GLADSTONE GALLERY

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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