

GLADSTONE GALLERY

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CARRIE MAE WEEMS

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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.