

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Jacqui Paulmbo, "Revisiting Carrie Mae Weems's Landmark
'Kitchen Table Series,'" *Artsy*, August 19, 2020



Revisiting Carrie Mae Weems's Landmark "Kitchen Table Series"

Jacqui Palumbo Aug 19, 2020



Carrie Mae Weems *Untitled (man smoking)* from *Kitchen Table Series*, 1990
Phillips

In 1989, Carrie Mae Weems began setting up her camera every day in her kitchen, in front of a simple wooden table illuminated by a single overhead light. And from that table, a fictional life unfolds, with Weems playing the lead role.

Initially, there is the span of a romantic relationship: at first warm and intimate, then cold and wanting. Across the scenes, Weems changes roles as others join her in the room. She moves from lover to friend to mother and to herself, alone. She commands the stage—she plays a woman aware of the viewer, sometimes stealing a glance while others remain oblivious, at other times directly confronting the camera.



Carrie Mae Weems

Untitled, from The Kitchen Table Series, 1990
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA)



Carrie Mae Weems *Untitled, from the Kitchen Table Series, 1990-2010*
Light Work

The resulting body of work became “The Kitchen Table Series” (1990), both a landmark in Weems’s career and in the lives of others. “I can’t tell you how many people I’ve met in the art world—artists, curators, dealers—that point to ‘The Kitchen Table Series’ as the one piece that made them know they wanted to be...in the arts,” said Elisabeth Sann, a director at Jack Shainman Gallery, which is currently exhibiting the series in an online viewing room.

Weems’s black-and-white photographs are like mirrors, each reflecting a collective experience: how selfhood shifts through passage of time; the sudden distance between people, both passable and impassable; the roles that women accumulate and oscillate between; how life emanates from the small space we occupy in the world.



Carrie Mae Weems *Untitled*, 1994
ClampArt

But it was also a seminal moment for Black representation in art, influencing an entire generation of artists who rarely saw their own selves reflected back on museum walls. Still, the series is not limited to a particular perspective. “I think [the series is] important in relationship to Black experience, but it’s not about race,” Weems told *W* magazine in 2016. “I think that most work that’s made by Black artists is considered to be about Blackness. Unlike work that’s made by white artists, which is assumed to be universal at its core.”

“Everyone can relate to this work,” Sann said. “It’s not just Black women; it’s white women, Asian women. Men can see the women in their lives—memories from their childhood or scenes from their marriage or their family life. It’s so universal and yet representation like this is so rare.”



Carrie Mae Weems

Untitled (mother and daughter), 1990

Phillips



Carrie Mae Weems *Untitled (Woman and daughter with makeup)...*
Phillips

Since photographing “The Kitchen Table Series” (Weems’s breakthrough project, though not her earliest), the Syracuse, New York–based artist has produced prolific bodies of photography and video work, earned a MacArthur “Genius Grant” in 2013, and became the first Black woman to receive a retrospective at the Guggenheim the following year. Though her output is multifaceted, Weems has continued to return to the “muse” figure first introduced in the intimacy of the kitchen—a woman who stands in for all women, guiding viewers through antebellum Louisiana or the vast exteriors of famous museums.

“This woman can stand in for me and for you; she can stand in for the audience, she leads you into history. She’s a witness and a guide,”

Weems told fellow photographer Dawoud Bey in a discussion for *Bomb* magazine in 2009. “Carrying a tremendous burden, she is a Black woman leading me through the trauma of history. I think it’s very important that as a Black woman she’s engaged with the world around her; she’s engaged with history, she’s engaged with looking, with *being*. She’s a guide into circumstances seldom seen.”



Carrie Mae Weems

Echoes For Marian, 2014

Guild Hall



Carrie Mae Weems *The Louisiana Project: Sorrow's Bed*, 2003
Pippy Houldsworth Gallery

Though the entirety of “The Kitchen Table Series” is in the permanent collections of the Cleveland Museum of Art and the Detroit Institute of Arts, it is most often seen in parts, through individual scenes and rarely with its accompanying text: a story of the lovers told in vivid vignettes, from their meeting in the “glistening, twinkling crystal light of August/September sky,” through all the tests and balancing acts and storms of their relationship, until the woman finds solace in solitude.

“I added the text just as I was wrapping up, and it was wonderful,” Weems told *W* about the series. “A man had come to visit me, and we had this wonderful talk about men and women, about our relationships, and he left and then I took a long drive. I always drive with my tape recorder, and I started reciting this text. By the time I got home, it was done, and I went upstairs to my computer and transcribed it.”



Carrie Mae Weems *Untitled (Woman and phone) from the series The ...*
Phillips

In the beginning of the text are her lover's first words to her: "So tell me baby, what do you know about this great big world of ours?" "Not a damn thing sugar," she replies. Viewers may not be able to see the world outside of the kitchen's walls, but her characters are trying to navigate it all the same. Weems, playing the muse, embraces her partner, their arms forming a single spiral. She's alone, folding into herself, a half-empty bottle of wine in front of her. She laughs with her friends, their



Carrie Mae Weems *Untitled, from The Kitchen Table Series, 1990*
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA)

movement leaving spectral trails across the frame. She sits with her young daughter, both hunched over their writing, resting a weary head in her hand. In the final scenes, alone, she locks eyes with the camera. She finds pleasure, and comfort, with herself.

As she fired her camera shutter in her kitchen, Weems knew she was achieving something new in her work with “The Kitchen Table Series,” but she couldn’t have anticipated the power her daily performance would have three decades on: a series so universal and timeless, yet crucial in amplifying Black perspectives in art. “I knew that I was making images unlike anything I had seen before, but I didn’t know what that would mean,” she told *W*. “I knew what it meant for *me*, but I didn’t know what it would mean historically.”