

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Ellen Gamerman, "A Star Three Decades in the Making,"
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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 Lefkofsky/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.