

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Louisa Buck, "Carrie Mae Weems: the photographer recreating and reframing famous historical moments," *The Art Newspaper*, June 1, 2023



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Carrie Mae Weems: the photographer recreating and reframing famous historical moments

Ahead of her largest European show to date, the artist tells us why her early work focused on her family and how she grew to embrace large-scale installation



Carrie Mae Weems
Photo: Jerry Klineberg, the artist

Carrie Mae Weems is widely acknowledged as one of the most influential American artists working today. She is most celebrated as a photographer, but her complex body of work encompasses video, text, installation, sound and digital images and has been challenging representations of race, gender and class for more than four decades. Laurie Simmons, Mickalene Thomas, Shirin Neshat, Catherine Opie and Hank Willis Thomas are among the vast community of artists who acknowledge the impact of this senior figure on their work. In 2014 Weems was the first African American woman to be given a solo exhibition at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York and in 2021 she took over the Park Avenue Armory with a giant film installation and performance-based show focusing on the history of violence in the US. This epic work has been reconfigured into a seven-chapter panoramic film that forms the culmination of Carrie Mae Weems's new survey at the Barbican in London, her first solo show in a UK institution and the largest presentation of her work in Europe.

The Art Newspaper: You initially trained in dance, but it was when you were given a camera for your 20th birthday that you decided to take up photography in earnest. What was it about photography that appealed to you?

Carrie Mae Weems: I didn't really know that I wanted to be a photographer until my boyfriend gave me the camera. And almost immediately it literally all just clicked into place. I never thought about taking photographs before but from the first photograph I took, I knew that this would become my tool and my path and that I was going to follow this through.

In both your 1981-82 *Family Pictures and Stories* and your breakthrough 1990 *Kitchen Table* series you used a documentary style to depict your family and those close to you—as well as yourself—but the aim was emphatically not to document. Why did you adopt this approach?

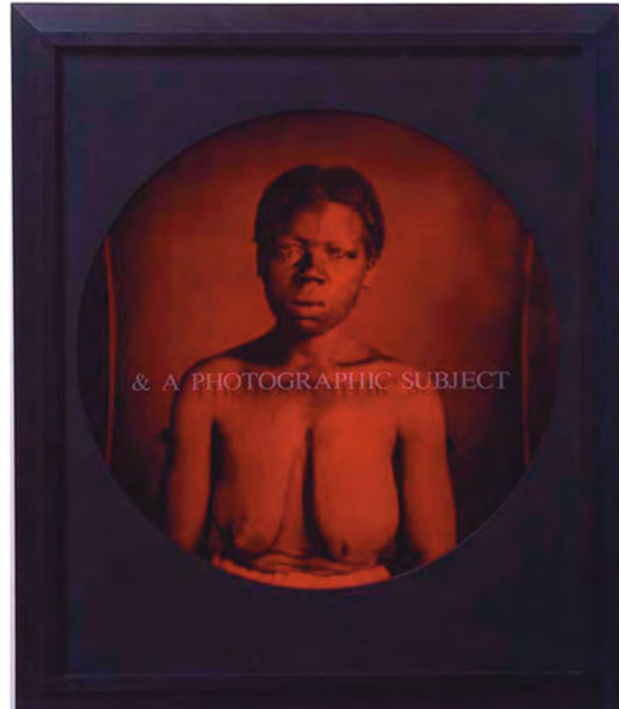
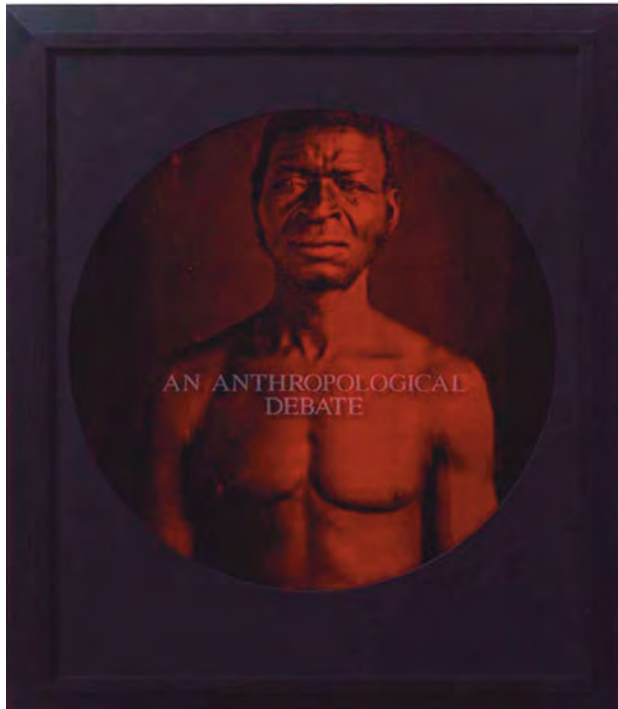
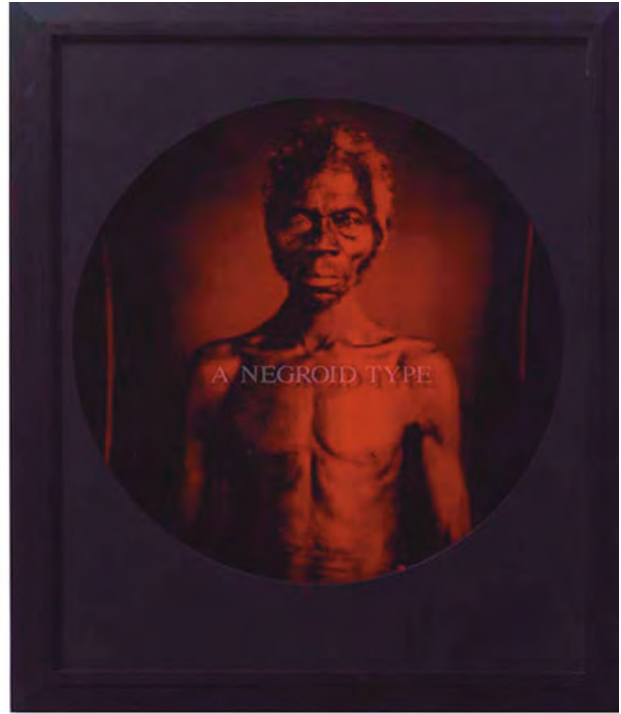
While I was very interested in the documentary format, I had ethical concerns about taking photographs of people without their knowledge and/or their consent. So it was out of my overarching concern and discomfort with the documentary format that I began photographing myself and using my own body and my own family as a conceptual frame for dealing with larger ideas, but doing so in ways that I actually had control over. Myself and my family were available material for the exploration of ideas, concerns and assumptions about the body, about politics and about family—and in this case about the Black family. At the time I wasn't so much focused on the notion of performance. The idea of acting in a certain way in the presence of the camera didn't come to me until much later, when I was looking at my photographs and understanding more what I was actually up to.

But for a long time viewers still persisted in reading these works solely as autobiographical.



Carrie Mae Weems's *Untitled (Woman and Daughter with Make Up)* from the *Kitchen Table Series* (1990) © Carrie Mae Weems; Courtesy of the artist; Jack Shainman Gallery; New York / Galerie Barbara Thumm; Berlin

This inability to understand the work and refusal to consider the work beyond what seemed to be “immediately present” had a lot to do with the times. For as much as the work was in some ways embraced, it’s also been dismissed. It was not thought of as conceptual art. It was easier to talk simply about race than it was to talk about the more complex issues that were really explored through the work itself. There had never been anything really quite like it and viewers and writers didn’t have a frame of reference for unpacking a Black body beyond itself. The only thing that was even remotely similar was Cindy Sherman’s *[Untitled] Film Stills*, but for many years no one wrote about us in the same breath. Until very recently there has been a refusal to engage with the work more deeply, more intellectually, more compassionately, and to position it within the frame of Post-modernism, which is exactly where it was positioned.



Four works from Weems's *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* (1995-96) series © Carrie Mae Weems; Courtesy of the artist; Jack Shainman Gallery; New York / Galerie Barbara Thumm; Berlin

Another series which was also denied a nuanced reading is *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* (1995-96) in which you rephotographed 33 often harrowing 19th- and 20th-century photographs of Africans and enslaved African Americans and presented them in a circular lens-like format beneath glass sandblasted with texts you had written.

I am not a historian but I am deeply interested in the history of how images are made, presented and constructed, and trying to get to their deeper meaning. So this work can be looked at in terms of American photography, in terms of African American representation and also in terms of contemporary American photography and white photographers and their assumptions around Blackness [...] There are just so many ways to unpack it. But for a long time the levels of the work, its structure and its complicatedness were simply not regarded—it was not thought of in the fullest possible way. Reviewers again turned back to race as a quick and easy way to discuss the work without really examining it much further. Now people are just starting to catch up to the way in which the work has functioned, which is lovely to see after all these years.

As well as using documentary footage in your films you have also made your own versions of historical moments in the American civil rights movement and in history in general, from the assassinations of Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X to the dropping of the Hiroshima atom bomb. Why did you choose to make these reconstructions?

The decision to construct certain things goes back to my ethical concern about what right do I have to appropriate the work of others? So I thought how wonderful it would be to use a group of people along with myself to restage those moments and to tease them out in a very different way by presenting them as a performance where all of the construction of the image—the track, the lights, the camera—is made clear also to the viewer. Via this understanding that all photographs are constructed, you are invited into a certain kind of history and a certain kind of complicatedness that you wouldn't ordinarily get if I simply appropriated existing images. I was challenging myself to go beyond appropriation to build my own constructed memory and to ask my students, my colleagues and friends, to participate along with me in the construction of things that have been historically important to us and that essentially made us who we are.



Weems's *The Assassination of Medgar, Malcolm and Martin from Constructing History* (2008) © Carrie Mae Weems
Courtesy of the artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York / Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin

Your images are also meticulously composed and can be gorgeously seductive. What's the role of beauty in your work?

I think it's partly a way of bringing the audience to complicated subjects. It's disarming. It allows you to get closer to memories, to ideas that, more often than not, we would turn away from except that the image is compelling in and of itself. Also I'm an image maker, I love beautiful things!

You have also often taken your art out into the world to confront injustices, most recently with the public health campaign Resist Covid/Take 6!, designed to bring attention to the impact of Covid-19 on Black, Latino and Native American populations. Do you see yourself as an activist as well as an artist?

I'm a politically-minded person and I think to be able to step outside of the museum and the gallery to bring important ideas and visual material directly into various communities is important. I'm not sure if I'm an activist, I think that I'm a deeply concerned artist who is certainly deeply engaged in the historical moment in which I live. I'm impacted, I'm troubled, I'm disturbed, I'm angry. And yet anger has to be controlled: rageful art normally doesn't get me where I need to go. Provocation and inquiry are closer to home.



Carrie Mae Weems's vast multi-disciplinary installation and performance work *The Shape of Things* was staged at the Park Avenue Armory in 2021. Photo: Stephanie Berger; © the artist