

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Huey Copeland, "Specters of History," *Artforum*, September 2014

**ARTFORUM**

CLOSE-UP

# Specters of History

HUEY COPELAND ON CARRIE MAE WEEMS'S *LINCOLN, LONNIE, AND ME*, 2012



This page and opposite: Carrie Mae Weems, *Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me—A Story in 5 Parts*, 2012, digital video projection, stage, curtains, stanchions, Mylar, sound. Installation views, Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh.



**HAVE WE ALL BEEN SLEEPING** on Carrie Mae Weems? The question might sound counter-intuitive, considering the esteem with which the artist has been held since her emergence in the 1980s—if not altogether off the mark, given the successes she has enjoyed in the past year. Highlights include a MacArthur “genius” award, a magisterial display of her “Museum” series at the Studio Museum in Harlem, and the star-studded “Past Tense/Future Perfect” conference organized around her work at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, the last stop of “Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video,” the artist’s traveling retrospective. In a word, Weems’s profile has never been higher. But, arguably, we have yet to receive a full accounting of her recursive and affecting practice, which embraces an ever-increasing array of lens-based media in order to reactivate historical memory. Indeed, as *New York Times* critic Holland Cotter noted, the Guggenheim’s showing was both a needed intervention and a “galling” “shame,” offering a scaled-down version of an already partial survey that was infelicitously shoehorned into the museum’s annexes rather than allowed to unfurl in Frank Lloyd Wright’s coiled rotunda.



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Where black artists are concerned, such accommodating half measures on the part of “mainstream” New York institutions should come as no surprise—just think back to the Museum of Modern Art’s hanging of Wifredo Lam’s *The Jungle*, 1943, next to the coatroom for decades. Still, it is unfortunate, if not surprising, that no venue in Weems’s adopted city has thus far mounted a comprehensive exhibition of her practice or shown the recent work that spurred my initial query, a production that holds its own alongside her most renowned photo-texts such as “The Kitchen Table Series,” 1990, and “From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried,” 1995–96. For, whether holding out eloquent fabulations of black intimacy or critiquing the visual construction of racialized subjectivity, Weems’s art has consistently blended vernacular and high-cultural traditions from a uniquely feminist African-diasporic perspective that is nearly without parallel in the visual arts.

The same might be said of the piece in question, *Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me—A Story in 5 Parts*, 2012, which was commissioned by and debuted at the Mattress Factory in Pittsburgh as part of the exhibition “Feminist and . . .” alongside new works by Julia Cahill, Betsy Damon, Parastou Forouhar, Loraine Leeson, and Ayanah Moor. Weems’s contribution was subsequently shown at LOOK3 in Charlottesville, Virginia, and at Chicago’s Rhona Hoffman Gallery last fall in the context of a small but revelatory exhibition, “Slow Fade to Black” (its title a nod to Weems’s photographic series from 2010), that featured a selection of the artist’s recent

work. *Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me* was located upstairs from the main gallery, sequestered in a room all its own. Yet in this case—as with this year’s staging of Kara Walker’s ghostly monument *A Subtlety* in a condemned Williamsburg sugar factory—such apparent spatial relegation was fitting, especially given the technical and experiential demands of the work, a complex video installation that mobilizes old and new visual technologies to mesmerizing effect.

After brushing aside heavy blackout shades, you enter a darkened room—that ubiquitous mise-en-scène of contemporary image projection—only to immediately confront an environment more redolent of the nineteenth century: a theatrical stage framed by heavy bloodred curtains and set off with velvet ropes. In the work’s eighteen-and-a-half-minute video projection, life-size floating figures succeed one another on center stage, occasionally wreathed by falls of snow or whiffs of vapor that bring to mind the fog that enveloped artist Terry Adkins in Lorna Simpson’s *Cloudscape*, 2004. The procession of luminous apparitions in Weems’s video—broken up at times by moments of silence during which the stage is empty—is accompanied by an equally varied array of sounds, beginning with Blind Willie Johnson’s nearly wordless classic “Dark Was the Night, Cold Was the Ground,” whose melancholic strains set the visuals in motion as a tap dancer materializes out of the darkness and lures you into the work’s thrall.

As its title spells out, *Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me* is the artist’s meditation on her relationship to history in general and to two figures in particular: the

American president and Weems’s sometime collaborator, the artist and activist Lonnie Graham. In the second of the work’s loosely demarcated sections, Weems’s impossibly resonant voice—part Kathleen Turner, part Eartha Kitt, but always inimitably her own—recites and revises Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, while fragments of her 2008 reenactment of John F. Kennedy’s assassination, taken from her video *Constructing History: A Requiem to Mark the Moment*, 2008, float above the stage. These images are succeeded in part three by archival footage of ’60s busing protests and a spoken commentary by Graham on the difficulty of effecting social transformation.

In so framing American history as a racialized theater of deadly repetition, the piece explores both the tragedies of the past and the ways in which their farcical returns might be negotiated. These pressures are indexed by subsequent figures who function as icons of black spectacularity, from the anonymous boxer plotting his next moves both in and out of the ring, to the artist herself, done up as a trickster whose seductive laughter in part four quickly transmutes into a demonic threat: “I am gonna destroy ya,

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because I want you to feel the suffering that I know. It’s not gonna be pretty, Oh! Revenge is a mutha-fucka.” The closing section of the video recasts these considerations by foregrounding questions of gender, holding out a retinue of images from art history and popular culture to the tune of Neil Diamond’s “Girl, You’ll Be a Woman Soon,” as performed by Urge Overkill on the *Pulp Fiction* sound track. Accordingly, in this chapter, Weems gingerly suits herself up in a Playboy Bunny costume, presents an artist and her female model in a send-up of the classic scenario, and shows off her own re-creation of the splayed female nude at the center of Marcel Duchamp’s last work, *Étant donnés*, 1946–66.

Like Weems’s practice more broadly, *Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me* cannibalizes aspects of her previous projects and remixes them with other sources so that they might be redeployed to flesh out the larger history to which they already belong. Although the piece purportedly represents a narrative—hence the subtitle *A Story in 5 Parts*—it is one that moves spirally, constantly looping back on itself to discover its own difference. All this makes a certain sense in light of the historical and technical inspiration for the work, which does not merely refer to nineteenth-century performative traditions of an episodic bent but actively extends them. In particular, Weems’s project owes its eerie effect to the “Pepper’s ghost” illusion invented by British civil engineer Henry Dircks and perfected in 1862 by John Henry Pepper, the director of London’s Royal Polytechnic Institution and a critic of spiritualist discourses, who used the

device to show off and ultimately debunk the theatrical tricks exploited by all manner of hucksters.

Pepper’s namesake technique, which enables objects and actors to appear onstage as projected spectral images, trades on a deceptively simple optical manipulation: A plane of glass is placed at a forty-five-degree angle between the stage and a hidden adjoining chamber, or “blue room,” located beneath it. When appropriately illuminated, objects and actors in the chamber appear on the glass and before the audience as dematerialized versions of themselves. As film scholar Laurence Senelick succinctly explains, the ghost effect relies upon the ability of glass to function transparently and reflectively at once, “just as in a brightly lit room at night one may see oneself reflected in a window-pane as far ‘outside’ the window as one stands before it in the room.” This illusion was enabled by the advances in glass-manufacturing technology that rendered modern cities sites of visual reflection and display, handily feeding into a Victorian investment in phantasmagoria that continues apace, from the “Ghosts of the Library” display at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum in Springfield, Illinois, to the appearance of an uncannily animated Tupac Shakur alongside a live Snoop Dogg at the 2012 Coachella music festival.

In Weems’s hands, the illusion is likewise technologically updated—Mylar replaces glass, and a projected video image takes the place of live actors—but her work does more than make the immaterial manifest. It underlines how projections, absences, and the shapes we give to them remain central to the

rescripting of the historical past and to the workings of the modern imagination itself, which is predicated on what literary theorist Terry Castle has called the “‘ghostifying’ of mental space.” These processes have been a key preoccupation of the artist’s practice, yet in *Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me*, Weems emphasizes the critical possibilities of visual technologies still capable of undoing—and so making visible—the means of appearance within Western culture, whose economies of thought and commerce are always haunted by the specter of blackness.

Weems’s turn to an actual theater of phantasms is thus particularly apt because it enables us to think anew about the culturally specific visual forms constructed to materialize the racial imaginary. Through its dramatic production of deep illusory space, so often enlisted in the maintenance of ideological ruses, the work highlights its own conceit, not only calling us back into the arena of political contestation but also encouraging us to look more closely at the realms opened up by Weems’s previous work in photography and video. Her art—too often flattened into a caricature of its reparative content—always cuts deep into the space of representation, asking us to look hard *into* the image, even when it is patently two-dimensional. *Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me* freshly reveals the ways in which Weems’s art draws our attention to worlds, both real and imagined, that continue to be haunted by apparitions who will have been heard only if we now awake. □

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