

GLADSTONE GALLERY

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Lens

PHOTOGRAPHY, VIDEO AND VISUAL JOURNALISM

The 'Genius' of Carrie Mae Weems

By JAMES ESTRIN

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"Mourning," from "Constructing History." 2008. Carrie Mae Weems, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, NY

Among the recipients of the 2013 MacArthur fellowships is Carrie Mae Weems, whose varied interests and skills encompass photography, film and activism. Though known for work that tackles questions of race and gender, she says it addresses “unrequited love” and the human condition. Her conversation with James Estrin has been edited.

Q.

Congratulations, on the MacArthur. It’s pretty wonderful.

A.

It is beyond wonderful. I feel like I am dancing in the stratosphere. I am sitting here with my tiara on and all of my fake jewels, and a bottle of Champagne that’s half empty. Or should I say half full?

Q.

This is a lovely validation of the work that you’ve been doing for so long. Do you have plans for what the money will enable you to do?

A.

Actually there’s a project I’ve been thinking about for the past year. It’s about women who are turning 60, but it’s also about those people who came of age in the 60s. I’ve spent years shooting lots of video and stills, and I want to do a feature-length film about a woman turning 60 who came of age in the 60s and use that as a metaphor to examine what it means to come of age in one of the most exciting and tumultuous periods of the 20th century.

Q.

Will that be a documentary?

A.

It’s not a documentary, it’s more of a fictional autobiography. I have a lot of footage, now I have this emotional freedom to work on it. Maybe to figure out some quiet time to really sink my teeth into this work that I have wanted to do for a long time, but now I can actually do it without having to think about paying the rent.

Q.

That’s pretty amazing.

A.

It is. It’s extraordinary. I am honored, I am floored, I am beyond gaga and I am even a little cocky and giddy.

Q.

You have this large body of work from over two decades dealing with race and gender and identity. Is that a fair way to characterize it?

A.

That's the way most people do so, I think that's fair.



From "The Kitchen Table Series." 1990. Carrie Mae Weems, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, NY

Q.

How would you characterize it?

A.

I always think about the work ultimately as dealing with questions of love and greater issues of humanity. The way it comes across is in echoes of identity and echoes of race and echoes of gender and echoes of class.

At the end of the day, it has a great deal to do with the breadth of the humanity of African-Americans who are usually stereotyped and narrowly defined and often viewed as a social problem. I'm thinking that it's not about social problems, that it's about social constructions. The work has to do with an attempt to reposition and reimagine the possibility of women and the possibility of people of color, and to that extent it has to do with what I always call unrequited love.

Q.

Which is sort of the human condition.

A.

Exactly, exactly exactly, exactly. It becomes race as a shortcut and gender as a shortcut to the larger questions of humanity on any given subject.

Q.

You started out working in modes that are often documentary but also conceptual. Your projects are very much about ideas and thoughts

A.

Yes, well I started as a documentary photographer. Then, at a certain point, I realized that that really wasn't what I wanted to do. That it wasn't quite my way of working. But referencing documentary was important. So for instance, the [kitchen table](#) — which has all the markings of documentary photography — isn't at all. It's highly constructed. So I learned fairly early on that photographs are constructed. These can be constructed, and these realities can be as poignant and meaningful as something that was "documentary in nature," so that you were able to arrive at and deal with multilevels of complexity, tiers of complexity, around the construction of photographs.

That idea really challenges me, and excites me and engages me, that it doesn't have to be the "real moment as seen spontaneously in life," but that it can be constructed in my living room, my dining room, in my kitchen, in my backyard, and it can be equally honorable, if not more so, than the actual "document" of that reality.

Q.

What are you dealing with in “The Kitchen Table Series”?

A.

The kitchen table stories is really a play around notions of family. It’s really about how one comes into their own.

What are the issues that surround monogamy and polygamy? What are the issues that surround motherhood and friendship — compassion? Those are the qualities that are dealt with, and of course it’s really a mock documentary; it’s a mock biography of one woman’s journey as she contemplates and negotiates what it means to be a contemporary woman who wants something different for herself. And it’s been very interesting, because even though it’s anchored around a black woman, my hope was always that it would be understood as a condition of women. And it exceeded my expectations, because women around the world relate to that piece, as do men. They see themselves in it.

Q.

Can you tell me about your move to film and how that happened?

A.

At a certain point, I realized that I didn’t know how to make photographs sing in a certain way, and I was becoming increasingly interested in composers and music and how one uses the voice. Film and video really allowed me to work across all of those interests in a single project. I could use voice and rhythm and work with the composers and use music to effect a certain visual image.

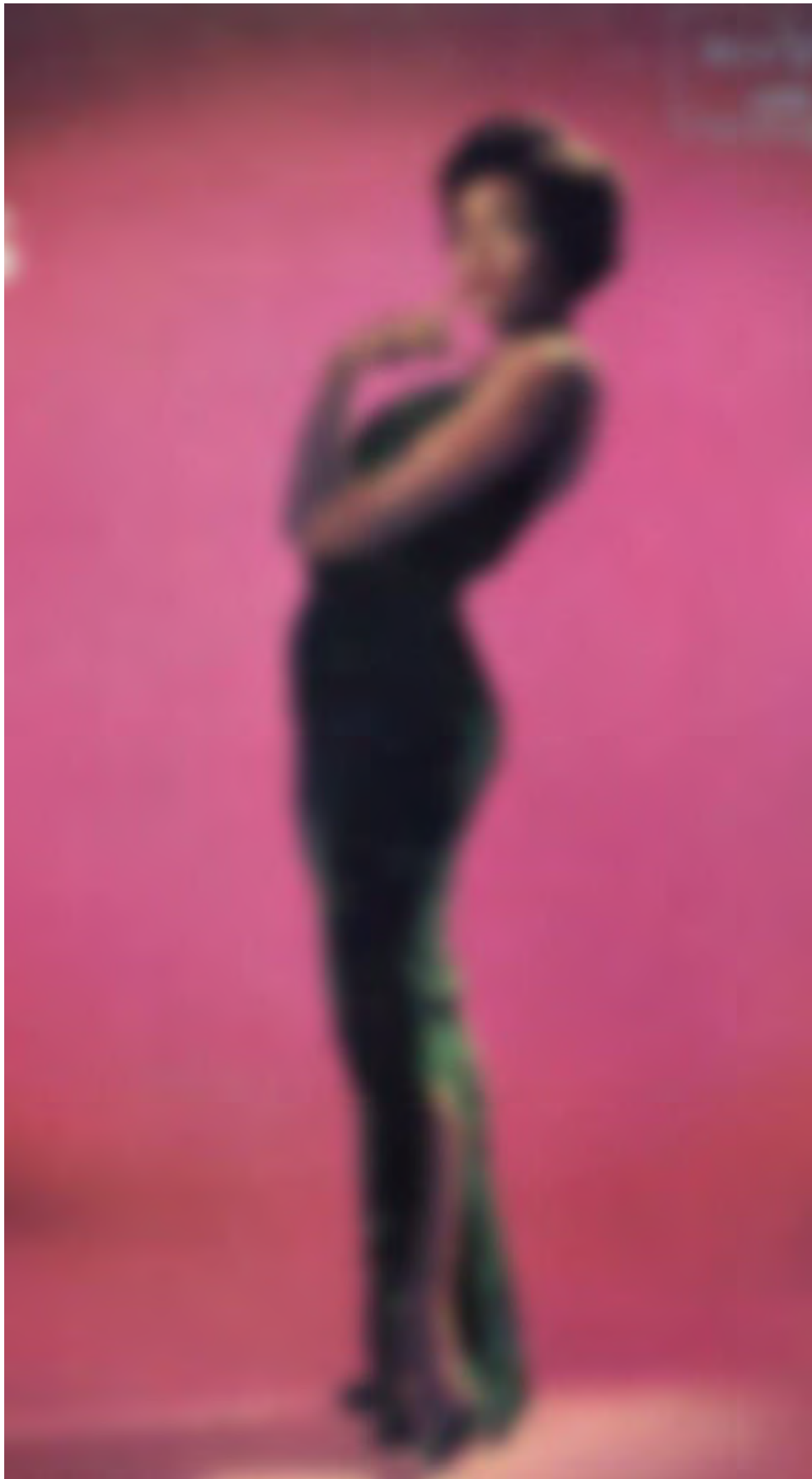
I love working with film, and even though — you know, every time I finish a project, I swear that I’m not going to make another film. It’s so difficult. There are so many aspects, so many parts and so many people that need to be involved. Invariably, as soon as I’ve finished one project, I start thinking about the next, because I love the form.

Q.

Have you given up photography?

A.

Not at all. I still make photographs all the time, and I will continue to do so.



Eartha Kitt. From the series "Slow Fade to Black." 2010. Carrie Mae Weems, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, NY

Q.

You're involved in Syracuse, in a program with young people in the community?

A.

Yes. Several years ago, there was a child killed in Syracuse — caught in the cross-fire of gangland violence. And I remember the day so clearly, because it was a snowy day in Syracuse, and I was exhausted. I thought I would just spend the morning in bed reading the newspaper and drinking coffee and looking at books and just relaxing. And I go into the kitchen, I saw this headline about this child that had been killed, and I was so upset about it that I immediately went to the studio and started working. And I started this series — a billboard project, actually, a public-art project, using billboards and broadsides and leaflets and a whole host of materials that I could use to do what I call “[activating](#)” the community around the issue of violence. And I did that for months and months and months, and it was the only thing I worked on, desperately, and getting things out there in the public.

Then I realized that I also needed to have another kind of response, and not just a response of being reactionary, or reactive, to a condition, but deciding to lead another kind of campaign.

I wanted to do a project that really focuses on young people that gets them engaged and involved in the arts. And so what do young people care about? They care about fashion. They care about music. They care about popular culture, and they care about sex. So I came up with this idea of doing an institute, the [Institute of Sound and Style](#), that introduces kids to different aspects of popular culture — as technicians, as videographers, as photographers, as recording engineers.

You don't have to be a rap singer, that you could be an engineer, that you didn't have to be in the photograph, that you could make the photograph.

It's a summer program, we run for four weeks over the course of the summer. We pay kids, because all the kids are desperately poor and need to be paid. We give them at least the minimum wage, and we train them in various aspects of the arts, giving them the skills that they need — and introducing them to the skills and ideas that they need to fashion another life for themselves. And it's truly one of the most exciting things that I'm involved in.

It's really a fabulous project, and I tell you, I get as much out of it as the kids. So that's what I'm working on, that's my heart's desire. And we take donations.



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