

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Andrea K. Scott, "A Place at the Table: Carrie Mae Weems's cultural diplomacy at the Guggenheim," *The New Yorker*, January 27, 2014



A PLACE AT THE TABLE

Carrie Mae Weems's cultural diplomacy at the Guggenheim

BY ANDREA K. SCOTT

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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.” ♦

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