

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Caroline Roux, "Artist Carrie Mae Weems: 'I want to invite you in,'" *Financial Times*, June 15, 2023

FINANCIAL TIMES

Visual Arts [+ Add to myFT](#)

Artist Carrie Mae Weems: 'I want to invite you in'

Her photography has made profound statements about family, race and life in the US over the past 40 years



Caroline Roux

"When I walk into a room now in the US, people stand up and applaud," says Carrie Mae Weems, in the rich warm voice that often provides a soundtrack to her work. "It seems like some critical generation has just emerged on the other side of the pandemic and Black Lives Matter, and I am exalted in some way that is beyond me."

The American artist's comments have more to do with forbearance than arrogance. Hers is a 40-year career, in which she has delivered exquisite bodies of work on charged subjects. Using photography, performance, film and sculpture, she has dug deep into the disparities of power, inequalities of gender and race and erosions of democracy in the US. Sometimes playing with found images, sometimes with herself as protagonist, the imagery she creates has inspired swaths of emerging practitioners, especially black artists.

"It seems I've grown in stature, although my work has been historically undervalued by the market and the institutions," she says with some resignation, though the latter are playing hasty catch-up. "I wasn't in collections for a long time, like 35 years, then somebody said . . . Oh!"

This summer, Weems has major exhibitions in both France and the UK. *The Shape of Things* has already opened at Luma, the lavish cultural centre established by philanthropist Maja Hoffmann in Arles. *Reflections for Now* comes to the Barbican Art Gallery in London on June 22. Perhaps we'll finally get the message on this side of the pond, too: that Carrie Mae Weems deserves our fullest attention.



Untitled (Woman and Daughter with Make Up) from the 'Kitchen Table Series' (1990) Untitled (Woman Standing Alone) from the 'Kitchen Table Series' (1990) © Carrie Mae Weems/Jack Shainman Gallery/Galerie Barbara Thumm

Weems sees herself as both an activist and an artist. Born in Portland in 1953, and growing up in one of the city's few black families, by her teens the Civil Rights movement was in full force and the Black Panthers were active in black communities across the US. "I had boyfriends in the Panther party," she says. "They were young men trying to work out how to protect their community against police violence. In a profound way my life is involved in these two movements."

Weems picked up a camera aged 20 and, after various artistic studies including fine art and dance, had finally found her medium. “I knew it was going to take me to the world in a unique way,” she says. Though inspired by the great documentarians then holding sway — Robert Frank, Henri Cartier-Bresson — Weems decided that documentary itself was not her form. “I was uncomfortable photographing people without their knowledge. The conceptual space turned out to be more interesting to me.”

Early on, she used her own family as subjects, making a series called *Family Pictures and Stories* in the late 1970s and early 1980s as a rebuttal to a 1965 report which attributed black poverty to weak family ties. “We were a strong resilient cohesive family,” says Weems of the fashionable, forceful individuals who people these pictures. “We had endured considerable pressures, but we had deep roots. And good lives.”

In 1990, living in New York, Weems made the *Kitchen Table Series*. In its 20 images, printed in lush black and white, the artist herself appears in the multiple roles that women play — mother, lover, wife, worker, friend — always in the same domestic setting. “I was concerned about the lack of representation of African-American women generally,” she says of its genesis, though ultimately Weems invests this woman with an agency, complexity and universality that transcends race.



‘Painting the Town #3’ (2021) © Carrie Mae Weems/Jack Shainman Gallery/Galerie Barbara Thumm

Along the way, Weems has concerned herself with rather more than her own career. “I have this capacity for organising,” she says, and laughs at her own desire to be in charge. (She describes

her studio MO as “micromanagement”).) At the Guggenheim in 2014, where she was the first black artist to be given a solo exhibition, she staged an exhausting four-day assembly of 150 black artists, poets, thinkers, writers, musicians and more. “Often when I go to a university, there are no black students, no brown people,” she says. “Very few non-white professors. When I ask why, I’m told that ‘we don’t know who they are.’ So I show you.” There have been a number of convenings since.

At the Barbican, visitors can expect a retrospective across four decades. It will include Weems’s *The Kitchen Table*, which is far and away her best-known work. The exhibition in Arles, however, is an act of Weems’s own curation (alongside curator Tom Eccles) and reverberates with her very being. There is a recreation of her study from her house in Syracuse, New York — a self-portrait in furniture and photographs. There is part of *Family Pictures and Stories* and a new series called *Painting The Town*, made in the aftermath of George Floyd’s death. “My mother told me how the whole of central Portland had been boarded up against protesters,” says Weems. On a subsequent visit she discovered shuttered stores whose chipboard panelling had been painted in dark coloured stripes. Weems’s flat photographs look like Abstract Expressionist paintings.



The installation ‘Cyclorama: The Shape of Things, A Video in 7 Parts’ (2021), which is showing at the Arles exhibition
© Carrie Mae Weems/Luma Foundation

The exhibition unfurls as a carefully calibrated landscape inside its vast post-industrial shed, with Weems's masterwork from 2021 at its heart. A huge drum contains "Cyclorama: The Shape of Things", where seven video screens in the round show a sequence of moving imagery over 40 minutes. "I'd been interested in the idea of the circus for a while," she says. "Here it's become more than a metaphor. You vote for a clown . . ." Documentary footage of both anti-racist and white supremacist marches tumbles together; a shadow-play of slave-owner ladies taking tea has a soundtrack of the woman in Central Park who called the police on a black man birdwatching; a kid in a hoodie walks tirelessly around the interior, passing from screen to screen, to a spoken soundtrack: "Imagine the nervous officer thinks you are reaching for a gun, not your ID. Imagine you are out for a stroll and a vigilante stops you for no reason."

Weems's vowels — beautiful and long — draw you so gently into this chilling work. "It's not about pointing fingers. I never like being clobbered over the head with anything," says Weems. "I want to invite you in, and then for you to ask yourself what your response is to the world. What are you afraid of? What are your hopes? What are your dreams? Where is your humanity?"