

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Adrian Searle, "Carrie Mae Weems review - evil clowns, race riots and tense kitchen table drama," *The Guardian*, June 21, 2023

The Guardian

Art
Review

Carrie Mae Weems review evil clowns, race riots and tense kitchen table dramas

Barbican, London

In this intriguing show, the photographer, film maker and dancer explores the Black American experience from a wide range of angles



📷 Hard to pin down ... detail from *The Shape of Things* by Carrie Mae Weems, showing at *Reflections for Now*. Photograph: © Carrie Mae Weems/Jack Shainman Gallery, New York/Barbara Thumm, Berlin

Adrian Searle

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Carrie Mae Weems appears and disappears among the endless rows of concrete slabs that make up Berlin's Holocaust Memorial. She's there and then she isn't in this short film, traversing past and present in the late winter sunshine, wringing her hands, catching her breath. As she moves out of sight, distant traffic glints brightly at the far

end of the row. Later, in two series of photographs, we see her - always from behind in the same long black gown - in the ruins of ancient Rome and also among Mussolini's fascist architecture. And here she is again, outside the Louvre in Paris and Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Bilbao, then in Philadelphia, Dresden and Boston. The figure in the long black gown is Weems playing the role of her own alter ego, her personal muse. She's an African American witness at large in the world. For all that, Weems is hard to pin down - and the Barbican's Reflections for Now show traces the complexities of her development.

Weems, who trained as a dancer before embarking on photography and art, often appears as a protagonist in her work. Now 70, she takes photographs, constructs installations and makes films. She also writes - and her words are a constant presence in this, the largest UK show of her work since the 1980s. Her art is rich and full of variety, without wavering from her focus on the Black American experience.



📷 Togetherness and separation ... Untitled (Woman and Daughter with Make Up) from the Kitchen Table Series by Carrie Mae Weems, 1990. Photograph: © Carrie Mae Weems/Jack Shainman Gallery/New York/ Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin

In her best-known series of staged photographs, all set at a small table in a kitchen, people congregate under a cone of light, and we're positioned at the far end of the table. At the other end, a man reads the paper, while Weems sits and smokes to one side, or hovers in the shadows by the wall, and in another shot leans over him, fussing for his attention. There they are again, him sucking on lobster shell, her sitting over her own unpicked dinner. The claws on her plate still wear their rubber bands; in one hand she holds a

cigarette, the other strokes his head. She's not getting his attention. Now she's with girlfriends, or doing homework with a daughter, or sitting pensively, alone with a bottle of wine. There are scenes of tenderness and complicity here, of raucousness and a palpable loneliness.

The staged black and white images in Kitchen Table series 1990, with their calibrated ordinariness and attention to small details, are filled with understated tension and drama, playing out the dynamics of domestic life. The images examine gender and generational divides, intimacy and individuality, togetherness and separation. They are also annotated by lengthy captions that flesh out a woman's inner life. Although great in their own way, I'm not sure the photographs need these inner monologues beside them. Maybe in a book, the juxtaposition of words and images would work better than on the wall, where we must shuttle back and forth between image and text. Sometimes it is better when things are left to speak for themselves.



📷 Ambitious hijinks ... still from Cyclorama – The Shape of Things: A Video in 7 Parts by Carrie Mae Weems. Photograph: Stephanie Berger./© Carrie Mae Weems/Jack Shainman Gallery/New York/ Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin

There is also a lot of sound leakage between the upper and lower floors of the gallery, where two film works are shown. The noise of tap-dancing, and snatches of the recorded, hysterical voice of the white woman who called the cops from Central Park to say she was being attacked by a black man, who was in fact a birdwatcher asking her if she'd mind putting her dog on a lead, drift up from below. Later, we hear Jimmy "The Schnozzle" Durante, singing the schmaltzy 1960 showtune Make

Someone Happy. This all comes from *The Shape of Things*, a 2021 film projected on a wide, curved screen, like a 19th-century cyclorama. This ambitious work in seven parts splices old footage of circus performers and slapstick hijinks with pro-Trump rallies and the 6 January insurrectionists storming the Washington Capitol; fragments of earlier works by Weems jostle with face-masked crowds on the street during the pandemic. Black Lives Matter protesters, police violence, and lengthy choreographed sections in which not much happens jostle together in this panoramic, complicated 40-minute work.

The Shape of Things attempts to get to the heart of a country whose black and brown citizens "are always stopped, charged and convicted", and where we must "imagine the worst of the worst and that it is always happening". *The Shape of Things* is many things: angry, eloquent, sorrowful, compelling, didactic and portentous. The long, choreographed sections don't entirely work. With its stock footage, clowns, a performing elephant, spotlit people posed theatrically in indoor rain and, of course, Jimmy Durante, the tone is constantly shifting.

After the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, in 2020, Weems returned to Portland, Oregon, the town of her birth and photographed

sections of boarded-up buildings, where the layers of graffiti had been repeatedly painted over, in whatever colours were to hand, as if to muzzle the voice of the protesters. Weems' carefully cropped and lit images of these distressed planes of chipboard and ply resemble nothing so much as painted abstractions. No words remain, but they are redolent reminders of recent violence, of muted voices and censored slogans, and, surprisingly, of the works of the mostly overlooked black American painters who had been associated with the New York school and abstract expressionism during the 1950s.

Past and present collide in these large colour photographs and Weems makes us aware of the uncanny double-take. Here, for once, less is more and the rich subtexts are implicit. For all that is staged in her works, they're a great reminder of the importance of simply paying attention and noticing things.

● This article was amended on 21 June 2023. George Floyd was killed in Minneapolis, Minnesota; not Portland, Oregon as an earlier version said.

● [Carrie Mae Weems: Reflections for Now](#), Barbican, London 22 June to 3 September

Betsy Reed

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