

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Cate McQuaid, "At BC, Carrie Mae Weems throws open windows inside history,"
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At BC, Carrie Mae Weems throws open windows inside history

By Cate McQuaid OCTOBER 04, 2018



IMAGE COURTESY OF THE MCMULLEN MUSEUM OF ART

An image from the series "From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried" from "Carrie Mae Weems: Strategies of Engagement."

In the midst of the conflict over Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh, I went to see "Carrie Mae Weems: Strategies of Engagement."

It was after Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell had sworn to "plow right through" and referred to Rachel Mitchell, the prosecutor Republican judiciary committee members hired to hide behind, as a "female assistant," but before the hearing itself. I was already rattled.

Weems is an artist for this moment. She examines how society has structured privilege: how we keep the status quo in place using stories, images, and ideas so embedded in our discourse we barely see them. She principally addresses race, but often touches on gender, gently dissecting the ways the dominant culture shapes and quashes people of color and women.

Her open-hearted and penetrating exhibition, at McMullen Museum of Art at Boston College through Dec. 13, demonstrates the artist's cunning use of formats, from photo to video to installation, to expose the fusty, encrusted belief systems that maintain hierarchies.

It was impossible to step into the museum and leave the news behind. Seeing Weems's art is no tonic. We are in an ongoing state of urgency with regard to these issues. But her clear-eyed look at them is exactly what we need. She waves a magnifying glass, not a cudgel, calling out to all of us — look! Look more closely, and look again.

History is easy to flatten. In her examination of the past, Weems reveals something nuanced and hard to fix into one simple shape — a shifting, shadowy history ripe with violence, longing, hope, and humility.

The show opens with the photo series “Constructing History: A Requiem to Mark the Moment.” Weems worked with students at Savannah College of Art and Design to reenact familiar scenes surrounding assassinations. John and Jackie Kennedy in their convertible in Dallas; a kind of group pieta in “The Assassination of Medgar, Martin, Malcolm.”

Photographs craft history. To dismantle their iconography, Weems staged them on a classroom set, with two windows and a clock on the wall, lighting and camera riggings evident in each shot. In order to look critically, she builds distance into archetypal images. A little space goes a long way.

Her acclaimed series “From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried,” examines 19th- and early-20th-century photographs of black people. Photos like some of these were used to develop racist classification systems. Weems tints them blood red and places them under glass, upon which she etches text; its shadow can read like a brand on the skin of the subjects.

Two blue ones frame the rest, depicting a regal Mangbetu woman, the “I” of the title, witnessing a scope of African-American humanity that includes the squelched, the striving, and the courageous: A bare-chested old man emblazoned with “A NEGROID TYPE,” Josephine Baker — who performed a “danse sauvage” in a banana skirt at the Folies Bergeres — reading “YOU BECAME AN ACCOMPLICE.”

Weems doesn't rewrite history. She goes inside it and throws open windows to air it out. The early photographs are straightforward subversions. “Ain't Jokin,” a series from the late 1980s, features deadpan illustrations of racist jokes, stereotypes, and cultural erasure.

In more recent, lushly layered works, the artist herself, who came up in the [Pictures Generation](#) alongside Cindy Sherman, slips into roles. As muse and trickster, she shrewdly deepens her exploration into the psychology of oppression. White society imprinted its shadow material on blacks. Fear, desire, and creativity dwell in that psychic muck.

In the sobering, penumbral video installation “Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me: A Story in 5 Parts,” Weems uses a 19th-century technology, projecting imagery upward onto a slanted screen to appear three-dimensional and ghostly

between scarlet curtains. Characters include a dauntless boxer, a soft-shoe dancer, Abraham Lincoln reciting the Gettysburg Address, and artist and activist Lonnie Graham declaring, “I’ve given up hope on making serious change.”

Weems appears, attempting to squeeze herself into a tiny Playboy Bunny outfit. Oh, how we labor to fit the needs of the powerful! Then she’s a sinister trickster in a top hat and tails, hissing, “I’m gonna shred you. I’m gonna kill you. I’m gonna brand you.” The story of “Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me” is slippery; like “From Here I Saw What Happened,” it’s threaded with fury, terror, desolation, and hope.

The recent video “People of a Darker Hue” returns us to the classroom of “Constructed Histories” — a way station for history; a place to try to rewrite it. Black men run on a treadmill there, never getting anywhere, in scenes intercut with videos of the beating of Rodney King and the deaths of Eric Garner, Philando Castile, and other blacks at the hands of police.

“The man was killed,” Weems intones. She invokes the raw grief and the power dynamics of “Antigone”: “The body laid in the open, uncovered and exposed.”

“For reasons unknown,” she continues, “I rejected my own knowledge and I deceived myself by refusing to believe that this was possible.”

We do that all the time. To stave off cruelty and violence with hope, to believe in change, to believe that those silenced may now speak. That it will matter.

Maybe the silenced will be heard, and the invisible will be seen. All we can really do, as Weems does again and again with breadth and poetry, is shine a light.

CARRIE MAE WEEMS: STRATEGIES OF ENGAGEMENT

At McMullen Museum of Art, Boston College, 2101 Commonwealth Ave., through Dec. 13. 617-552-8587,
www.bc.edu/mcmullenmuseum