

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Florence Hallett, "Carrie Mae Weems: Reflections for Now, Barbican, review: Shapeshifting show finds optimism in bleakness," *iNews*, June 26, 2023

i



Carrie Mae Weems: Reflections for Now, Barbican, review: Shapeshifting show finds optimism in bleakness

Weems' photography, paintings and performance pieces swirl into a profound reflections of black womanhood ★★★★★

Is Carrie Mae Weems a photographer, a performance artist, a writer? In the opening room of the first UK exhibition to be dedicated to this shape-shifting chameleon of an artist, she confounds us with another tricky identity switch: she's a painter – or so it seems.

Here, broad sweeps of paint have apparently been applied to collages of differently textured materials, to create flat, abstract fields of colour. In fact, *Painting the Town* is a series of photographs taken in Weems's hometown of Portland, Oregon, where she was born in 1953, and remained until 1970.

In the wave of public grief and outrage that followed the murder of George Floyd in 2020, central Portland was boarded up against protestors, whose graffitied slogans were repeatedly painted out, their voices silenced again and again. Weems photographed the boarded up windows, rendering them

flat so that they look like Abstract Expressionist paintings, an art movement so analogous with white male power that it is only now that female and black contributors have begun to be acknowledged.



Carrie Mae Weems: Reflections for Now Barbican Art Gallery, London, UK (Photo: Jemima Yong)

Visual trickery turns sinister in 2012's *Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me: A Story in Five Parts*, a video installation that mimics a 19th century travelling theatre, complete with a Pepper's Ghost, an optical illusion using a mirror to summon a ghostly image onstage. Lincoln, of course, is Abraham, whose 1863 Gettysburg Address is read by Weems, and artist and activist Lonnie Graham provides a commentary on the impediments to social change.

Framed by red curtains, a spectral Weems appears against a black void, first as a devilish master of ceremonies, then as a Playboy Bunny, the sounds of Urge Overkill singing Neil Diamond's "Girl, You'll Be a Woman Soon" – a song forever associated with *Pulp Fiction* – a melancholic marker of entrenched

misogyny, and the mutually reinforcing networks of power and powerlessness which ensure that history is set on an eternal loop.

For all that she takes the big moments in US history as building blocks, Weems is always focused on the lives of ordinary people, and though focused on black female experience, her explorations take her into more general territory. “My core question”, she said in a 2017 lecture, “revolves around the question of dismantling power”.

In her work the legacy of centuries of oppression is carried into the lives of individuals, whose experiences now are the direct consequence of the collective traumas of the past. As she said of Barack Obama in 2008, when she produced a series of black and white photographs to commemorate the 40 years since the 1968 assassinations of Dr Martin Luther King Jr and Robert F Kennedy, “this incredible, tumultuous, brutal history is exactly what makes his presidency possible”.



Carrie Mae Weems: *Reflections for Now* Barbican Art Gallery, London, UK (Photo: Jemima Yong)

For her 2021 installation *Land of Broken Dreams: A Case Study Room*, one of the Barbican's smaller galleries on the upper level is set up like a living room, with a table and chairs, copies of *Life Magazine*, a sideboard with a Black Panther lamp among the ornaments, and pictures on the walls.

The space is as much about public information as it is a tribute to leading figures in the 60s Black Power movements, and on a desk a folder is left open at a page detailing the history of the Black Panther Party, founded in 1966 by Huey P Newton and Bobby Seale to protest police violence committed against African Americans.

Photographs of Newton and Seale are among the black-and-white portraits of activists on the walls, while photographs of police attacking black protestors in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963, have been tinted and blurred, techniques used often by Weems to signal her own intervention in a photograph she has appropriated, and to invite viewers to look again at familiar images.

A commemorative plate dedicated "to every black man who lives to see the age of twenty-one", and a board game called Little Black Sambo stacked on the sideboard, bring racial violence and inequality forcefully into the domestic environment. The copies of *Life Magazine*, the retro View-Finders for looking at photographs, and the 60s furniture immerse us in the past, and yet these objects, and the volumes of Weems's encyclopaedia of the History of Violence charge the space with a menace that transcends time.

Words are essential to Weems's project, and inseparable from her activism, a calling that gives her a heightened sense of responsibility and purpose as an artist. Her words are written, or spoken, and in the exhibition, a film of selected highlights from lectures she has given reveals her as a mesmerisingly powerful speaker.

Song too is important. Sounds from the 2021 panoramic film installation *The Shape of Things: A Film in Seven Parts* merge with *Lincoln*, *Lonnie and Me*, and can be heard throughout the show, travelling through space and time just as it transcends divisions in the real world.

Words are written, not spoken at the end of Weems's Holocaust Memorial from 2013, a performance to camera accompanied by the music of

American composer Gregory Wanamaker. Here, Weems is not quite herself, instead adopting as she does from time to time, the role of what she calls her muse, whose role is to be our guide and proxy, a vessel in which we might transcend time, and our own bodies to explore the experiences of others.

Moving between the concrete pillars of Peter Eisenmann's *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* in Berlin, Weems's early training as a dancer is evident, the deliberate, choreographed movements a form of communion achieved through the use of the body. Weems has said: "We stand in the shoes of others and come to know first-hand what is often only imagined, lost forgotten."

This trust in the body as a place of truth is important for Weems, whose use of words to make meaning unambiguous often seems to betray her deep unease about the deceit of images, which are so often recruited as instruments of oppression.

In her 1991 series *And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People*, Weems photographs ordinary household objects against a uniform background, giving each one a title. The effect is deeply unsettling, and shows that even the most banal objects can absorb multiple meanings, the reflection on a globe labelled "A Hot Spot in a Corrupt World", a rolling pin labelled "By Any Means Necessary" suggesting the potential for resistance in everyday, ordinary lives.

"Ordinary lives" form the subject of *Kitchen Table*, a series of tableaux in which photography, performance and writing converge. Dated 1990, the series is the earliest work in this 30-year survey of her career. Weems appears in each black and white photograph, adopting the role of lover, mother, friend in micro narratives that explore the particular experiences of black women, and the ways in which different modes of oppression reinforce one another.

A couple sits at a table, embracing, reading the newspaper; friends drink and smoke; mother and child sit absorbed in their writing. In accompanying texts, these scenes are elaborated on, but also made more nuanced, the tensions in the couple's relationship made corrosive and doubly so by racist tropes piled onto misogynistic ones. The man is out of work, while the

woman has a job, “and this was truly messing with his mind. He was starting to feel like a black man wasn’t supposed to have nothing...”.

Weems’s commitment to exploring African American female experience is total, and though specific, her insights are so profound as to feel universal. The variety of her expression is endlessly interesting, and allows her to discover more and different resonances across media.

Perhaps most impressive of all is her optimism, which though sometimes buried deep under the weight of four centuries of oppression, stays alight in her art, which so fully celebrates the strength of individual action.

***Carrie Mae Weems: Reflections For Now* is at the Barbican until 3 September**