century plantation house in Louisiana, for example, and among classical ruins in Rome.

A set of recent pictures by Ms. Weems that will be on view at the Studio Museum in Harlem as a supplement to the Guggenheim show make a somewhat different, but even more immediately pertinent point. Titled “The Museum Series,” it shows the artist dwarfed by the facades of international art institutions — the Louvre, the Tate Modern, and so on — which, to quote the Studio Museum news release, “affirm or reject certain histories through their collecting or display decisions.”



“A Single’s Waltz in Time” (2003). Collection of the artist. Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

The Guggenheim, with its smallized, to-the-side display of Ms. Weems’s show, edges toward rejecting, even as it appears to be affirming. Instead of a full retrospective, it delivers a career sampler when it has the space and resources to do so much more.

Why didn’t it show, for example, the full “Sea Islands Series” rather than just excerpts? Why, as the last and crowning stop on the exhibition tour, didn’t it add material, fill the survey out, bring in important missing pieces like “The Hampton Project,” Ms. Weems’s haunting 2000 multimedia essay on institutional racism as it applied to both African and Native Americans?

Maybe there were problems with loans, with schedules. Whatever. Where there's a will there's a way. It's a shame.

That said, the curators — Kathryn E. Delmez at the Frist Center and Jennifer Blessing and Susan Thompson at the Guggenheim — have done a solid job within their restrictions. And Ms. Weems, now 60 and much honored, is what she has always been, a superb image maker and a moral force, focused and irrepressible, and nowhere more so than in the videos that round out the show.

The short, funny 2009 fashion shout-out called “Afro-Chic” celebrates a revolutionary style while making cool-eyed note of its marketing. And in the 2003-4 compilation called “Coming Up for Air,” screened in the museum’s New Media Theater, Ms. Weems returns, with a few misfires but with a truly impressive, try-harder wisdom, to themes she started with: the rifts created by race and class, the possibility of building bridges with beauty, and the reality that the politics of living are individual, familial and universal.

“Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video” runs through May 14 at the Guggenheim Museum, 1071 Fifth Avenue, at 89th Street; 212-423-3500, guggenheim.org. “Carrie Mae Weems: The Museum Series” opens on Thursday and runs through June 29 at the Studio Museum in Harlem, 144 West 125th Street; 212-864-4500, studiomuseum.org.

A version of this review appears in print on January 24, 2014, on page C25 of the New York edition with the headline: Testimony of a Cleareyed Witness.

A PLACE AT THE TABLE

Carrie Mae Weems's cultural diplomacy at the Guggenheim

BY ANDREA K. SCOTT

January 27, 2014

In 1990, the American photographer Carrie Mae Weems staged a series of black-and-white scenes at her own kitchen table, starring herself, alone and with other models. These weren't straight-up self-portraits any more than Cindy Sherman's "Film Stills" were outtakes from movies. Alternating the pictures with framed panels of folkloric text, Weems distilled complexities of race, class, and gender into the story of a black Everywoman who was defined not just by her relationships—as a lover, mother, breadwinner, friend—but by her comfort with solitude. In the process, she elevated the sapless polemics of identity politics to the lush realm of neorealism.



"Untitled (Woman Playing Solitaire)," from the "Kitchen Table Series" (1990), by Carrie Mae Weems.

Weems is now sixty. Since that career-making project, her gimlet-eyed, starkly lyrical meditations on what constitutes ideas of difference have earned her a MacArthur "genius" grant, a Medal of Arts from the U.S. State Department, and a survey of thirty years' worth of work that opens this week at the Guggenheim. (The exhibition was organized by the Frist Center for the Visual Arts, in Nashville, Tennessee; New York is its fifth and final stop.)

"Of course, I'm thrilled," Weems said, several days before the show opened. "I'm the first African-American woman to have a retrospective at the Guggenheim. Not to sound pretentious, but I *should* be having a show there. By now, it should be a moot point for a

black artist—but it’s not.” She said she’d be just as happy if the museum were surveying someone else, mentioning a few mid-career names, including Lorna Simpson, Mickalene Thomas, and Lyle Ashton Harris. “Of course, I might be lying to myself,” she said. “But I’m not as interested in my own career as I am in moving a kind of cultural diplomacy forward.”

One such advance followed Weems’s 1995 series “From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried,” for which she enlarged daguerreotypes of African-American subjects, colored them red, and overlaid them with text. A portrait of a young woman, who is naked and turned sideways in front of the camera, reads, “You became a scientific profile.” Superimposed on another photograph, of an elegantly attired woman gazing frankly ahead, are the words “Some said you were the spitting image of evil.” The original pictures are in the archives of Harvard University, which threatened to sue Weems over their use but ended up acquiring the series for its collection.

Still, for an artist whose subsequent works have been set against the monuments of ancient Rome and the museums of Europe—not to mention the fabulous fashion show Weems staged for her 2009 color video “Afro-Chic”—the label “political” can feel constraining. “I think it’s the easiest way of dealing with me,” Weems said. “It’s expedient, just like reducing things to my race or my gender. But I am not a political artist.” On April 25, she will gather a group of artists, writers, choreographers, and musicians for a weekend of public programs at the Guggenheim, to join her in “thinking about what the cultural process of brown people has been.” The title of one event reads like a synopsis of Weems’s historical consciousness, her spirit of optimism, her fascination with language, and her sense of humor: “Past Tense, Future Perfect.” ♦

PHOTOGRAPH: COURTESY ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

WALL STREET JOURNAL

A Star Three Decades in the Making

By ELLEN GAMERMAN | JANUARY 23, 2014

Carrie Mae Weems is finally getting the star treatment that has largely eluded her during her career.

The artist's first New York museum retrospective opens Friday at the Guggenheim. "Carrie Mae Weems : Three Decades of Photography and Video" examines race, class and gender with work that includes posed domestic scenes, historic re-enactments and pieces using appropriated objects.



Carrie Mae Weems's 'Untitled (Woman and Daughter With Makeup),' from her 'Kitchen Table Series,' 1990, will be on view at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. © Carrie Mae Weems/Collection of Eric and Liz Lefkowsky/The Art Institute of Chicago (photo)

The exhibition is the latest in a spate of honors for Ms. Weems. In September, the MacArthur Foundation awarded her a "genius grant" worth \$625,000—a moment she celebrated by donning a tiara, evening gown and fake jewels. Next month, she will join Aretha Franklin among the artists celebrated at the annual BET Honors, established by BET Networks, news she greeted with a near swoon.

"It was like, 'No, this can't be happening to me. Aretha Franklin and Carrie Weems? I mean, come on,'" Ms.

Weems said.

The Guggenheim exhibit, the last stop in a show that started at the Frist Center for the Visual Arts in

Nashville, Tenn., presents some of Ms. Weems's best-known photographs, including mocked-up family tableaux shot in a documentary style from her 1990 "Kitchen Table Series."

"She's really been on our radar since the 'Kitchen Table Series'—that's now almost 25 years," said Jennifer Blessing, the Guggenheim's senior curator of photography. Of Ms. Weems's retrospective, she said: "It was certainly time."

Another series in the show, "From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried," features a range of blood-red-tinted and text-covered daguerreotypes, some incorporating pictures of slaves.

The work has a charged history: Harvard University threatened to sue Ms. Weems after she used images of slaves featured in photos owned by the school. The artist argued that even if she didn't have a legal case, she had a moral one, and she told the school she welcomed a lawsuit. No court battle ever materialized, and Harvard later acquired the pieces.

Ms. Weems's artwork is hard to categorize—she has gotten a peony named after W.E.B. Du Bois and posed as an aging Playboy bunny struggling to get into her outfit in a hologram-like video installation.

Because she can appear as a character in her photos, she has drawn comparisons to Cindy Sherman, whose artwork has generally commanded higher prices.

For example, Ms. Weems's high-profile photo projects, including the "Kitchen Table Series," are priced at New York's Jack Shainman Gallery from \$50,000 to \$125,000 for the series, while Ms. Sherman's auction record for a single piece is \$3.9 million.

"Carrie hasn't received the attention she deserved for quite a while," said Kathryn Delmez, a curator at the Frist who worked closely with Ms. Weems on the show, adding that she was particularly surprised that major museums didn't own more of her work.

This month, two institutions bought pieces by Ms. Weems: the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University in Durham, N.C., and the National Gallery of Art in Washington.

Ms. Weems grew up in Portland, Ore., part of an extended family of more than 300 people. After she turned 16, she had her only child, a daughter, and left home.



A blood-red-tinted and text-covered daguerreotype incorporating the picture of a slave is part of Ms. Weems's exhibit at the Guggenheim. MoMA/President & Fellows of Harvard College

She joined a dancer's workshop in San Francisco before getting introduced to Marxism and working as an organizer. A friend gave her a camera for her 21st birthday, and about a decade later she was studying photography at the California Institute of the Arts on her way to a master's degree from the University of California, San Diego. She now lives in Syracuse, N.Y., with her husband.

These days, the artist is focused on a new project, "Swinging Into 60," mostly video and writing that connects her age—60 years old—to the decade of the 1960s.

"It gives me this wonderful double entendre about what it means to age in this culture, what it meant to come up in this amazing moment in our contemporary history," she said.

Besides the Guggenheim, the Studio Museum in Harlem is featuring Ms. Weems's work this winter. An exhibit opening at the Studio Museum on Thursday includes photos of a black-clad Ms. Weems with her back to the camera, dwarfed by the imposing facades of institutions such as the British Museum and the Louvre.

In these shots, she almost looks locked out of the art establishment. She isn't—at least, not anymore.



Carrie Mae Weems, Guggenheim, New York – review

By Ariella Budick
January 29, 2014

The American artist's photographs combine confessional ferocity and clinical coolness



Carrie Mae Weems's 'Afro-Chic' (2010)

"I am not a political artist," Carrie Mae Weems recently told *The New Yorker* magazine, trying to wriggle out of a box she has spent much of her career constructing. Her finest photographs have always been intricate and nuanced, but also so direct that they invite simplistic interpretations: an archetype of the strong black woman, a protest against prejudice, an indictment of slavery. A new retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum recycles some of these blunt readings, but it also invites viewers to see beyond slogans to subtlety.

The fulcrum of her career is the "Kitchen Table Series" (1990), a suite of self-portraits in which the artist functions less as protagonist than as projection. She is a Weems-ish character whose story is "loosely related to the artist's own experiences", as a Guggenheim text panel puts it.

A saga of waxing and waning love plays out around the kitchen table, beneath the deep-shadowed glow from an overhead lamp. In the opening frame, Weems – or rather, “Weems” – gazes past a vanity mirror, into the camera, wearing a wry, sceptical expression. The source of her amusement is presumably the man behind her chair, who is hunched over her shoulder in an inveigling embrace. The scene has a smoky retro glamour. His dark suit frames her soft floral kimono, and a black fedora masks his inclined face. A half-full bottle of whisky, a couple of highball glasses and a packet of cigarettes join a comb and brush on the table. The scene is a mash-up of atmospheric Dutch interiors and *Citizen Kane*. Still life contends with sexual drama.

Two panels of writing – not museum texts, but an integral part of the piece – intervene, and the words, like the images, are deceptively straightforward and elaborately stylised. The man “is definitely in the mood for love. Together they were falling for that ole black magic. In that moment it seemed like a match made in heaven. They walked, not hand in hand, but rather side by side . . . thanking their lucky stars with fingers crossed.”

Weems has strung together this necklace of hackneyed phrases from pop songs and pulp novels, but it’s hard to gauge her level of irony. As the relationship inches from infatuation to estrangement, the prepackaged prose drops away, and the language becomes more analytical: “She insisted that what he called domineering was a jacket being forced on her because he couldn’t stand the thought of the inevitable shift in the balance of power.” Spoken like a therapist.

Small details loom in this claustrophobic setting, taking on outsized significance. The table nearly fills one corner of the room, so that people and chairs are always pushed up against it. A poster of Malcolm X disappears from the back wall, replaced by a painted still life, then a caged bird and a Peruvian tapestry. It’s an almost sacramental space, a kitchen where hardly anyone eats or smiles. The protagonist finds comfort in her daughter, her mother and her friends. But in the end she is alone, elbows planted firmly on the table, playing a contemplative game of solitaire. The series is typically read as an affirmation of independent, resilient womanhood, but there are no triumphal fanfares here. The tone is more fatalistic than celebratory.

In the two decades since “Kitchen Table”, Weems has never quite matched its perfect synthesis of autobiography, appropriation, politics and sheer enchantment. She came close, though, in a 1995-96 series that confronts race more directly, “From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried”. It began with a collection of small mid-19th-century daguerreotypes of South Carolina slaves, which the Harvard naturalist Louis Agassiz commissioned to support his theory that blacks belonged to a separate species. Weems rephotographed these tainted images, printed them large, and tinted them blood-red. She framed them under glass and etched missives on the panes. To a sequence of four naked torsos: “You became a scientific profile . . . a negroid type . . . an anthropological debate . . . a photographic subject.”

Weems is doing more than just tut-tutting at a scientist’s dehumanising classification. She is challenging her own medium. First these individuals were bought and exploited, then photography reinforced the violence; capturing them with the lens recapitulated the power relations of slavery. Now she tries to reverse the process, redeeming anonymous ancestors and folding solemn instants back into an ongoing story. She reaches beyond Agassiz’s slave portraits to address a black Union soldier: “You became a whisper, a symbol of a Mighty Voyage & by the sweat of your brow you laboured for self family & other.”

Weems doesn’t confine herself to 19th-century documents. She also appropriates Garry Winogrand’s 1967 picture of a mixed-race couple in the Central Park Zoo cradling a pair of chimps dressed in human

clothes. It's a charged image to begin with, buzzing with ambiguities. Is Winogrand, a white photographer who chronicled America during the Civil Rights movement and Vietnam, buying into atavistic fears of miscegenation, or is he mocking them? Is this a racist photo or a protest against bigotry? Weems adds an extra tangle in the superimposed caption, which announces that "some laughed long & hard & loud". She doesn't tell us who's laughing, or at whom, and there's really no way to know.

Although it's made from found images, "From Here I Saw What Happened" feels as personal and passionate as the documentary-style pictures Weems shot of her extended family in the late 1970s and early 80s. Those candids were meant to rebut a 1965 government report blaming "the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society" on the breakdown of black family life. Accompanied by Weems's recorded narration of various relatives' stories, the photographs represented family as a complex organism, at times chaotic and dysfunctional but never reducible to stereotype.

Her least successful works – a black man hoisting a watermelon, for example, or a black woman brandishing a fried chicken leg – tip into stridency. She gets trapped by the clichés she's trying to dismantle. At other times, her anger dissipates into fuzzy generalities, as in the many self-portraits in which she turns away and gazes over some European beauty spot. At her best, Weems mixes confessional ferocity with clinical coolness, and the combination lifts her beyond crude assertions into the realm of human complexity.

Until May 14, guggenheim.org

A concurrent show, 'Carrie Mae Weems: The Museum Series', opens on January 30 at the Studio Museum in Harlem and continues until June 29. studiomuseum.org

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Chatting With MacArthur Winner Carrie Mae Weems

BY **ROBIN CEMBALEST** POSTED 10/01/13

The artist, activist, and educator on winning the “genius grant,” bringing color to the Guggenheim, and changing the world one flower at a time

“**W**hat with planning for her retrospective at the Guggenheim, helping inner-city youth enter the music business, fighting gun violence in an advertising campaign, and managing to get a peony named after an African American hero, [Carrie Mae Weems](#) was pretty busy even before she got The Call last week from the [MacArthur Foundation](#). So the news that she won a “genius grant” added another whirlwind of activity on her already intimidating schedule.

“I was floored,” the artist said on the speakerphone from her car as she raced between engagements in Syracuse, New York, where she lives and teaches. “It was the most ridiculous thing I’d ever heard.”

Along with the 23 other MacArthur recipients this year, Weems will receive \$625,000 over the next five years, no strings attached.

“I’ll buy a new dress and a new pair of shoes for sure,” she says. “But everything will go back into my work because that’s what I do. It will go to the projects I care about.”

A charismatic artist, activist, and educator, Weems is best known for installations, videos, and photographs that invite the viewer to reflect on issues of race, gender, and class.



MacArthur Carrie Mae Weems

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN
GALLERY, NEW YORK.



Carrie Mae Weems, *Forbidden Fruit*, from “Madingo Series,” 2009-10, oil on canvas.

©CARRIE MAE WEEMS. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK.

A wry wit infuses even her most uncompromising works, which comment on stereotypes, slavery, miscegenation, and the exclusion of blacks—as artists and subjects—from Western art history. Her traveling retrospective, which began at the Frist Center in Nashville last year and opens at its final stop, the Guggenheim, on January 24, includes the naughty “Ain’t Jokin’” series (1987-88); “The Kitchen Table Series” (1990) photographs of domestic scenes that inspired Mickalene Thomas to be an artist; and the fabulous Afro-Chic fashion video (2009), among some 200 objects Weems has produced over the last three decades.

She’s been talking to Guggenheim staff about ways to jumpstart a demographic shift in the museum’s typical audience.

“I want to make sure I have a dynamic presence of people of color flowing through the space,” she says. One idea she’s thinking about is a live-broadcast performative conversation, maybe something along the lines of Jon Stewart’s *Daily Show*. Maybe with a comic and a house band.

“There could be a night around art and activism, with people who are troubling the waters, as they say,” she comments. “A night called *Laughing to Keep from Crying* or, *Jewish Comedy*, *Black Comedy*, and the *Power of Resistance*.”

Weems knows that many communities are unlikely to connect with her work in an art setting, so in 2002 she founded an artists collective, *Social Studies 101*, to reach a more diverse and often more marginalized audience.

Their projects include Operation: Activate, a public-art campaign in Syracuse that fights gun violence with missives everywhere from



Carrie Mae Weems, *Mirror Mirror*, from the series “Ain’t Jokin’,” 1987-1988, gelatin silver print.

©CARRIE MAE WEEMS. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK.

billboards to matchbooks to newspapers fliers and advertising circulars. “As militants you were feared,” reads one. “As thugs you are only despised!”

Another Social Studies 101 project is the Institute of Sound + Style, a program introducing high school students to careers in music, fashion, and other creative fields. “It’s a space that engages them in understanding what is possible in their own lives, as workers and contributing members of society,” Weems says. “You can be more than a rapper, you can be a sound engineer. You can be a graphic designer, involved in the creation of popular culture.”

An advocate of social practice before its current status as an art-world buzzword, Weems is delighted to see more people in the art world deploy their creative energies to affect change in the real world. “It’s an interesting cultural and political moment,” she says. “It’s all shifting. People are figuring out how to deal with what’s coming down the track.” The next shift, she hopes, will be the growth of an infrastructure to help artists develop their work in this arena. “Any university worth its salt needs to start paying attention,” she says.



Carrie Mae Weems & Social Studies, Operation: Activate, 2011.

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK.

describes as a feature-length mock autobiography using herself as the main character.

Weems has begun to make a mark in the horticultural world too. Working with landscape architect Walter J. Hood, she collaborated on the concept for the Du Bois Memorial Garden, in honor of the civil rights leader, writer, and sociologist who founded the NAACP. The proposal is part of “Du

She’s also got a movie going. Weems has begun shooting footage for a project about people who grew up in the ’60s—the Baby Boomer era—who are now turning 60. “It’s this wonderful double entendre,” says the artist, who was born in Portland, Oregon, in 1953. She hopes to use part of the grant to edit footage and move forward with the film, which she



The Du Bois Peony of Hope, officially named by the American Peony Society, is part of a Du Bois Memorial Garden that Weems designed in collaboration with landscape architect Walter J. Hood.

COURTESY THE ARTIST.

Bois in Our Time,” an exhibition at the University Museum of Contemporary Art at the University of Massachusetts Amherst (up through December 8) that unites artists and scholars to investigate Du Bois’s legacy.

In another unexpected recent triumph, Weems happened to contact the American Peony Society when there was a naming opportunity for a flower. So now there is a William E. B. Du Bois Peony of Hope, a white blossom with a bright yellow center that will anchor the memorial garden and is also available from Hollingsworth Peonies at \$88 a root.

Meanwhile, notes Weems, as humbling and validating as the MacArthur is, it hardly means an end to her fundraising. “At the end of the day \$100,000 a year is just kind of normal,” she comments. “You still need to raise money.

“It’s important to keep people who care about social justice engaged. It’s a way to be part of the project. I support a lot of stuff because I just want to be a part of it.”

The New York Times

Lens

PHOTOGRAPHY, VIDEO AND VISUAL JOURNALISM

The 'Genius' of Carrie Mae Weems

By JAMES ESTRIN

Published: September 25, 2013



"Mourning," from "Constructing History." 2008. Carrie Mae Weems, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, NY

Estrin, James. "The 'Genius' of Carrie Mae Weems." *The New York Times*, 25 September 2013. Online.
<http://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/09/25/the-genius-of-carrie-mae-weems/?_r=1#/15/>.

Among the recipients of the 2013 MacArthur fellowships is Carrie Mae Weems, whose varied interests and skills encompass photography, film and activism. Though known for work that tackles questions of race and gender, she says it addresses “unrequited love” and the human condition. Her conversation with James Estrin has been edited.

Q.

Congratulations, on the MacArthur. It’s pretty wonderful.

A.

It is beyond wonderful. I feel like I am dancing in the stratosphere. I am sitting here with my tiara on and all of my fake jewels, and a bottle of Champagne that’s half empty. Or should I say half full?

Q.

This is a lovely validation of the work that you’ve been doing for so long. Do you have plans for what the money will enable you to do?

A.

Actually there’s a project I’ve been thinking about for the past year. It’s about women who are turning 60, but it’s also about those people who came of age in the 60s. I’ve spent years shooting lots of video and stills, and I want to do a feature-length film about a woman turning 60 who came of age in the 60s and use that as a metaphor to examine what it means to come of age in one of the most exciting and tumultuous periods of the 20th century.

Q.

Will that be a documentary?

A.

It’s not a documentary, it’s more of a fictional autobiography. I have a lot of footage, now I have this emotional freedom to work on it. Maybe to figure out some quiet time to really sink my teeth into this work that I have wanted to do for a long time, but now I can actually do it without having to think about paying the rent.

Q.

That’s pretty amazing.

A.

It is. It’s extraordinary. I am honored, I am floored, I am beyond gaga and I am even a little cocky and giddy.

Q.

You have this large body of work from over two decades dealing with race and gender and identity. Is that a fair way to characterize it?

A.

That's the way most people do so, I think that's fair.



From "The Kitchen Table Series." 1990. Carrie Mae Weems, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, NY

Q.

How would you characterize it?

A.

I always think about the work ultimately as dealing with questions of love and greater issues of humanity. The way it comes across is in echoes of identity and echoes of race and echoes of gender and echoes of class.

At the end of the day, it has a great deal to do with the breadth of the humanity of African-Americans who are usually stereotyped and narrowly defined and often viewed as a social problem. I'm thinking that it's not about social problems, that it's about social constructions. The work has to do with an attempt to reposition and reimagine the possibility of women and the possibility of people of color, and to that extent it has to do with what I always call unrequited love.

Q.

Which is sort of the human condition.

A.

Exactly, exactly exactly, exactly. It becomes race as a shortcut and gender as a shortcut to the larger questions of humanity on any given subject.

Q.

You started out working in modes that are often documentary but also conceptual. Your projects are very much about ideas and thoughts

A.

Yes, well I started as a documentary photographer. Then, at a certain point, I realized that that really wasn't what I wanted to do. That it wasn't quite my way of working. But referencing documentary was important. So for instance, the [kitchen table](#) — which has all the markings of documentary photography — isn't at all. It's highly constructed. So I learned fairly early on that photographs are constructed. These can be constructed, and these realities can be as poignant and meaningful as something that was "documentary in nature," so that you were able to arrive at and deal with multilevels of complexity, tiers of complexity, around the construction of photographs.

That idea really challenges me, and excites me and engages me, that it doesn't have to be the "real moment as seen spontaneously in life," but that it can be constructed in my living room, my dining room, in my kitchen, in my backyard, and it can be equally honorable, if not more so, than the actual "document" of that reality.

Q.

What are you dealing with in “The Kitchen Table Series”?

A.

The kitchen table stories is really a play around notions of family. It's really about how one comes into their own.

What are the issues that surround monogamy and polygamy? What are the issues that surround motherhood and friendship — compassion? Those are the qualities that are dealt with, and of course it's really a mock documentary; it's a mock biography of one woman's journey as she contemplates and negotiates what it means to be a contemporary woman who wants something different for herself. And it's been very interesting, because even though it's anchored around a black woman, my hope was always that it would be understood as a condition of women. And it exceeded my expectations, because women around the world relate to that piece, as do men. They see themselves in it.

Q.

Can you tell me about your move to film and how that happened?

A.

At a certain point, I realized that I didn't know how to make photographs sing in a certain way, and I was becoming increasingly interested in composers and music and how one uses the voice. Film and video really allowed me to work across all of those interests in a single project. I could use voice and rhythm and work with the composers and use music to effect a certain visual image.

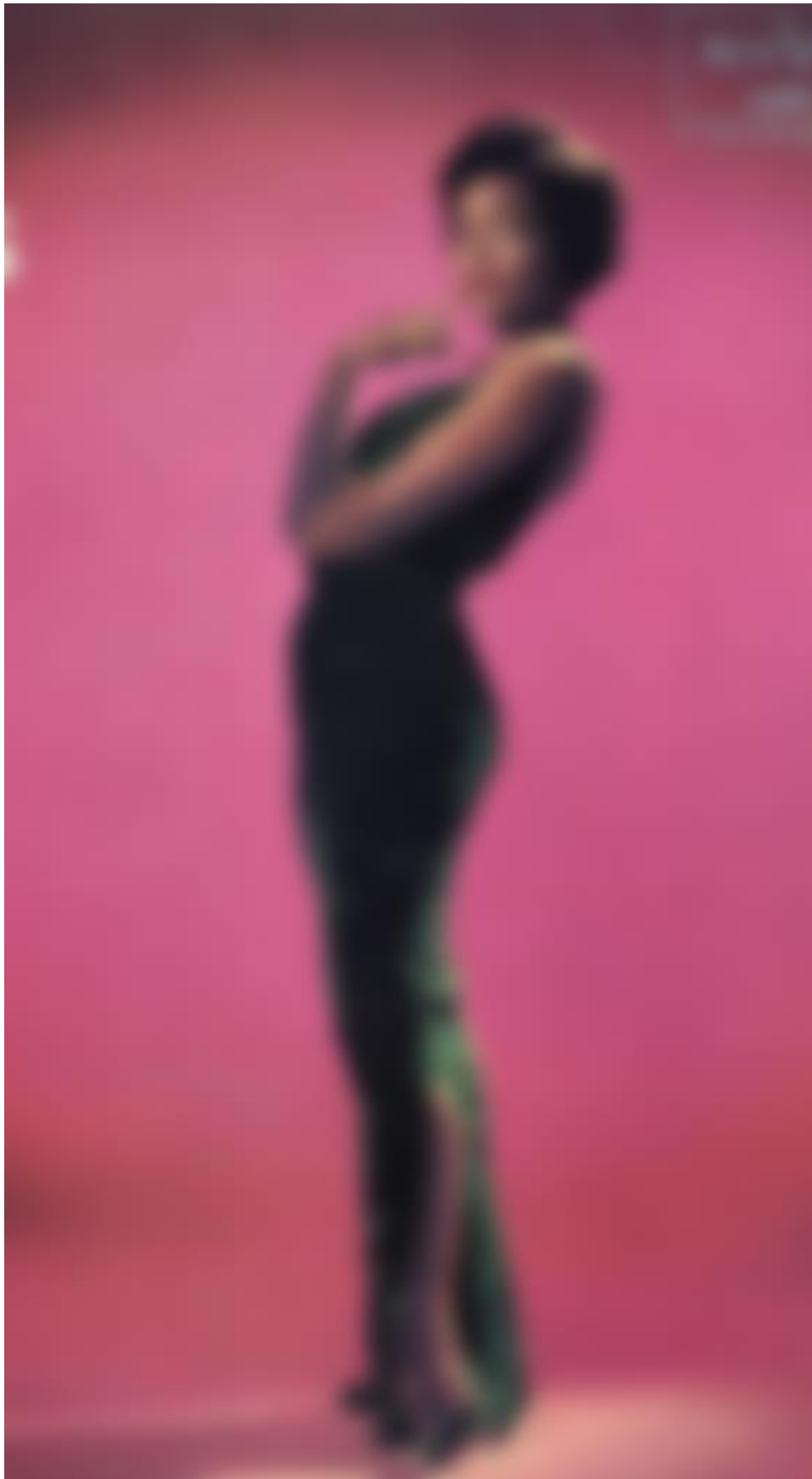
I love working with film, and even though — you know, every time I finish a project, I swear that I'm not going to make another film. It's so difficult. There are so many aspects, so many parts and so many people that need to be involved. Invariably, as soon as I've finished one project, I start thinking about the next, because I love the form.

Q.

Have you given up photography?

A.

Not at all. I still make photographs all the time, and I will continue to do so.



Eartha Kitt. From the series "Slow Fade to Black." 2010. Carrie Mae Weems, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, NY

Estrin, James. "The 'Genius' of Carrie Mae Weems." *The New York Times*, 25 September 2013. Online.
<http://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/09/25/the-genius-of-carrie-mae-weems/?_r=1#/15/>.

Q.

You're involved in Syracuse, in a program with young people in the community?

A.

Yes. Several years ago, there was a child killed in Syracuse — caught in the cross-fire of gangland violence. And I remember the day so clearly, because it was a snowy day in Syracuse, and I was exhausted. I thought I would just spend the morning in bed reading the newspaper and drinking coffee and looking at books and just relaxing. And I go into the kitchen, I saw this headline about this child that had been killed, and I was so upset about it that I immediately went to the studio and started working. And I started this series — a billboard project, actually, a public-art project, using billboards and broadsides and leaflets and a whole host of materials that I could use to do what I call “activating” the community around the issue of violence. And I did that for months and months and months, and it was the only thing I worked on, desperately, and getting things out there in the public.

Then I realized that I also needed to have another kind of response, and not just a response of being reactionary, or reactive, to a condition, but deciding to lead another kind of campaign.

I wanted to do a project that really focuses on young people that gets them engaged and involved in the arts. And so what do young people care about? They care about fashion. They care about music. They care about popular culture, and they care about sex. So I came up with this idea of doing an institute, the Institute of Sound and Style, that introduces kids to different aspects of popular culture — as technicians, as videographers, as photographers, as recording engineers.

You don't have to be a rap singer, that you could be an engineer, that you didn't have to be in the photograph, that you could make the photograph.

It's a summer program, we run for four weeks over the course of the summer. We pay kids, because all the kids are desperately poor and need to be paid. We give them at least the minimum wage, and we train them in various aspects of the arts, giving them the skills that they need — and introducing them to the skills and ideas that they need to fashion another life for themselves. And it's truly one of the most exciting things that I'm involved in.

It's really a fabulous project, and I tell you, I get as much out of it as the kids. So that's what I'm working on, that's my heart's desire. And we take donations.



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Carrie Mae Weems Wins \$625,000 MacArthur “Genius” Award

by Brian Boucher

Artist Carrie Mae Weems is one of 24 recipients of this year's fellowships from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, commonly referred to as "genius" grants. Over five years, she will take home \$625,000. At 60, Weems is the oldest recipient this year.

For more than three decades, Weems has worked principally in photography and video, often combining text with images of Africans and African-Americans to explore the complex history of black identity in America.

"It is Weems's conviction that radicalism and beauty are complementary, not antithetical, that gives her work its distinctive edge," wrote Ernest Larsen in *A.i.A.* in 1999.

In a [video](#) on the foundation's website, Weems pushes back at simplistic views of her and her work: "My disadvantage is that for the most part, . . . I'm viewed only in relationship to my black subjectivity, even though I'm a very complex woman working on many, many different levels."

She also relates her initial disbelief, when she got the call, at being chosen for the grant.

"Not me! Can't be me. Gotta be a mistake," she says. "You know, I put my head down and I cried."

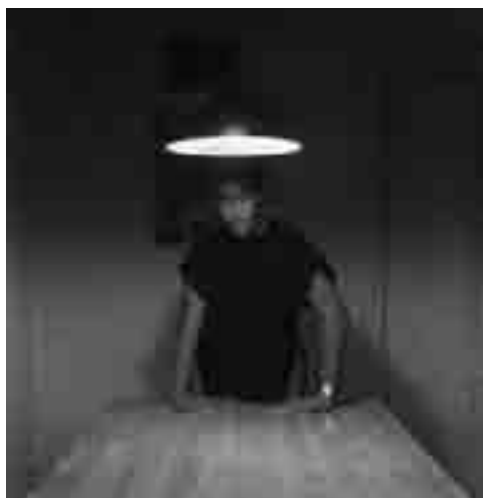
CRITICS' PICKS—Portland, OR

Carrie Mae Weems

PORTLAND ART MUSEUM

1219 SW Park Avenue

February 2–May 19



Carrie Mae Weems, *Untitled*, 1990, gelatin silver print, dimensions variable. From the “Kitchen Table Series,” 1990.

The likeness of Portland, Oregon native Carrie Mae Weems is often at the center of her work. This spectacular retrospective, aptly taking place in her hometown, reveals the diverse ways in which Weems combines photography’s documentary, portrait, and pictorial traditions in dramatic multi-image serial narratives exploring history, family, community, and place. For instance, in the “Kitchen Table Series,” 1990, Weems casts herself as a woman who begins and ends a romantic relationship, then weathers its dissolution in the company of friends and family, and, in the last few images of the twenty-part work, “finds” herself through the empowerment of self-representation. In the most powerful of these images, we see Weems adorned in a plain black shirt standing at the head of the table, palms flat on the table and elbows extended in a gesture of resolve, staring straight-on into the camera confronting the gaze of the viewer. Weems describes the “Kitchen Table Series” as the locus of her transformation into a performer. However, Weems’s representational agenda expands far beyond self-identity: “I use myself simply as a vehicle for approaching the question of power. It’s never about me; it’s always about something larger.”

Weems’s broader, humanistic concerns are also exemplified by her use of image, audio, text, and, occasionally, moving image, to create what seems like a reparative and holistic vision of overlooked people and their histories. Her subjects include: families of color (*Family Pictures and Stories*, 1978–84); black women artists (*Slow Fade to Black*, 2010); and political activism (*May Days Long Forgotten*, 2002). In *Slow Fade to Black*, Weems enlarges and blurs historic publicity photographs of black women singers, hanging them, like much of her work, in staggered grids and rows that transform the walls of the museum into a new territory of the artist’s making.

— Stephanie Snyder

CARRIE MAE WEEMS

11/28/12

FRIST CENTER FOR THE VISUAL ARTS

by lilly wei



NASHVILLE Carrie Mae Weems's first retrospective, "Three Decades of Photography and Video," curated by Kathryn E. Delmez, is an engrossing, overdue look at an artist whose name is often better known than her work, with the exception of her acclaimed series "Kitchen Table" (1990).

Each black-and-white photograph in that suite (shown here in its entirety) is staged with Weems (b. 1953) at a kitchen table, often with other people. The domestic tableaux suggest cycles of love, friendship, motherhood and solitude in the life of a spirited, clear-eyed, tough-minded black woman, "the other of the other," as the artist, quoting Lacan, put it in her talk at the center. Wry wall panels are linked to a narrative tradition also tapped by Faith Ringgold's story quilts. The word, written or spoken or both, has been integral to Weems's practice from the beginning, as have a certain classic formality and theatricality.

Occupying the ample galleries of the Frist Center's ground floor, the show begins with Weems's early series "Family Pictures and Stories" (1978-84), which features middle-class African-Americans. Here the artist rebuts the stereotype of black families as atomized, feckless and rootless. It is her own family (she grew up in Portland, Ore.) that she

shows—an extended, interwoven multigenerational clan in all its complex, functional and dysfunctional humanity—accompanied by text and audio recordings that recount the lives of individual members.

The show's selection of around 225 photographs, videos and installations is largely thematic and loosely chronological. Its walkabout format invites viewers to delve, at will, into issues of otherness, race, gender, identity, class, history, migration and place. Weems has a lot on her mind, including the black body and social marginalization. Many of her images are barbed and politically incorrect: for example, the picture of a young black man with an Afro, holding a watermelon, from the series "Ain't Jokin'" (1987-88). Weems is particularly concerned with black women and how they are portrayed, remembered and forgotten. Her appropriated, softly blurred images of Nina Simone, Josephine Baker, Marian Anderson and others in the series "Slow Fade to Black" (2010) offer a poignant assessment of uncertain celebrity.

Weems turns to disturbing 19th-century daguerreotypes in the series "From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried" (1995-96). Photographs of slaves she has stained blood-red are labeled with phrases like "A Negroid Type" or "You Became Playmate to the Patriarch." In "The Hampton Project" (2000), Native Americans are shown in enlarged before-and-after pictures, their traditional bearing and attire suddenly transformed by white influences, a change that raises difficult questions about assimilation and difference.

In "Roaming" (2006), a series of large-scale photos taken in Italy, Weems addresses these conundrums in a manner reminiscent of Korean artist Kimsooja's persona, Needle Woman. Positioning her robed, regal self with her back to us, the artist gazes at the Old World. Does she belong? Is she an interloper? Like a solemn muse, black or otherwise, she seems to ask: Who writes history? Who rewrites it, and where and what is our place in it?

History is also evoked in the installation *Ritual to Revolution* (1998), its hanging muslin scrims conjuring the history of the world through translucent pictures, and in "Constructing History: A Requiem to Mark the Moment" (2008), a video and photo series reenacting crucial events from the Civil Rights movement. Weems takes due note of social progress, but also its glacial pace. The latest work in the show, the video installation *Cornered* (2012), utilizes two adjoining screens mounted in a corner. On the opposing sides, groups of people protest angrily for and against desegregation during the 1965 Boston riots, the looped news footage slowed to match the tempo of Samuel Barber's elegiac "Adagio for Strings," the only sound.

Photo: Carrie Mae Weems: The Edge of Time— Ancient Rome, from the series "Roaming," 2006, digital chromogenic print, 73 by 61 inches; at the Frist Center for the Visual Arts.

ARTFORUM

OCTOBER 2012

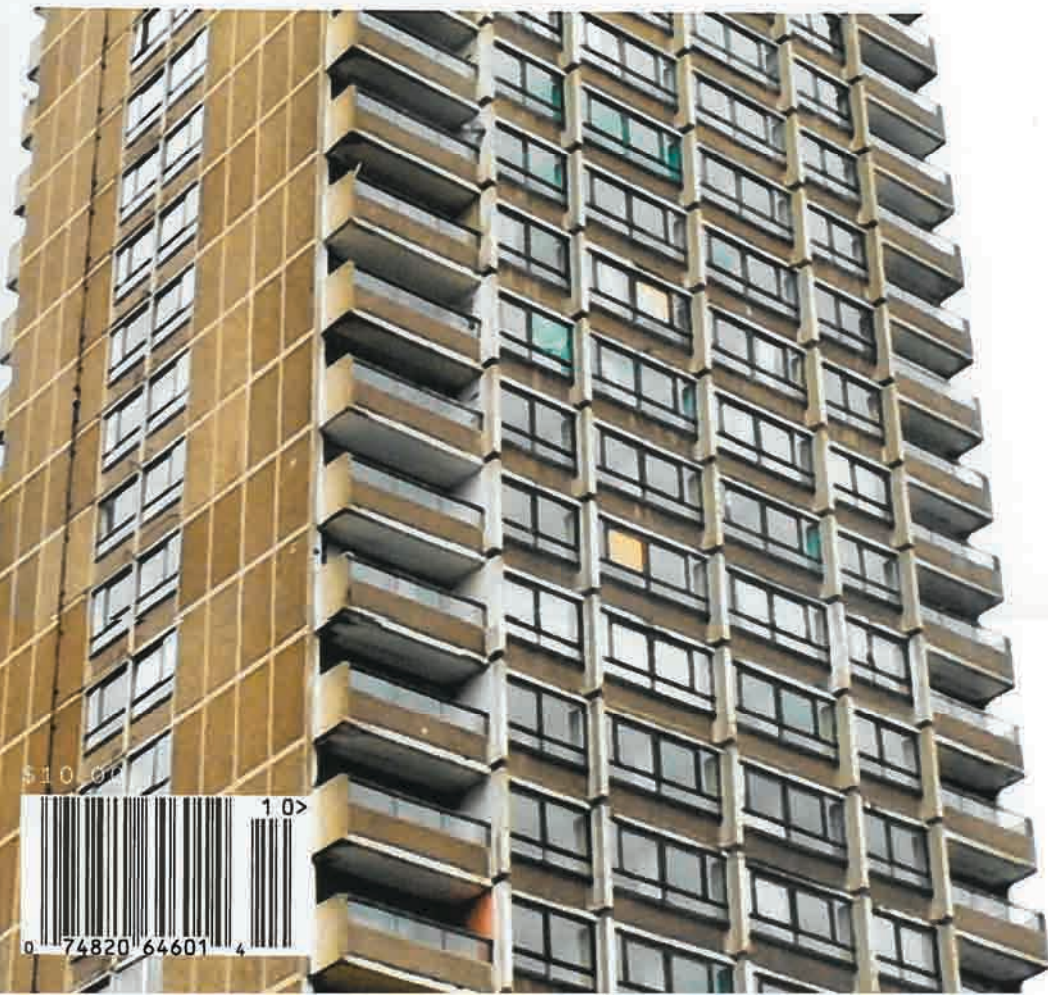
I N T E R N A T I O N A L

FALL PREVIEW

CHRIS JOHANSON

LUKE FOWLER

ART AND ARCHITECTURE:
A ROUNDTABLE





From left: Alberto Burri, *Combustione Plastica (Plastic Combustion)*, 1958, burnt plastic and acrylic on canvas, 38 1/2 x 33". From "Destroy the Picture: Painting the Void, 1949–1962." Ken Price, *Snail Cup*, 1968, glazed ceramic, 2 1/2 x 5 1/4 x 2 1/4".



NASHVILLE

"CARRIE MAE WEEMS: THREE DECADES OF PHOTOGRAPHY AND VIDEO"

FRIST CENTER FOR THE VISUAL ARTS • September 21, 2012–January 13, 2013 • Curated by Katie Delmez

The nationwide tensions surrounding the presidential election provide an appropriate backdrop for a retrospective devoted to Carrie Mae Weems, an artist who consistently challenges us to think about how we arrived at where we are now. In the lead-up to Barack Obama's first election, Weems made the series "Constructing History: A Requiem to Mark the Moment," 2008, revisiting political assassinations of the past century to recall the loss on which our history is built. This exhibition of two hundred works—thirty years' worth of photographs, text, and video—and the accompanying catalogue will bear out Weems's compassionate focus on politics, history, and subjectivity and, all told, are sure to stir our emotions. *Travels to the Portland Art Museum, OR, Feb. 2, 2012–May 19, 2013; Cleveland Museum of Art, June 30–Sept. 29, 2013; Cantor Arts Center, Stanford University, CA, Oct. 16, 2013–Jan. 5, 2014; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Jan. 24–Apr. 23, 2014.*

—LaToya Ruby Frazier

LOS ANGELES

"DESTROY THE PICTURE: PAINTING THE VOID, 1949–1962"

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART • October 6, 2012–January 14, 2013 • Curated by Paul Schimmel

Always gifted at brushing canonical histories against the grain, Paul Schimmel now gathers an international cross section of postwar abstraction that challenges the old modernist story of the "integrity" of the picture plane. The show's nearly one hundred works inventory multifarious assaults whereby canvases were sliced, punctured, buried, bandaged, shackled, bound—and confronted with a gargantuan flamethrower. This grouping and the related catalogue will provide new ways of looking at major artists such as Jean Fautrier, Lucio Fontana, and Rauschenberg along with focused rediscoveries of underknowns including Alberto Burri, Gérard Deschamps, Manolo Millares, Salvatore Scarpitta, and Chiyu Uemae. Offering a prehistory to the recent Los Angeles art Schimmel has valiantly championed, the show may be a culmination of the curator's work at LA MOCA, but it also promises an argument for why this should not be his final project there. *Travels to the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Feb. 16–June 2, 2013.*

—George Baker

"KEN PRICE SCULPTURE: A RETROSPECTIVE"

LOS ANGELES COUNTY MUSEUM OF ART • September 16, 2012–January 6, 2013 • Curated by Stephanie Barron

With his "Snail Cups," 1965–68; "Curios" (cabinets), 1972–78; and a quarry's worth of psychedelic philosopher's stones, the late Ken Price was the hairy potter our greed-driven times needed—one who conjured wonder from base materials. The wand that chose him was a paintbrush, and the canvas (or support) he championed—bowing to and freaking with influences and peers as various as Antoni Gaudí, Magritte, and John Altoon—was fired clay. Let's just hope, for an artist who so exuberantly shrugged off the quandary of craft versus art, that LACMA's exhibition, including almost one hundred sculptures dating from 1959 until 2011 and a dozen late works on paper, isn't overengineered by its guest designer, Frank O. Gehry. The catalogue essays, especially Dave Hickey's rhetorical glazing, should keep the gaze fixed on Price's funky magic despite the goings-on. *Travels to the Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas, Feb. 9–May 12, 2013; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, June 18–Sept. 22, 2013.*

—Bruce Hainley

"ZARINA: PAPER LIKE SKIN"

HAMMER MUSEUM • September 30–December 30 • Curated by Allegra Pesenti

Since the early 1960s, Indian-born American artist Zarina Hashmi has developed a minimal artistic language that balances materiality with themes of home, displacement, and memory. Her first retrospective—long overdue—features approximately sixty pieces from the past five decades and includes prints, paper-pulp casts, and sculptures. While the influence of Zarina's studies of mathematics and architecture are evident across her oeuvre, rarely seen early relief prints such as *In the Woods I*, 1971, manifest the importance and impression of nature in her practice, and recent works such as the obsidian-covered *Dark Night of the Soul*, 2011, suggest a subtle turn toward contemplative spirituality—aspects that are further explored in the exhibition's catalogue with essays by Allegra Pesenti, Aamir Mufti, and Sandhini Poddar. *Travels to the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Jan. 25–Apr. 21, 2013; Art Institute of Chicago, June 27–Sept. 22, 2013.*

—Beth Citron

Thursday, September 20, 2012 | By Deborah Willis

Carrie Mae Weems: A Look Back on Three Decades



© Carrie Mae Weems / The Art Institute of Chicago

Untitled (Eating lobster)
from *Kitchen Table Series*, 1990.

The cover image of Carrie Mae Weems's engaging book finds the artist and photographer wearing a long black dress as she stands at the shoreline with her back to the camera, looking at the ocean. It looks as if she is contemplating the morning. We, the "reader" or "viewer," wait in anticipation to open the book and look into her world. The cover image is our invitation! The photograph is from Weems's *Roaming* series from 2006. She becomes our narrator to history. She states: "This woman can stand in for me and for you; she leads you into history. She's a witness and a guide." Weems is an art-photographer, performance artist, activist and videographer—well known for her photographic series and multi-screen projections relating to themes focusing on family, beauty and memory. For the last 25 years, she has relied on stories from the 'kitchen table' and of life in the low country of South Carolina, antebellum New Orleans, cities in Senegal, Cuba, Ghana and Italy to create a body of work that engages in history. An artist concerned with iconography, she has constructed a series of works questioning black women's presence in popular and material culture as well as art history. Throughout her 30-odd year career, Weems has re-staged historical moments and created images that re-imagined everyday life from family stories to political history. Weems focused her camera on her own body to create multiple conversations. She interrogates and assembles old stereotypes and disassembles them.

In 1992, she refused to accept the scientific racism that prevailed in the 19th century circulating about black Americans. In re-imagining the photographed experiences of some of the blacks enslaved on a South Carolina plantation photographed by J. T. Zealy, a daguerreotypist commissioned by zoologist Louis Agassiz, Weems used the narrative of slavery and re-purposed the images. The title of her series *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* is a text and image installation of large scale framed images printed with a red tint, possibly to signify the life's blood still flowing through the memory of their enslaved experience.

Born in Portland, Oregon, and now living in Syracuse, N.Y., photo-artist Weems interweaves a narrative of black female subjectivity, black beauty and the gaze in her work on beauty. Weems's photographs are 'performing beauty' through lighting, posing, acting and fashion. Weems confronts historical depictions and restages them with 'what if...' questions. In her series, *Not Manet's Type*, Weems critiques the white male art "masters," and how beauty is defined through their paintings. The ironic series of five self-reflexive photographs with text, questions not only Manet but also Picasso, DeKooning and Duchamp.

Weems is the ideal model and she is well informed about the history of art, using her own partially dressed and nude body. The posing reveals her formal training as a photographer, and her choice of props is influenced by her sharp observation as a builder of ideas. The series' power lies in her narrative voice and her ability to create a scene. At first glance, it looks as if the photographs are all the same because of the square format and the centered art deco-style vanity dresser. The setting is the bedroom, a private but inviting space. We, the viewer, peer through the square mat into the round mirror that frames her body, which lends an effect of peeping at a private moment. Her sensitivity to the historical gaze is quite evident, the time of day, the lace on the brass bed, the large white vase holding dried flowers, and the art work framed on the wall offer a sense of reality, as the bright sun bleaches the lower half of her body and the bed. Weems stands with her back to the viewer; the bold red text reads:

"It was clear, I was not Manet's type... Picasso—who had a way with women only used me & Duchamp never even considered me."

The series' text clearly shows her vulnerability as she attempts to empower her image. The next images states:

"Standing on shakey [sic] ground I posed myself for critical study but was no longer certain of the questions to ask."

Women artists like Weems, Barbara Kruger, Cindy Sherman, Lorna Simpson, Renee Cox and Carla Williams challenge ideas of beauty and desire, which are both critical components in Weems's work. All of these artists dare her viewer to rethink their understanding and the positioning of contemporary art practices. Mirrors are often found in Weems's self-portraits; she's gazes at her statuesque frame which is reflected in the mirrored image. Gates states, "An artist does not make a work called *Not Manet's Type* (1997) without a keen sense of her own authority, a respect—not reverence—for those artists who came before her, and an ability to laugh in the midst of serious thinking."

Deborah Willis is a photographer, photo historian and professor at New York University. Her recent work includes a book and exhibition of the same title Posing Beauty in African American Culture on exhibit at the Figge Art Museum in Davenport, Iowa.

Willis's writing is featured in Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video, which will be released by Yale University Press in October.

A retrospective exhibition of the same name is also on view at the Frist Center in Nashville from Sept. 21, 2012 to Jan. 13, 2013.

It will then travel to the following locations:

Portland Art Museum: Feb. 2–May 19, 2013

Cleveland Museum of Art: June 30–Sept. 29, 2013

Cantor Center for Visual Arts, Stanford University: Oct. 16, 2013–Jan. 5, 2014

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York: Jan. 24–April 23, 2014

The New York Times

ART & DESIGN

Photographer and Subject Are One



Carrie Mae Weems/Art Institute of Chicago

Carrie Mae Weems in a photo from her "Kitchen Table Series."

By HILARIE M. SHEETS

Published: September 12, 2012

WHEN Carrie Mae Weems was first teaching photography in the late 1980s at Hampshire College in Massachusetts, she was struck by the difference in how her male and female students presented themselves in pictures. "The women were always turning away from the camera, always in profile," said Ms. Weems, demonstrating by obscuring her face seductively with her graceful hands. "They never squared themselves. The boys were squaring themselves."

At night she would return to her studio to work on her own photographs that told a different story. She centered herself at the end of a kitchen table and composed vignettes about the life cycle of a romance, the camaraderie among female friends, the demands of motherhood and finally her solitude, all unfolding at the table under a harsh, expository overhanging light. These photographs in "Kitchen Table Series," completed in 1990, are accompanied by 14 panels recounting the path of a 38-year-old woman with a

“bodacious manner, varied talents, hard laughter, multiple opinions,” as a panel says, who resists classification and embraces complexity.

Using herself as a surrogate for all self-possessed women and controlling the narrative as both subject and photographer, Ms. Weems found her artistic voice. The series was shown widely, including at the Museum of Modern Art in “Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort” in 1991.

“I emerged in that incredible moment in the 1980s when all kinds of social questions about subjectivity and objectivity, about who was making, who was looking” were being asked, Ms. Weems said in a recent interview at the Jack Shainman Gallery in Chelsea, which represents her work. She, along with fellow African-American artists like Glenn Ligon, Lorna Simpson and Gary Simmons, began to receive more recognition than black artists had previously seen. “There was a real shift,” she said.

The painter Mickalene Thomas was inspired to become an artist after seeing “Kitchen Table Series” at the Portland Art Museum in Oregon as a student in the early 1990s. “It was the first time I saw work by an African-American female artist that reflected myself and called upon a familiarity of family dynamics and sex and gender,” Ms. Thomas said. Now 59, Ms. Weems is having her first comprehensive retrospective, which opens on Friday at the Frist Center for the Visual Arts in Nashville and includes some 225 photographs, videos and installations, from her earliest, never-before-published ’70s documentary photographs influenced by Roy DeCarava and Henri Cartier-Bresson to brand-new pieces referring to works by Marcel Duchamp and Ana Mendieta, among other artists. It will travel to the Portland Art Museum in Oregon, where she grew up and is home to almost 400 members of her close-knit extended family, as well as to the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Cantor Center for Visual Arts at Stanford University and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York.

“When you’re talking about Carrie Mae Weems, you’re going to talk about race and gender and classism,” said Kathryn Delmez, curator of the exhibition. “But I really think it goes beyond that to her desire to insert all marginalized people into the historical record, as she says, to tell the stories that have been ignored or forgotten or erased. Through Carrie’s lens she’s looking at who’s writing history, who has the power to influence other people’s lives.”

In her series “From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried” (1995-96), for instance, she appropriated 19th-century daguerreotypes of slaves and presented them tinted blood red and etched with text like “An Anthropological Debate,” “Some Said You Were the Spitting Image of Evil” and “You Became Playmate to the Patriarch.”

“What can this black body project, and how will that projection be understood and received no matter how you attempt to shift it?” Ms. Weems asked. “It’s laid with a certain kind of history that’s almost insurmountable. I’m always attempting to push against it, to insist that there be another kind of read.”

In person Ms. Weems has a regal bearing and easily forges moments of intimacy. Her strong physical presence and rich, melodic voice are central to her still photos and video pieces over the decades, in which

she sees herself serving variously as alter ego, muse and witness to history. She studied movement at Anna Halprin's progressive Dancer's Workshop after moving to San Francisco at 17.

For her 20th birthday her boyfriend gave her a camera. "Suddenly this camera, this thing, allowed me to move around the world in a certain kind of way, with a certain kind of purpose," she said. In 1976 she moved to New York to study photography at the Studio Museum in Harlem and then returned west to earn a bachelor of fine arts degree at the California Institute of the Arts in 1981. She received a master of fine arts degree at the University of California, San Diego, in 1984.

During her schooling she started "Family Pictures and Stories," completed in 1984. Ms. Weems, who had her own daughter at 16, grouped candid black-and-white photographs of her sprawling middle-class family, in which she is one of seven children, with text and audio recordings about the members' lives, especially the older generation's experiences in Tennessee and Mississippi before moving to Oregon. Responding to the 1965 Moynihan Report that asserted that African-American communities were in shambles because of weak family structures, Ms. Weems put forward an authentic and unvarnished portrait of a strong African-American family as she knew it. It was the beginning of using herself as a stand-in for a larger subject and integrating word with image to approach different levels of storytelling.

In "Not Manet's Type" (1997) she used caustic humor to expose the invisibility of women, especially black women, in the canon of art history. In the text accompanying photographs of herself undressed in her bedroom, she recognizes that she would not have been the preferred type of model for Manet, Picasso or Duchamp. "But it could have been worse/Imagine my fate had de Kooning gotten hold of me," she wrote, before stating that she would take "a tip from Frida" Kahlo and become her own model and creator.

Ms. Weems, who moved to Syracuse in 1996 to live with her husband, Jeff Hoone, and maintains a studio in Brooklyn, said she saw the same set of questions about power playing out in the art world as in society at large. "I can spend an evening at most art functions in New York City and not see a single other person of color," she said. "Now. Today. That's shocking to me."

In her "Museum Series," which she started in 2007, she photographs citadels of art like the Louvre, the British Museum and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. She appears in front of each august edifice in a long, black dress with her back to the camera, a wistful, solemn presence that suggests both a longing for admission and a testament to exclusion. She has similarly materialized before grand antebellum architecture embedded with the history of slavery in the "Louisiana Project" (2003) and on ancient streets in Europe in her 2006 series "Roaming."

Photographed from behind in all these images, Ms. Weems's elegant, silhouetted figure doesn't immediately announce her race. "We can set that aside," she said. She said she saw herself "functioning as a guide in an architectural place that asks another set of questions about power and relationships that perhaps then we can all then stand in front of. I am the first point of reference to the viewing. Then you come along with me, hopefully."

The New York Times

Two Artists Salute a Legacy



Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

Geri Allen, seated, and Carrie Mae Weems working on their show "Slow Fade to Black."

By [FELICIA R. LEE](#)

Published: June 14, 2012

POINTING her camera, the artist Carrie Mae Weems lobbed directions. "A little more smoke!" and "Women, raise your mirrors!" she instructed the performers gathered recently in a black-box theater on the Lower East Side. Geri Allen, the jazz pianist and composer, sat nearby, scribbling notes.

Ms. Weems, known for photography and film projects that plumb issues of race and gender, was filming the *Persuasions*, four men tricked out in purple suits, in a flirtatious encounter with three female singers in regal black turbans.

"Trust me, love me, feel me," the men crooned.

"Can I trust you?" the women cooed back.

"What happened to 'No, no, no'?" Ms. Weems asked.

"It sounds great," Ms. Allen shouted from the sidelines. "Just do more!"

Ms. Allen and Ms. Weems were creating images for a multimedia show called “Slow Fade to Black,” set to have its premiere on Friday at [Celebrate Brooklyn!](#), the Prospect Park summer festival of performing arts and film. Marrying Ms. Weems’s images (on three giant screens) to original music by Ms. Allen, the show is among the festival’s 32 mostly free events, which began last week with the reggae star Jimmy Cliff and will end in August with the country singer Lyle Lovett.

“Slow Fade” is an unusual first-time festival collaboration for two African-American artists who tend to inhabit separate citadels of culture: museums and galleries for Ms. Weems, and concert halls and clubs for Ms. Allen. For this project the two will be joined by the Grammy-winning members of Ms. Allen’s trio, [Esperanza Spalding](#), a bassist and singer, and the drummer Terri Lyne Carrington.

Also part of the show are, among others, the tap dancer Maurice Chestnut; the singers Lizz Wright and Patrice Rushen; and Afro Blue, Howard University’s vocal jazz ensemble.

If the title “Slow Fade to Black” sounds familiar, it’s because it is the culmination of a project that began in 2010 and continued in 2011: a series of blurred, soft-focus photographs of famous black female performers like Eartha Kitt, Nina Simone and Marian Anderson. The title works in two ways, Ms. Weems said. The blurry photographs are a comment on the women’s receding from cultural prominence and the idea of a fade “to black” suggests a new generation of emerging black female artists. Many of the “Slow Fade” photographs will be projected while Ms. Wright sings on Friday. Ms. Allen composed a song to accompany the images.

“I first and foremost view this as an evening of music, centered on this idea of a woman’s journey, the span of a life,” Ms. Weems said recently as she and Ms. Allen dined in an Italian restaurant in the West Village.

“The journey is from your first feeling of emotion and love, the birth of your children, growing old,” she said. She and Ms. Allen are both in their 50s. They have known each other more than a decade and have worked together before.

Ms. Weems, tall and ebullient with a dash of curly hair, is perhaps best known for her 1990 project “Kitchen Table Series.” It deployed text and images to show a woman (Ms. Weems herself) sitting at the same kitchen table at various points in her emotional life.

More recently, her 2009 video project “Afro-chic” explored 1960s pop culture, concentrating on younger women. Ms. Weems’s 1995-96 project “From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried,” part of the permanent collection at the Museum of Modern Art, is a layered work consisting of about 30 representations of African-Americans in the history of American photography. They are accompanied by text that explores the history from Ms. Weems’s perspective, creating a counternarrative to the way the images were often intended.

In the Celebrate Brooklyn! project, “the images will inform the performance,” said Ms. Allen, a soulful, post-bop pianist whom [Ben Ratliff](#) of The New York Times recently called “one of the more important jazz

musicians of the last 25 years” and whose album “Flying Toward the Sound” made several “best of” lists for 2010. She is shorter and quieter than Ms. Weems, her face framed by locks.

While the overall structure of the show has been mostly sketched out, there will be plenty of improvisation as things get cooking, the women said. Sometimes the three screens will form a triptych or linger on Ms. Allen’s hands on the keyboard. Look for Ms. Allen and Ms. Rushen to perform a version of “Que Sera Sera” and for Ms. Allen’s contemporary arrangement of the spiritual “Oh, Freedom,” to be sung by Afro Blue. Images on the three screens will shift between video projections and the live action onstage.

The staged images of men and women that Ms. Weems created at the Lower East Side theater will be there too. They are intended as explorations of the nature of love, desire and female identity, examining women’s relationships to men, children and, most important, to themselves, she said. For example, the images show women looking at themselves and one another in mirrors or approaching a man who looks away.

“Will everyone in the audience pick up every nuance of the music or the images?” Ms. Weems asked. “Maybe not, but enough will, and we are excited about presenting this to an audience in Prospect Park.

“Geri is more introspective; I’m more visual and animated,” she continued. “I think those qualities are what we bring to the evening — the deep introspection on one hand, and this level of visual noise and visual sensuousness on the other.”

Ms. Weems, who is married and has an adult daughter, lives in Syracuse and Brooklyn. A single mother, Ms. Allen lives in New Jersey, with a hectic schedule that includes touring, caring for two teenagers (a third child is grown) and teaching music at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. The women mostly worked apart after an initial residency at Mass MoCA last year to jump-start the project.

It helped that the two had collaborated before. In 2009 Ms. Weems created an art film called “[Refractions: Flying Toward the Sound](#),” which explored Ms. Allen’s life as part of a larger look at women’s lives. The film uses Ms. Allen’s composition “Flying Toward the Sound,” a concert-length piano suite with pieces inspired by Cecil Taylor, McCoy Tyner and Herbie Hancock. Ms. Allen wrote the piece while on a Guggenheim fellowship. In turn, Ms. Weems’s film projections accompanied Ms. Allen’s concert performances of “Flying.”

“Slow Fade” was commissioned by Bric Arts Media Brooklyn, the festival producers, as part of a mission that includes bringing artists not usually associated with free festivals to Prospect Park, said Rachel Chanoff, the artistic director of Celebrate Brooklyn!

Ms. Allen and Ms. Weems have been established artists for years but they continue to come into their own. The first major museum [retrospective](#) of Ms. Weems’s work — some 225 photographs, videos and installations — begins on Sept. 21 at the Frist Center for the Visual Arts in Nashville. It will travel to the

Portland Art Museum in Oregon, the Cleveland Museum of Art and the Guggenheim Museum in New York.

“In Weems’s video work the scores are an integral part, and this festival is a way for the viewer to have an immediate, all-sensory experience in an unexpected way,” said Kathryn Delmez, the curator of the Frist retrospective.

Ms. Allen, known for her collaborations, has worked with a glossy roster of musicians that includes Betty Carter, Ornette Coleman, Charlie Haden and Ravi Coltrane. Her new trio with Ms. Carrington, who is in her 40s, and Ms. Spalding, who is 27, showcases her with a younger generation. Ms. Carrington’s album “Mosaic” (with various artists, including Ms. Allen) was awarded the 2011 Grammy for best jazz vocal album of the year. Mr. Chestnut can be heard on the album “Geri Allen and Timeline Live,” along with the bassist Kenny Davis and the drummer Kassa Overall, who will both perform on Friday.

Although “Slow Fade” begins through “the lenses of a black cultural experience, ultimately, it’s about the experiences of all women,” Ms. Weems said.

Mr. Chestnut, 28, speaking the other day, said, “I see it as just a celebration of this history — African-American jazz, tapping, as well as a tribute to women.”

At a recent rehearsal, at Ms. Allen’s suggestion, Ms. Weems read some Harriet Tubman quotations as part of the evening.

“I had no one to welcome me to this world of freedom,” Ms. Weems read in her husky, melodious voice.

Ms. Weems then told a story about how Tubman left her husband behind in one of her Underground Railroad excursions. Returning to find him with another woman, Ms. Weems said, Tubman simply asked the other woman to join her in escaping bondage.

Ms. Allen and Ms. Weems exchanged a knowing high five.

“Slow Fade to Black” is Friday night at 8 at the Prospect Park Bandshell, Prospect Park West and Ninth Street, Park Slope, Brooklyn; \$3 suggested donation; (718) 683-5600, bricartsmedia.org.

A version of this article appeared in print on June 15, 2012, on page C21 of the New York edition with the headline: Two Artists Salute a Legacy.

WSJ

THE WALL STREET

AMERICANS

For more than 15 years, philanthropist Jo Carole Lauder has been quietly enlisting America's most important artists to spread their work across the globe—in the name of cultural diplomacy



BY SARA RUFFIN COSTELLO PORTRAITS BY ALEX MAJOLI AND DARIA BIRANG

ABROAD



ELLSWORTH KELLY

"I wanted to give something to China as well as the U.S.," Kelly says of his installation "Beijing Panels," which hangs outside the U.S. Embassy in China. "It's good for our embassies to have great American art. We're all patriots and that's why we do this."

WITH THE NEGATIVE PRESS that the U.S. often garners abroad—whether about Wall Street corruption, intractable wars or a divisive presidential campaign—there's one category in which our standing remains untarnished: high art.

Like Jackson Pollock's drip paintings and Christo and Jeanne-Claude's wrapped buildings, contemporary American artists have a reputation for making beautiful, challenging work—and, in doing so, reflecting back who we are as a nation. Since 1986 the Foundation for Art and Preservation in Embassies (FAPE), a nonprofit now led by collector and philanthropist Jo Carole Lauder, has acted as a kind of global curator for our national psyche, placing preeminent American art in consulates and embassies around the world—and allowing luminaries like Ellsworth Kelly and Louise Bourgeois to serve as our cultural ambassadors abroad.

In the 1960s, the State Department inaugurated a program called Art in Embassies, primarily as a vehicle to provide temporary art for ambassadors' residences during their diplomatic tenure. In 1986, Leonore Annenberg, former chief of protocol for President Reagan and wife of former U.S. Ambassador to the U.K. Walter Annenberg, launched FAPE, along with other diplomats' wives. By exploiting their formidable connections to the artist and patron community, these women were able to help pay for extensive redecoration projects (including the U.S. Embassy's residence in London), fund much-needed restoration, and both purchase and solicit donations for embassies from preeminent artists to build what would become an enduring, important collection. Although the seeds of the foundation's legacy were growing, the scope was still small.

In 1996 leadership passed to Jo Carole Lauder, the wife of Ronald Lauder; she steered the foundation away from simply supplying loaner art to diplomatic residences and instead toward building a permanent collection at American embassies in more than 140 countries. Lauder quickly transformed what had been an elite, rarefied program into something more accessible and democratic. "Embassies are the visible face of our country," says Yale's fast-talking dean of art, Robert Storr, who moonlights as chairman of the organization's professional fine arts committee and guides its curatorial mission. "The art installed in and around

those government buildings allows foreigners to have a glimpse of our cultural production."

With certain site-specific installations, the art has been created with its architectural environment in mind. At the Charles Gwathmey-designed United States Mission to the U.N. in New York City (a federal building where dignitaries meet and greet), the State Department brought the foundation into the design process early, so Gwathmey could collaborate with artists as he designed the building. From the Sol LeWitt painting on the dome of the 70-foot-high rotunda to the spectacular Odili Donald Odita elevator mural, the art and architecture flow together seamlessly. Standing under the blue LeWitt dome, visitors are engaged with the art rather than just passively looking at it. "There are a lot of things in the USUN that are not standard issue," Storr explains. "The point is not to just put up feel-good art, but to pay close attention to a standard of sophistication. The one thing we don't do is just decorate."

"So many things in today's world are fleeting," adds Lauder. "Having facilitated the collaboration between our country's best architects and artists, I can see things

changing in a way that's wonderfully permanent

At the American embassy in Beijing, visitors are greeted by two 18-foot-high sculptures by Ellsworth Kelly. Three aluminum panels are mounted on the outside—on one side, two red and one yellow, on the other, red, white and blue. "I am very particular about that's why I've done this," says the 88-year-old, laughing. "And because of Jo Carole!" Kelly also considered how Chinese citizens would react emotionally as they waited in line for their visas. "When people ask me what my paintings mean," he says, "I say, 'It's a question of what it means—ask yourself, how would you feel?'"

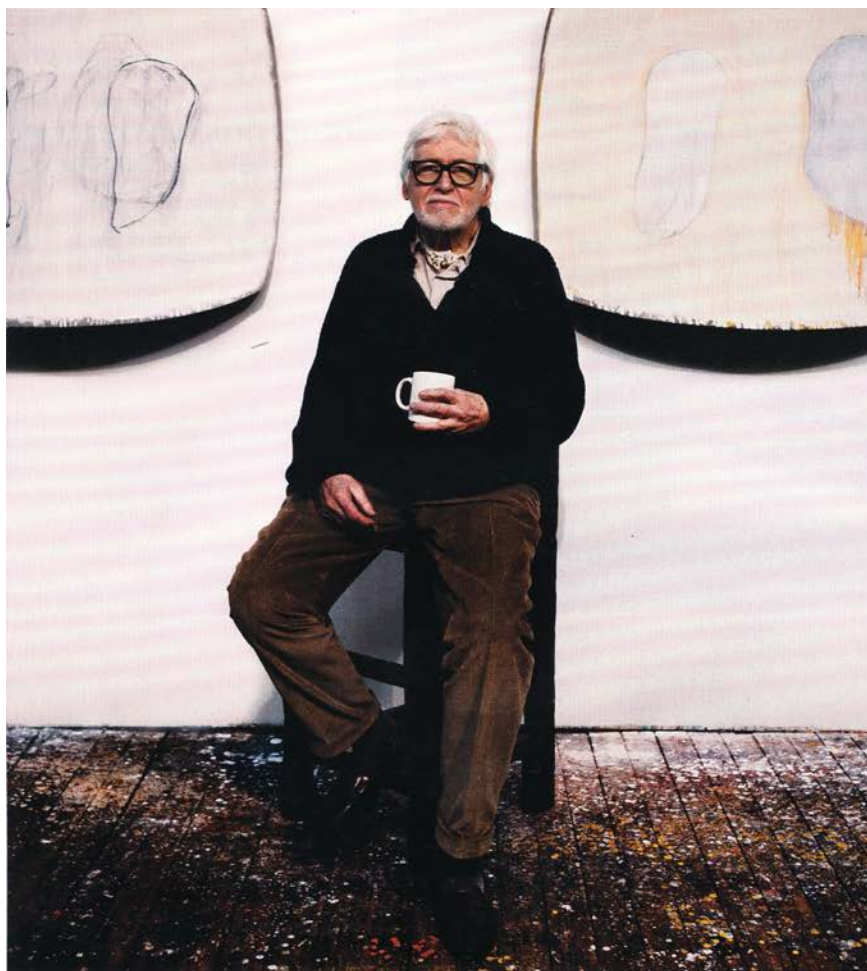
The foundation's president, Eden Rafshoon, runs the D.C. office, underscoring Kelly's point about the effects of modern art. "Whether people understand it or not, its mere presence works subliminally. If it's there, people would feel differently." In that way, in our embassies program waves a less obvious flag for America: proof that freedom of expression, opportunity, and unity through diversity are values which American artists stand. ♦

PATRON SAINT

Jo Carole Lauder, right, and Odili Donald Odita in front of "Light and Vision," the elevator mural he created for the United States Mission to the United Nations (USUN) building in New York City.



"The point is not to just put up feel-good art, but to pay attention to a standard of sophistication. The one thing we don't do is just decorate."



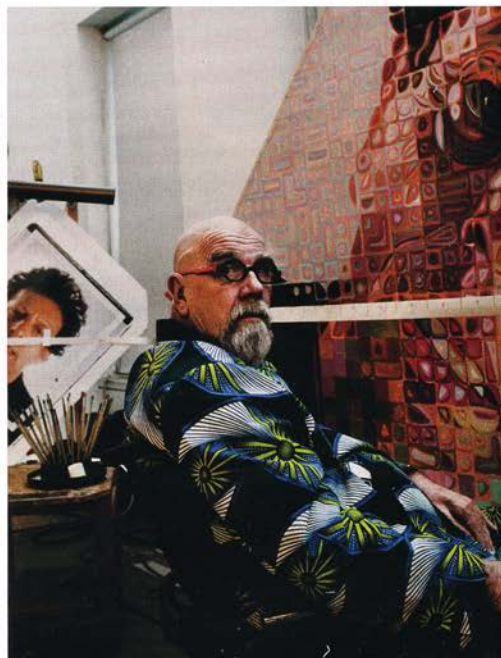
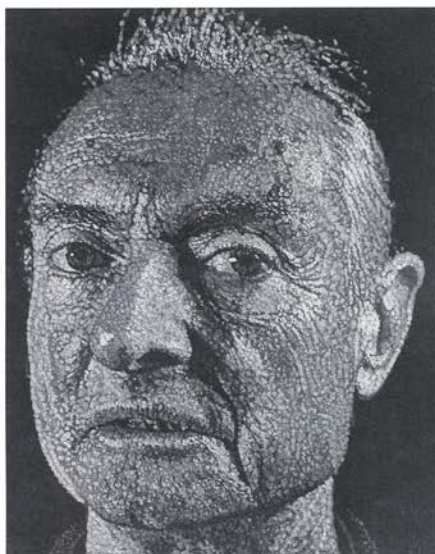
RON GORCHOV

"The only comparison would be a duet in music," Gorchov says of the juxtaposition of his "Totem," a 19-foot-tall, hand-painted sculpture in the USUN building, with Sol LeWitt's painting on the dome of the rotunda above.



CHUCK CLOSE

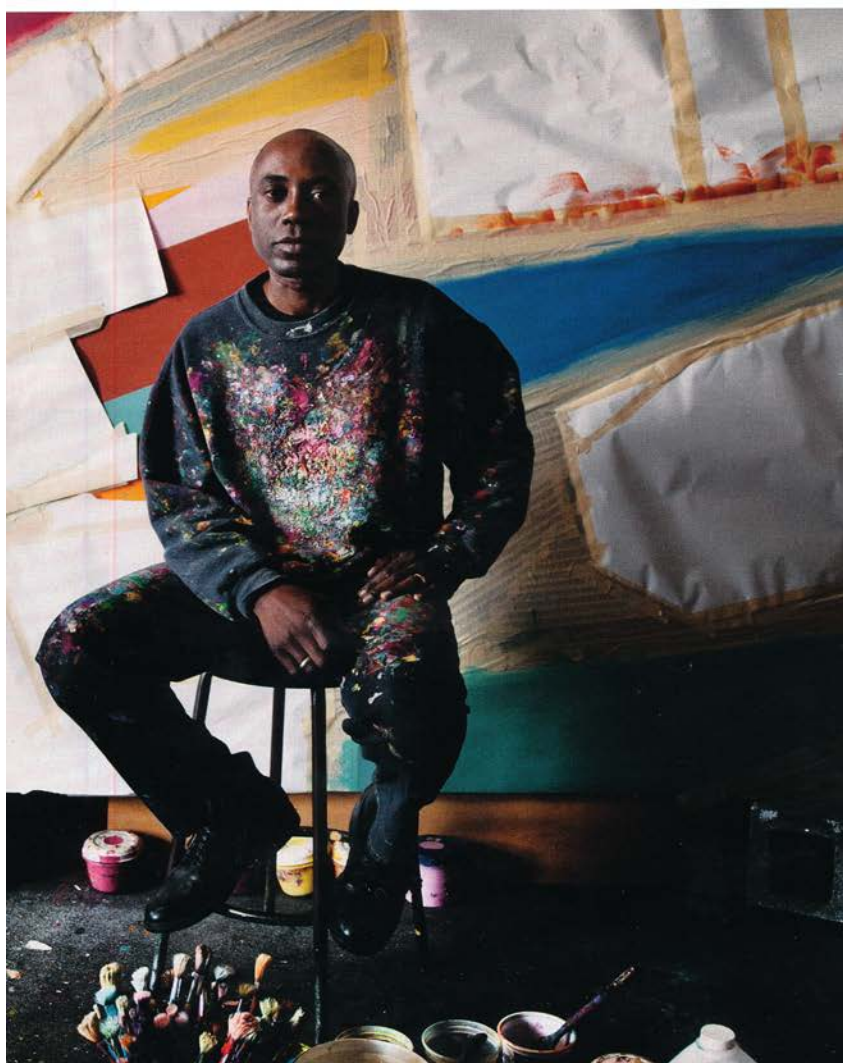
"The embassies are full of paintings of dead white men," says Close, whose portrait of the late Roy Lichtenstein was created for the foundation's print collection. "I thought at least one of them ought to be an artist."





ODILI DONALD ODITA

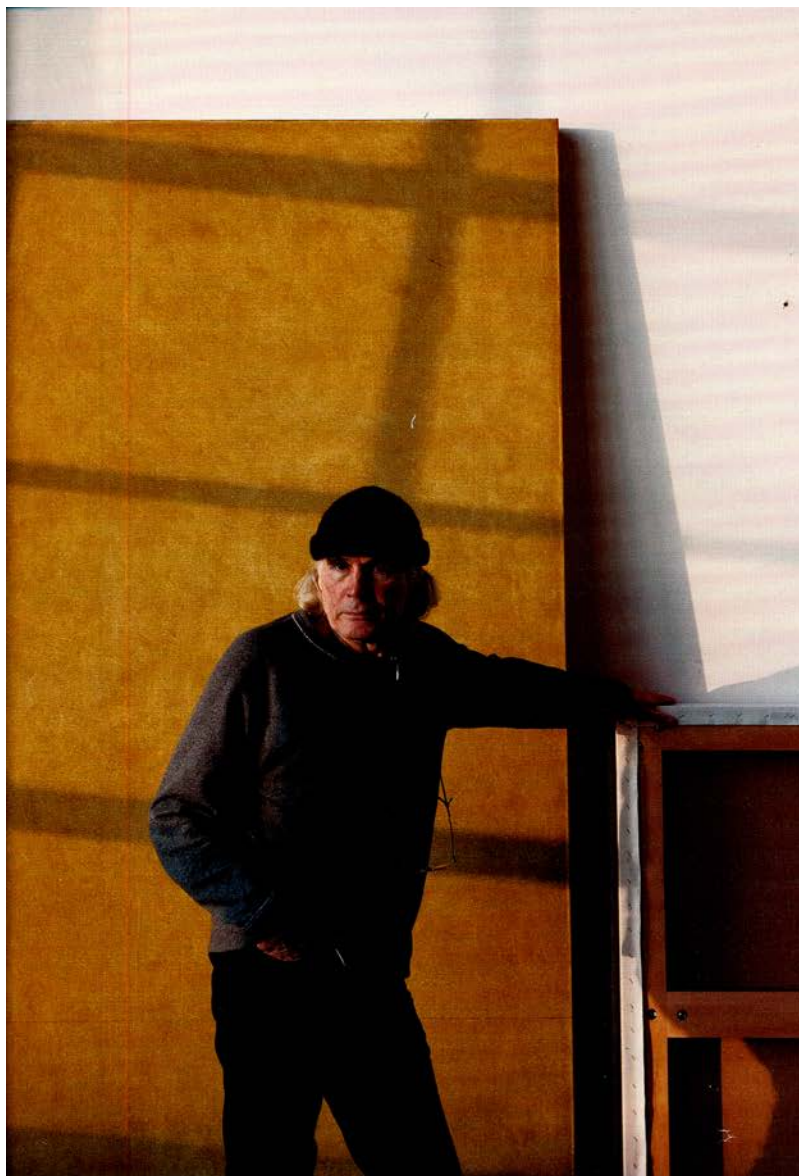
"Growing up as a Nigerian in America, I have a sense of what it means to come to this country and make dreams come true," says Odita, whose mural surrounds the USUN-building elevators.





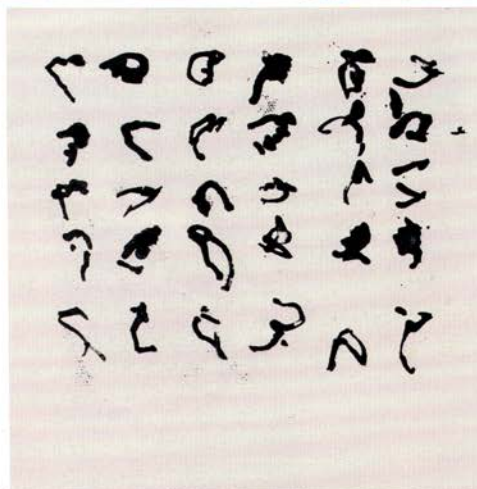
CARRIE MAE WEEMS

"They're like my little morsels, like little Lifesavers. I always want to consume them!" says Weems of her 42-panel work in the USUN lobby. "It delights me to look at that piece. I'm so honored that it's there."



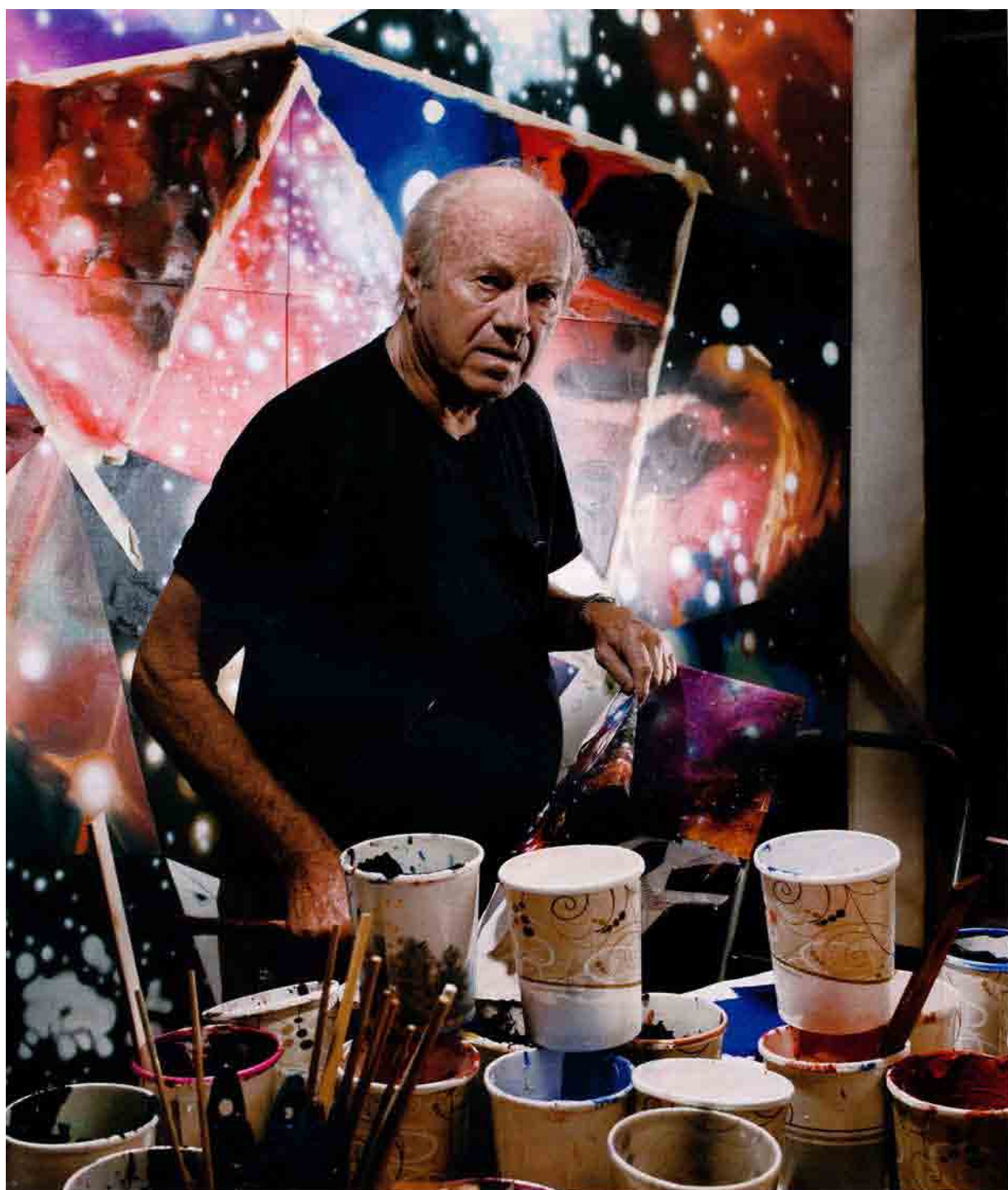
BRICE MARDEN

"I tend not to think that the government is a very good client, so I tend to avoid it—but it's an important client," says Marden, whose "First Etched Letter" was made in a limited edition of 50 prints. "It's a chance to place some of your work where people are going to see it. You make the work hoping that it can have an effect."



Whether people understand it or not, the art's mere presence works subliminally. In that way, the program waves a less obvious cultural flag for America.





JAMES ROSENQUIST

"Lauder and others are putting artwork in embassies so people can see what we're up to," says Rosenquist, who painted "The Stars and Stripes at the Speed of Light" for the foundation's print collection. "There's a history of America wanting to show the world that it's intelligent and has some feeling about art."

THE NEW YORK TIMES, FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 29, 2008

Art in Review

Carrie Mae Weems

A Survey

*Jack Shainman Gallery
513 West 20th Street, Chelsea
Through March 8*

I don't know why Carrie Mae Weems hasn't had a midcareer museum retrospective. No American photographer of the last quarter-century — her first solo show was in 1984 — has turned out a more probing, varied and moving body of work. None has made more adventurous use of the photographic medium, adding performance, film and installation to the serial print format. Ms. Weems has not wanted for institutional attention; but the topographical view that a retrospective offers is missing.

So "A Survey," her debut at Shainman, will have to do for now. The show takes Ms. Weems's work back to the early 1990s, with the haunting "Sea Islands Series" of photo-and-text pieces that evoke African-American lives off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia. It continues with bits from several

mid-1990s projects, among them the extraordinary meditations on the anthropology of race called "From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried" (1995). It comes up to date with photographs and videos from 2005-6, made when she was a fellow at the American Academy in Rome.

All together it's a lot, too much really for one gallery to comfortably handle, even with a crunched chronological span. The great early "Family Pictures and Stories" is missing and some large series are edited down to an image or two.

Drastic editing is a problem with art as ambitious as Ms. Weems's, for as often as not its full effect comes from a kind of cinematic accumulation and the variation of images and ideas. The resources of a museum would effortlessly finesse the problem, and transform a tight sampler survey into the expansive and immersive experience it deserves to be.

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