

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Charmaine Picard, "A Q&A with Carrie Mae Weems," Modern
Painters, January 2014

A Q&A
WITH **Carrie Mae
Weems**

By **Charmaine Picard**



Elegant and graced with a rich, melodic voice, Carrie Mae Weems is an imposing figure on the artistic landscape. Through documentary photographs, conceptual installations, and videos, she is known for raising difficult questions about the American experience. When the MacArthur Foundation awarded her a 2013 “genius” grant, it cited Weems for uniting “critical social insight with enduring aesthetic mastery.” The artist and activist is the subject of a major traveling career retrospective, which was at Stanford University’s Cantor Arts Center in the fall and opens January 24 at its final stop, the Guggenheim Museum in New York.

CHARMAINE PICARD: What was it like studying at the California Institute of the Arts in the late 1970s?

CARRIE MAE WEEMS: They didn’t always know what to do with this brown woman taking brown photographs. I arrived there when I was 27 years old, and I knew that I wanted to research women photographers; I knew that I wanted to learn who the black photographers were; and I knew that I wanted to build my own archive of their work. My best friend was filmmaker Catherine Jelski. The graduating class before mine was strong, with Mike Kelley, Jim Shaw, and Tony Oursler. John Divola, Jo Ann Callis, and John Baldessari were teaching there at the time. Divola apologized to me a few years ago because he thought he could have been more supportive. The field was more limited then. We knew all of the great male artists—and I don’t have a problem with them—I’m just saying, move over a bit, folks!

Your late friend Mike Kelley said of your photographs, “Her images are obviously constructed and don’t present themselves as being factual—rather, they have a mythic dimension that forces you to deal with them in a more complex way.” Because you often appear in the images, do people assume they’re autobiographical?

The only time I tried to deal in a small way with autobiography was in *Family Pictures and Stories* (1981–82), but I produced that work a long time ago, when I was a graduate student. In some ways it’s like Cindy Sherman’s use of self-portraiture—you understand it as conceptual-based work that explores issues of sexuality, self-construction, and other themes.

Both you and Kelley are receiving career retrospectives this year—his, unfortunately, is posthumous. Did you keep in touch with him?

Mike graduated a year before I did, and we hung out together in L.A. We dated for a while. He was like my boyfriend; he was my guy. We kept in touch on and off over the years. Passages in life can be pretty difficult, and I can understand why you would like to leave it behind; but if you could just hold on for one more day, sometimes it breaks. He just couldn’t hang on for one more day, and that’s unfortunate. It’s a tragedy.

You’ve long merged art and social activism. Recently, you brought attention to gun violence in Syracuse by launching a public art campaign, using signage and billboards, called Operation: Activate. And in 2012 you founded a summer program for teens called the Institute of Sound + Style, where students learn career skills. Do you consider these initiatives part of your art practice?

I’ve been interested in social engagement for a very long time, and these projects are very much a part of my art practice, allowing me to work in a more immediate way with specific issues. The work is different than what I might create for a museum exhibition or a show at the Jack Shainman Gallery, but they overlap, and I bring the same skill set and ideas to the work.

How have you funded these initiatives?

I used my own money and worked with a group of wonderful graduate students I met through a class that I taught with David

Ross at Syracuse University. I haven’t made a billboard for the past year, but I will probably make one again now that I have money from the MacArthur fellowship. I’m starting to partner with other people because they have additional resources that they can bring to the table—whether it is camera equipment, recording equipment, or musical knowledge. I think that having other people involved is really important to keep the institute alive and infuse it with fresh ideas.

To coincide with the U.S. presidential election in 2012, you produced a video on Barack Obama suggesting that he is judged by different criteria than past presidents have been. Can you speak about this work?

The first video I made about Obama was in 2008, and it looks at the tension between Obama and Hillary Clinton. The 2012 piece was an attempt to understand how difficult it’s been for him to govern because of the harsh backlash from the far right and from liberals as well. The patterns that govern racism are so entrenched that his hands are tied, and it’s so, so painful to see.



Last Song, 2012. From the series “An Essay on Equivalent, See.” Digital C-print, 33½ x 22¼ in.

OPPOSITE: Carrie Mae Weems, 2013.

Are the president and Mrs. Obama familiar with your work?

Yes, my work has been at the U.N. and in various American embassies, and it was also hanging in former U.N. ambassador Susan Rice's apartment. Michelle was very moved when she saw "From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried," 1995–96, at MOMA and said, "I have to call the president. He has to come and see this." When I met her at the White House, it was really wonderful. She said to me, "Carrie Mae Weems, I'm so glad to meet you." And I said, "I'm so happy to meet my first lady!" Getting older is interesting because I'm starting to feel like an elder stateswoman and with that comes a certain kind of recognition. And there's something lovely about how Michelle Obama might greet me as an older woman whom she respects.

Have you learned anything about your past work while putting together your retrospective?

I was taking a group of people through my exhibition at the Cantor Center, and there was a self-portrait that I made 30 years ago, with my back toward the camera. That figure became important in the development of three series of works: "Roaming," 2006; "The Louisiana Project," 2003; and "Dreaming in Cuba," 2001. That thread was picked up from 30 years ago and pulled through several bodies of my work. There are also visual and emotional patterns that were set very early on and a way of working with the camera that was also set a long time ago, so visually the work has a certain type of consistency. The poet and writer Amiri Baraka called it the *changing same*.

How have you moved away from your early photography and videos and pushed your work into new terrain?

The series I'm working on now is called "Equivalents," and this work is some of the most ephemeral that I've made. These images are more open than, say, "From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried." Something like "Equivalents" has more air around it, and its meaning fluctuates and it's harder to pin down. Alfred Stieglitz came up with the idea of Equivalents, and I was thinking about the importance of certain artists, like Duchamp, in my life, the importance of Magritte as an artist in my life, the importance of Lorna Simpson in my life, as well as Steichen and Stieglitz. So I was remaking the impossible but adding an extra layer of mediation.

I also just recently finished a project on W.E.B. Du Bois. I've been thinking a long time about contemplative spaces for important African-American figures, and I realized that there are so few of them in the country. So when given the chance to create a project around Du Bois, I started thinking that this is the time to create a memorial garden. I had a new variety of peony named for him that is slated to go into a new garden at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. It's called the Du Bois Peony of Hope. It's white with a beautiful citron-yellow center and can be installed outside the museum or in gardens across the country.

In what ways, if at all, has your Jewish and Native American ancestry influenced your ideas?

My grandfather on my mother's side was Jewish. There's a deep link between African-Americans and Jews, and it's something

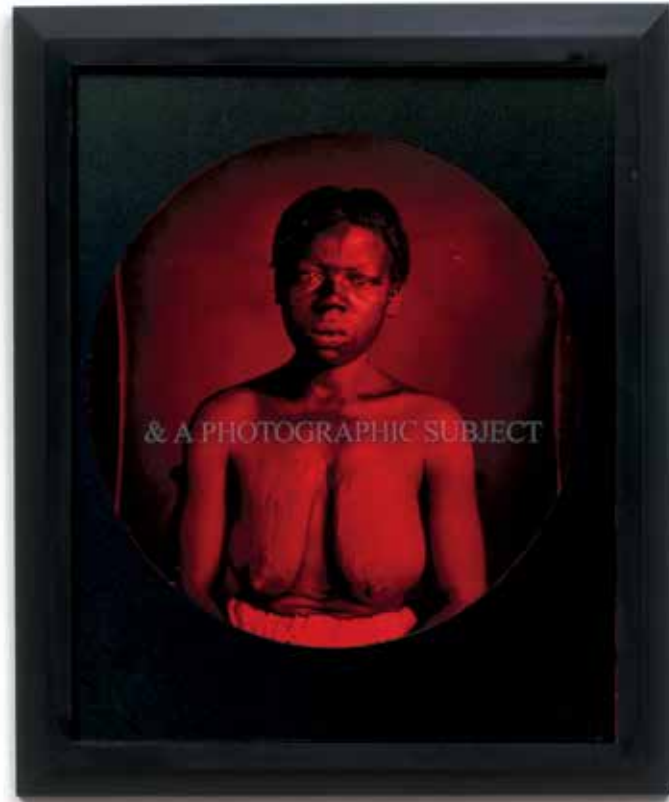
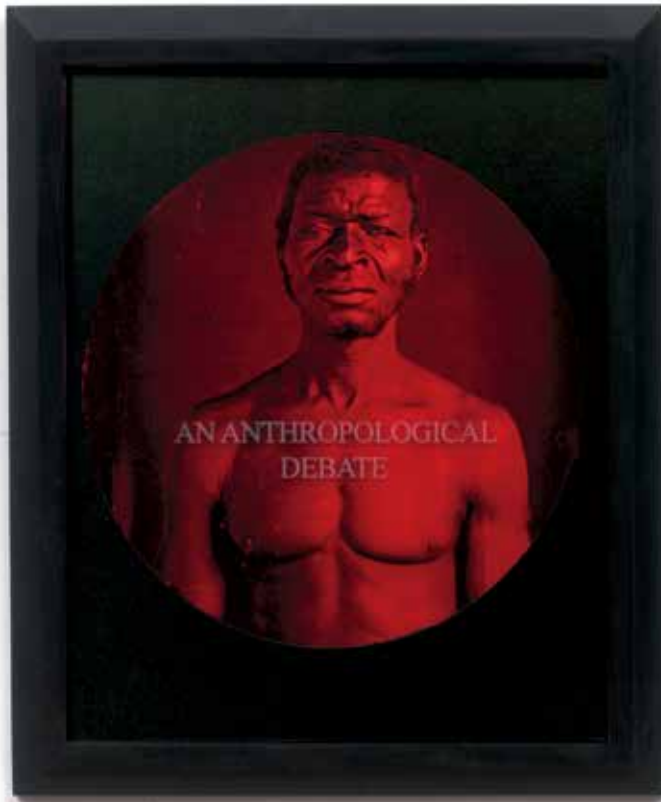
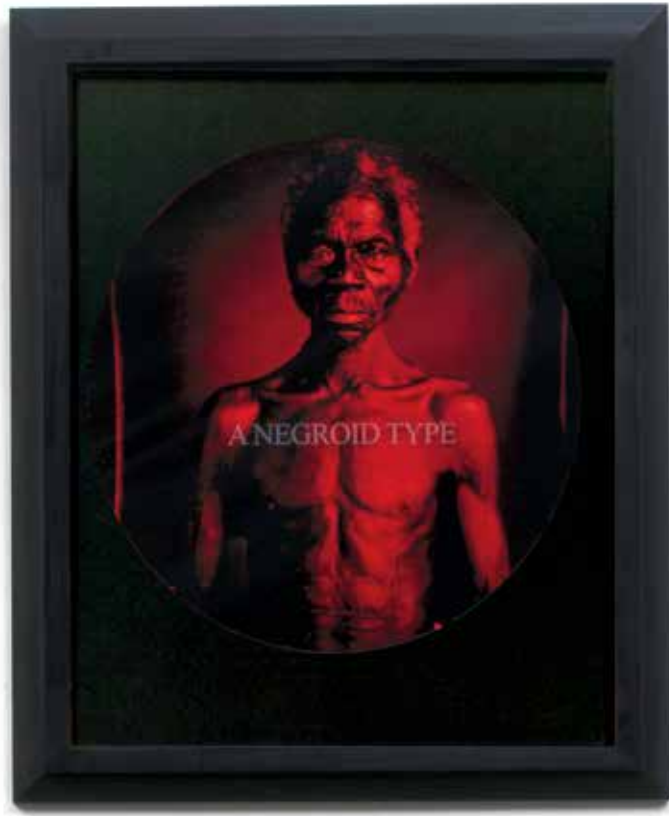
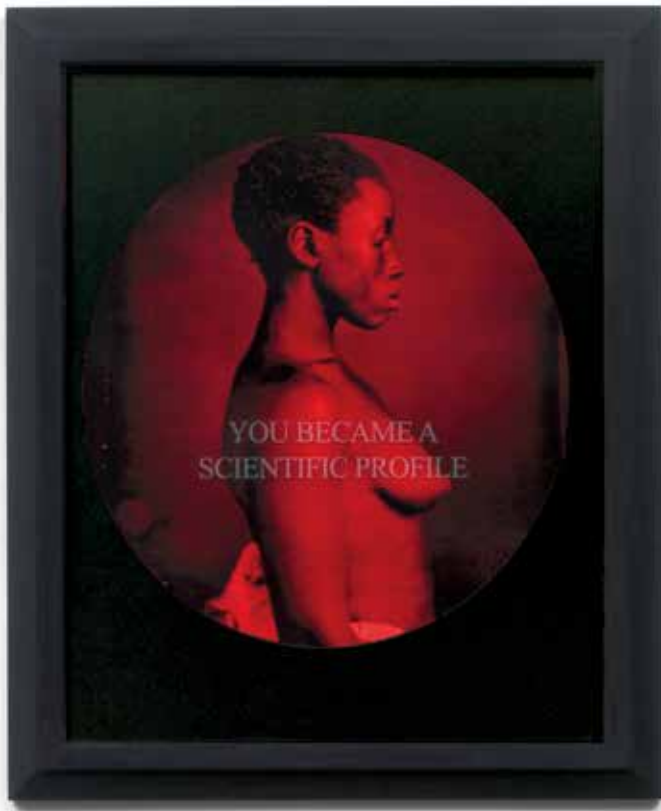
"African-American artists are still considered outliers, and people don't know how to integrate them into broader themes."



Still from *Afro-Chic*, 2009–10. Video, 5 min. 30 sec.

OPPOSITE:
A Scientific Profile, 1995–96.
From the series
"From Here I Saw
What Happened
and I Cried."
C-prints with etched
text on glass,
each 26½ x 22¾ in.

GABOR SZITANYI, CARRIE MAE WEEMS, AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY



that I've always wanted to explore. There was a larger project that I had hoped to do in Israel that, unfortunately, didn't come to fruition. I'm sensitive to people who have been scorned for what they look like or believe in or who have been under attack. One of the projects that I want to present and produce in my public programs at the Guggenheim is a night on Black and Jewish comedy. I think that there's a shared sense of struggle in the country, and that, I think, forms an incredible bond between these two apparently very different groups of people. It will be interesting to have these ideas rub up against one another.

Would you like to see your work presented differently in the future?

I would really like to see a well-curated show that has the power

to break through narrow confines of race in order to bring together really smart artists. For instance, nobody has organized a show with Lorna Simpson and Cindy Sherman, or Carrie Mae Weems, Robert Frank, and Gary Winogrand.

African-American artists are still considered outliers, and people don't really know how to integrate them into broader themes. People frame my work in terms of race and gender and don't integrate it into broader historical questions, and I think that limits the possibilities of what the public is allowed to understand about our production in the country. It's one of the reasons that I'm interested in using my platform at the Guggenheim to bring forth voices that are rarely heard together. If you invite only African-Americans to the table, then you're participating in your own isolation. **MP**