

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Carrie Mae Weems, "Home," *Muse*, April 2014

MUSE



Carrie Mae Weems:
*Untitled (Woman
and daughter with
children)*, from the
"Kitchen Table
Series," 1990,
gelatin silver print
27¼ inches square.
Courtesy Jack
Shainman Gallery,
New York.

APRIL 2014

HOME

by Carrie Mae Weems

**CURRENTLY
ON VIEW**
"Carrie Mae Weems:
Three Decades of
Photography and
Video," at the
Guggenheim
Museum, New York,
through May 14.

**CARRIE MAE
WEEMS** is an artist
based in Syracuse,
N.Y.

SIX OR SEVEN MONTHS AGO, I'd been on the road for a while, traveling a lot. I just could not wait to get home: to wake up in my own bed, be in my own sheets, bathe in my own tub, smoke in my own living room. To be with all the furniture and art that I live with, all the stuff that I've accumulated over the years, that's taken on a certain kind of meaning for me. In some ways, home is my muse. It's the space that allows for deep contemplation, deep reflection. Somewhere you can go to smell yourself, to nourish and replenish yourself, and to protect yourself. Home gives me those four walls that I need between me and the rest of the immediate world.

I could never be a homeless person, rootless. I can go out on the limb quite far, but I have to have someplace to scurry back to, to make a nest of the ideas and pieces of material that I've acquired while out there, to sort of sink into, you know. As a visual artist, there are times I must leave; I have to travel. If I'm working on museums [as a subject], I'm looking at museums all over the world—not in Syracuse, my primary home, where there's only one. But I need to get home in order to understand whatever I've seen out there. So there's home, but there's also the psychological space that home creates.

The thing about being home on this particular occasion: I was just dying to hear really good music. I got back from wherever I had been at around three o'clock in the afternoon. I went into my kitchen and pulled out my music, my computer, and I decided to listen to really extraordinary voices. I'm very interested in all kinds of music, and all kinds of singing voices. From three o'clock in the afternoon until about two in the morning I just sat in one place listening to them; from Sarah Vaughan to Frank Sinatra to Aretha Franklin. Or Aretha Franklin remixing Glen Campbell, then back to Glen Campbell to rethink Aretha. The thing that became clear to me in this moment, maybe for the first time, was that the really great singers, almost without exception, usually only sang. They seldom played piano or did a song-and-dance act. The great singers mostly just sang.

How do you get close to the bone in your work? You don't do it by trying to be a jack-of-all-trades. You can only do it by sinking deep, by going deep into the structure of the thing. I'm just a photographer, a visual artist, mining the same territory again and again and again, in hopes of getting closer in my lifetime to the full nature of my own voice and the complexity of being alive.

This "sounding out" is my deepest muse, if you want to call it that. How things are made to sound in the world, and how close you can get to the authentic, complex soundings of the world. I have been listening to Louis Armstrong for 45 years, and still, every time I hear him, my mind is blown by the places he is able to take us in our own imaginations. The music delivers us to the deepest part of ourselves. So the question is, Will I ever be able to come close to even an approximation of that?

It's really difficult to truly see your own work, though you are seeing it all the time, since you're always making it. My work endlessly surprises me. I think, "I made that? Hmmm . . . not bad for a girl!" With the Guggenheim survey up, I'm learning a great deal about myself. I don't think of myself as a great artist, by any stretch of the imagination. I've seen great art, and my work is not that. I do, however, have a unique voice. I'm aware that it's situated in a very particular space in the art world, and that it's been very important—that a lot of people have paid attention to it—from how the photographs are structured in, say, the "Kitchen Table Series" [1990], to the way I've used language in that and other series, such as "Africa" [1993] or "From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried" [1995-96]. I've figured out a way to use voice and language with the image in a rather unique and meaningful way.

Men and women have come to me as a result of their encounters with my work over the years. It presents the possibility of generating certain kinds of dialogue that might not happen otherwise. A couple I know went to see my show. He's black and she's white, a very old friend of mine. They've been dating for 17 years. She



Aretha Franklin singing in the Atlantic Records studio, New York, Jan. 9, 1969. Photo Michael Ochs. © Getty Images.

said, "We came to your show and had conversations like we've never had before." Another friend wrote me: "I'm standing in front of your work and a man is talking to his son for the first time about race." That is an accomplishment. In conversations like these you discover your voice in relation to someone that you thought you knew, someone that you love.

I'm dying to get home. I have some work I really want to make. I want to be back in my studio and listening to music. Right now, I'm paying attention to radio and television personalities from the past—hosts and announcers. There was such an art to them, from Groucho Marx to Nat King Cole to Steve Allen to Dick Cavett. They were great personalities of voice and sound—and they had such incredible shows! Today, authenticity is not really being looked for. Until the early '70s, you didn't want 15 singers on the radio who sounded the same. Now that's a given, that they sound alike. There's been a homogenization of culture and language and style that has ruined the possibility of an authentic voice.

I was just given a BET [Black Entertainment Television] award. I was seated next to Aretha Franklin, Berry Gordy was across from me, and Smokey Robinson was behind me. So many of the younger performers were just horrible—so fake, I was embarrassed for them. And then Aretha took the stage and sang "A Change Is Gonna Come." Unbelievable. That *odor!* That depth! You have to be kind of ugly to sing like that—you can't be way up here to get down. It is so important to really discover your voice, to allow it to speak through, and to not be afraid of being different. ○

—As told to Faye Hirsch