

GLADSTONE GALLERY

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Chatting With MacArthur Winner Carrie Mae Weems

BY **ROBIN CEMBALEST** POSTED 10/01/13

The artist, activist, and educator on winning the “genius grant,” bringing color to the Guggenheim, and changing the world one flower at a time

“**W**hat with planning for her retrospective at the Guggenheim, helping inner-city youth enter the music business, fighting gun violence in an advertising campaign, and managing to get a peony named after an African American hero, [Carrie Mae Weems](#) was pretty busy even before she got The Call last week from the [MacArthur Foundation](#). So the news that she won a “genius grant” added another whirlwind of activity on her already intimidating schedule.

“I was floored,” the artist said on the speakerphone from her car as she raced between engagements in Syracuse, New York, where she lives and teaches. “It was the most ridiculous thing I’d ever heard.”

Along with the 23 other MacArthur recipients this year, Weems will receive \$625,000 over the next five years, no strings attached.

“I’ll buy a new dress and a new pair of shoes for sure,” she says. “But everything will go back into my work because that’s what I do. It will go to the projects I care about.”

A charismatic artist, activist, and educator, Weems is best known for installations, videos, and photographs that invite the viewer to reflect on issues of race, gender, and class.



MacArthur Carrie Mae Weems

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK.



Carrie Mae Weems, *Forbidden Fruit*, from “Madingo Series,” 2009-10, oil on canvas.

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A wry wit infuses even her most uncompromising works, which comment on stereotypes, slavery, miscegenation, and the exclusion of blacks—as artists and subjects—from Western art history. Her traveling retrospective, which began at the [Frist Center](#) in Nashville last year and opens at its final stop, the [Guggenheim](#), on January 24, includes the naughty “[Ain’t Jokin’](#)” series (1987-88); “[The Kitchen Table Series](#)” (1990) photographs of domestic scenes that [inspired Mickalene Thomas to be an artist](#); and the fabulous *Afro-Chic* fashion video (2009), among some 200 objects Weems has produced over the last three decades.

She’s been talking to Guggenheim staff about ways to jumpstart a demographic shift in the museum’s typical audience.

“I want to make sure I have a dynamic presence of people of color flowing through the space,” she says. One idea she’s thinking about is a live-broadcast performative conversation, maybe something along the lines of Jon Stewart’s *Daily Show*. Maybe with a comic and a house band.

“There could be a night around art and activism, with people who are troubling the waters, as they say,” she comments. “A night called *Laughing to Keep from Crying* or, *Jewish Comedy*, *Black Comedy*, and the *Power of Resistance*.”

Weems knows that many communities are unlikely to connect with her work in an art setting, so in 2002 she founded an artists collective, *Social Studies 101*, to reach a more diverse and often more marginalized audience.

Their projects include [Operation: Activate](#), a public-art campaign in Syracuse that fights gun violence with missives everywhere from



Carrie Mae Weems, *Mirror Mirror*, from the series “*Ain’t Jokin’*,” 1987-1988, gelatin silver print.

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billboards to matchbooks to newspapers fliers and advertising circulars. “As militants you were feared,” reads one. “As thugs you are only despised!”

Another Social Studies 101 project is the [Institute of Sound + Style](#), a program introducing high school students to careers in music, fashion, and other creative fields. “It’s a space that engages them in understanding what is possible in their own lives, as workers and contributing members of society,” Weems says. “You can be more than a rapper, you can be a sound engineer. You can be a graphic designer, involved in the creation of popular culture.”

An advocate of social practice before its current status as an art-world buzzword, Weems is delighted to see more people in the art world deploy their creative energies to affect change in the real world. “It’s an interesting cultural and political moment,” she says. “It’s all shifting. People are figuring out how to deal with what’s coming down the track.” The next shift, she hopes, will be the growth of an infrastructure to help artists develop their work in this arena. “Any university worth its salt needs to start paying attention,” she says.



Carrie Mae Weems & Social Studies, Operation: Activate, 2011.

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describes as a feature-length mock autobiography using herself as the main character.

Weems has begun to make a mark in the horticultural world too. Working with landscape architect [Walter J. Hood](#), she collaborated on the concept for the Du Bois Memorial Garden, in honor of [the civil rights leader, writer, and sociologist](#) who founded the NAACP. The proposal is part

She’s also got a movie going. Weems has begun shooting footage for a project about people who grew up in the ’60s—the Baby Boomer era—who are now turning 60. “It’s this wonderful double entendre,” says the artist, who was born in Portland, Oregon, in 1953. She hopes to use part of the grant to edit footage and move forward with the film, which she



The Du Bois Peony of Hope, officially named by the American Peony Society, is part of a Du Bois Memorial Garden that Weems designed in collaboration with landscape architect Walter J. Hood.

COURTESY THE ARTIST.

of “[DuBois in Our Time](#),” an exhibition at the University Museum of Contemporary Art at the University of Massachusetts Amherst (up through December 8) that unites artists and scholars to investigate Du Bois’s legacy.

In another unexpected recent triumph, Weems happened to contact the [American Peony Society](#) when there was a naming opportunity for a flower. So now there is a William E. B. Du Bois Peony of Hope, a white blossom with a bright yellow center that will anchor the memorial garden and is also available from [Hollingsworth Peonies](#) at \$88 a root.

Meanwhile, notes Weems, as humbling and validating as the MacArthur is, it hardly means an end to her fundraising. “At the end of the day \$100,000 a year is just kind of normal,” she comments. “You still need to raise money.

“It’s important to keep people who care about social justice engaged. It’s a way to be part of the project. I support a lot of stuff because I just want to be a part of it.”