

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Megan O'Grady, "How Carrie Mae Weems Rewrote the Rules of Image-Making,"  
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## How Carrie Mae Weems Rewrote the Rules of Image-Making

Perhaps our best contemporary photographer, she creates  
work that insists on the worth of black women — both in  
art and in life.



Carrie Mae Weems, photographed in New York City on Aug. 7, 2018.  
Photograph by Mickalene Thomas. Styled by Shiona Turini

By Megan O'Grady

Oct. 15, 2018

ON CARRIE MAE WEEMS'S deck in Syracuse, N.Y., locusts are buzzing about the space like doomsday portents, emerging from the ground after 17 years only to drown boozily in our cups of rosé. It's a warm day in late June, and a summer languor — or maybe it's a news-cycle-induced torpor — is in the air, but Weems, perhaps our greatest living photographer, is juggling so many projects that when we were emailing to work out the interview logistics, she warned me, "We'll need all your skills on this." She is simultaneously working on a trio of shows: a retrospective at Boston College's [McMullen Museum of Art](#) this fall, an installation for Cornell University and a group show she's curating, "Darker Matter," which will include a new series of her own, at the Park Avenue Armory around 2020 — a follow-up to the creative think tank of artists, musicians and writers she organized at the venue last winter titled "[The Shape of Things.](#)"

But first, she wants to show me her peonies. A few weeks before we meet, she emailed me a JPEG of a flower in full bloom, a still-life hello. Frothy white with a bright yellow center, it wasn't just any peony, but the W.E.B. DuBois peony, which was named for the civil rights activist after Weems called up the American Peony Society with the suggestion. (As she tells it, they happened to have a new variety in need of a name.) The flower was to be the centerpiece of a memorial garden for DuBois at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst — a small but characteristically thoughtful gesture from an artist who has made her career creating spaces for contemplation in the place of absence, rooting a troubled present in a painful past with projects that feel resolutely forward-looking and idealistic.

*See all six of the 2018 Greats issue [cover stories here.](#)*

[Weems](#), 65, who won a MacArthur Fellowship in 2013, the year before she became the first African-American woman to have a retrospective at the Guggenheim, has for some time existed in the cultural mythosphere. Her many admirers reserve an intense, almost obsessive affection for her that is rarely extended to visual artists: She is name-checked in a lyric on the new album by Black Thought and appears as herself in Spike Lee's new Netflix series of "[She's Gotta Have It.](#)" Her iconic 1987 picture, "Portrait of a Woman Who Has Fallen From Grace" — a photo that depicts Weems sprawled on a bed in a white dress, cigarette dangling from one hand — is on the cover of Morgan Parker's poetry collection "[There Are More Beautiful Things Than Beyoncé.](#)" (Speaking of Beyoncé, Weems has been cited as an influence on the videos for "Lemonade.") Any day now, surely, someone will name a flower after her.





Weems's photographs and short films have gone a long way toward resetting our expectations of pictures. **Bottega Veneta** dress and belt, (800) 845-6790. **Cartier** earrings, (800) 227-8437. **Van Cleef & Arpels** bracelet, [vancleefarpels.com](http://vancleefarpels.com). **Manolo Blahnik** shoes, (212) 582-3007. All clothing and jewelry price on request.

Photograph by Mickalene Thomas. Styled by Shiona Turini

Canonical, yes — and yet, in many ways, it feels we barely know her apart from the persona we see in her work, in which she often appears, staring down the camera lens, or with her back turned to it, inviting us to see things through her eyes. She's as arresting a presence in real life. In conversation, she has a magnetism that's almost planetary; she is mellifluously voiced and funny, with a habit of repeating "Right? Right?" as she makes her points, which move from critical theory to an anecdote about her Pilates teacher, who tried to break up with Weems because she was too demanding. She's like that friend who sees right through you and who you trust will set you straight, because she's just as undeluded about herself.

Her photographs and short films, as gimlet-eyed and gutsy as they are visually compelling, have gone a long way toward resetting our expectations of pictures and challenging our assumptions about her largely African-American subjects. A gifted storyteller who works accessibly in text and image, she's created new narratives around women, people of color and working-class communities, conjuring lush art from the arid polemics of identity. The desire to create images has never not felt powerful, something Weems understood from the first time she held her own camera. She was 20, and it was a birthday present from her boyfriend, Raymond, a Marxist and labor organizer. "I think that the first time I picked up that camera, I thought, 'Oh, O.K. This is my tool. This is it,' " she tells me.

Originally from Portland, Ore., Weems now divides her time between an art-filled midcentury-modern home in Syracuse, where she moved in 1996 to be with her husband of 23 years, Jeffrey Hoone, the executive director of [Light Work](#) — an organization that awards residencies to artists — and a pied-à-terre in Fort Greene, Brooklyn. But much of her family remains on the West Coast, including her mother, also named Carrie, her daughter, Faith, and many aunts, uncles and cousins. They appear in Weems's early work from the late '70s, when she was still mostly in documentary mode — work that became her first show, "Family Pictures and Stories," shown in 1984 at a gallery in San Diego. Inspired by Zora Neale Hurston's writing and Roy DeCarava's depictions of Harlem in his book with Langston Hughes, "[The Sweet Flypaper of Life](#)," the black-and-white images revealed a loving, fractious, deeply connected clan and were a glorious rebuttal to the infamous 1965 Moynihan Report's assertion that African-American communities were troubled because of weak family bonds.

Soon she was turning the lens on herself to address questions of representation. It would be hard to overstate the impact of "[The Kitchen Table Series](#)" (1989-90), which combines panels of text and image to tell the story of a self-possessed woman with a "bodacious manner, varied talents, hard laughter, multiple opinions," as it reads. It's the series that made her career and inspired a new generation of artists who had never before seen a woman of color looking confidently out at them from a museum wall, and for whom Weems's work represented the first time an African-American woman could be seen reflecting her own experience and interiority in her art.





Weems was 20 when she first held her own camera; it was a birthday present from her boyfriend. **Oscar de la Renta** dress, [oscardelarenta.com](http://oscardelarenta.com). **Pomellato** ring, [pomellato.com](http://pomellato.com). **Christian Louboutin** shoes, [christianlouboutin.com](http://christianlouboutin.com). Weems's own earrings and ring. Photograph by Mickalene Thomas. Styled by Shiona Turini

Weems is also a nimble satirist — a bride with her mouth taped shut in “Thoughts on Marriage” (1990), a mock fashion show for “[Afro Chic](#)” (2009) — but her humor is generally of the more unsettlingly pointed kind, aimed directly at our smug aesthetic foundations. In a 1997 series, “[Not Manet’s Type](#),” she plays a muse, her negligee-clad reflection in front of a bed, beheld and objectified — or simply invisible. “It was clear I was not Manet’s type,” the accompanying text reads. “Picasso — who had a way with women — only used me & Duchamp never even considered me.” [In 2016](#), she revisited the idea with “Scenes & Take,” shot on the sets of television shows like “Empire,” “How to Get Away With Murder” and “Scandal,” which feature the kind of multifaceted and genuine-feeling black characters that for years weren’t widely enough seen outside of Weems’s own work. Weems appears in flowing black, a specter of the black ingénue who arrived too early, who was ignored, who never even had the chance to be.



Images from the artist’s most famous and arguably most influential work, “The Kitchen Table Series,” left to right: “Untitled (Woman and Daughter With Children),” “Untitled (Man Reading Newspaper)” and “Untitled (Woman and Daughter With Make Up).” Photographed between 1989 and 1990, the images depict black identity — in particular the woman at the center of each photo, portrayed by Weems — in intimate, remarkable detail.

From left: Carrie Mae Weems, “Untitled (Woman and Daughter with Children),” 1990; Carrie Mae Weems, “Untitled (Man Reading Newspaper),” 1990; Carrie Mae Weems, “Untitled (Women and Daughter with Make Up),” 1990. All images © Carrie Mae Weems, Courtesy of the artist and Jeckel/Steinman Gallery, New York

In the art world, too, Weems has always been before her time, and this has made her a singularly eloquent witness to the shifting landscape of race and representation. This is not the enviable position it may seem to some: One wonders if the reason her work hasn’t inspired quite the same volume of ink as, say, her contemporary Cindy Sherman is that critics have simply been too afraid, or too unimaginative, to engage with it. Georgia O’Keeffe once said, “Men put me down as the best woman painter. I think I’m one of the best painters.” This marginalization, being categorized as “black artist” or “woman artist” rather than simply *artist*, is something Weems has dealt with her entire career. In fact, much of Weems’s most powerful work has examined, with piercing moral clarity, a past that’s very much



shared, whether she's casting herself as Sally Hemings for "[The Jefferson Suite](#)" (2001) or recreating moments from the civil rights movement in "[Constructing History](#)" (2008). She is a master at appropriating historical images: For her extraordinary pictorial essay "[From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried](#)" (1995-96), she used found sources, including a cache of 1850 daguerreotypes commissioned by the Harvard scientist Louis Agassiz. The sitters are African-Americans, former slaves, many of them depicted naked or half naked, as anthropological specimens. Weems reproduced the images, staining them blood-red and encircling the subjects so that they appear to be held captive by the lens. Providing a context for understanding the historical use of those photographs and then subverting it, she restores tenderness and humanity to the subjects. Even the way the series has been received illustrates the glacial pace of progress: Harvard, which initially threatened to sue Weems over the use of images from its archive, later ended up acquiring a portion of the series for its collection.

Photography can enslave and revictimize, Weems has shown us; it can also, potentially, set us free from our inherited bias and expectations. A 2006 Rome Prize from the American Academy made possible a line of work called "[Roaming](#)," challenging the idea that an African-American artist couldn't have international resonance: Looking at Weems's ghostly alter ego dressed in black outside historic sites in the Italian capital, one wonders who could possibly better understand the architectures of power. In "[The Museum Series](#)" (2005-6), the spectral figure appears again outside the Louvre, the Pergamon and the Tate Modern, the kinds of institutions that, feeling their authority increasingly in question, now call upon Weems to tell them how they might remain relevant. The figure — a testament to exclusion, longing for admission — challenges the idea of art made by white men as being the only art in Western culture capable of speaking to our common humanity.

If there's a bitter irony in the way in which historically white museums have turned to socially engaged black artists to help solve their problems — asking the victim, in essence, to become their savior — Weems has responded with characteristic optimism. Her "convenings," which she held at the Guggenheim during her retrospective (mordantly named "Past Tense/Future Perfect") and more recently at the Park Avenue Armory, suggest that keeping the old model while simply swapping out the content isn't going to work. *Her* model, rather, is about curating a flexible, conversation-oriented space that reflects the community, in which real civic engagement might happen. She has so much more work to do, she says: "I feel like I'm racing against the clock."



Daddy and I have a special thing going, and to this day I use his lap as my private domain. He says, "See Carrie Mae what I like about you is you can talk that talk to them white folks, and you's smart too, just like your daddy."

Weems's earlier portrait series, "Family Pictures and Stories," begun in 1981, depicts friends and relatives, as in "Dad and Me," which shows the artist with her father.

Carrie Mae Weems, "Dad and Me" (detail), 1978-1984. © Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

OVER THE LAST two years, even those of us who might have once been able to delude ourselves into thinking that structures of power don't really affect us have been made to see otherwise. For Weems, who grew up in one of the few black families in Portland, the child of a large (she is the second of seven children), close-knit family of sharecroppers who had migrated from Mississippi, that was never the case. Her paternal grandfather had organized tenant farmers on the Sunshine Plantation, one of Mississippi's first cooperative farms with black and white farmers; Dorothea Lange, she recently discovered, photographed her favorite uncle, Clarence, in the 1930s. Weems's childhood was a very happy one, filled with caravan trips to the beach and Mount Hood. It was defined in large part by two men: her handsome father, Myrlie, who she says resembled Muhammad Ali — "he was just a really charismatic kind of guy, funny and wonderful and warm, polite, open" — and her maternal grandfather, who employed most of the family. "He was Jewish, Native American and black, but looked very Jewish, and he knew that basically he was passing for white and that he could do things that we couldn't so easily. So he used all of that to make sure that his family was taken care of." He ran a janitorial service and later owned a popular barbecue restaurant.



Weems was 8 when her parents divorced, and because the family remained in some ways intact — her father lived around the corner — she told herself for many years that it hadn't affected her. It was only years later, while talking to one of her aunts, that she realized the divorce marked the point at which she'd stopped drawing and painting. Other memories of that time in her youth have come back, too: of arriving home from school to find her mother weeping in front of the television after Kennedy was shot; of reading Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech over and over again with her father, following King's assassination.

Over the years, Weems has revisited in her work the age she was then — 8, 9, 10, a girl still in the process of becoming herself, with a dawning adult awareness of the world and a self-assurance made all the more poignant with the knowledge that it won't survive adolescence wholly intact. A 1978 portrait of her daughter, Faith, at 9, is radiant with Faith's innocence and Weems's love. A nostalgic 2002 image, "May Flowers," hangs prominently on the wall in Weems's home. It depicts three girls at that age dressed in vintage dresses and flower crowns. The girl in the center, whose name, Weems tells me, is Jessica — Weems noticed her on the streets of Syracuse with her mother and approached them to ask if Jessica might model for her — looks directly out at us, warily, fearlessly. It is, like much of Weems's work, a kind of slanted self-portrait.



Alice is the oldest and as the oldest — her mother wasn't home — cooked her food, was not out clothes and so, closed the house, who always even to help me see better. She is a not just a simple woman, taking no risk from nobody for me to see. And me thing I know about her is her tradition, commitment to family. Girl will do whatever it takes to hold it together though you do.

Another photograph from the "Family Pictures and Stories" series, "Alice on the Bed," which is of Weems's older sister.

Carrie Mae Weems, "Alice on the Bed," 1978-1984. © Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

In one of the indelible images from “The Kitchen Table Series” — possibly the most famous picture Weems has ever taken — a young girl and her mother are looking in matching mirrors while applying lipstick. It’s the kind of effortless-seeming image that complexly plays with ideas of feminine subjectivity, recalling the Impressionist painter Berthe Morisot’s 1875 painting “[Woman at Her Toilette](#)” in the way in which it shows a private act that anticipates public exposure. In Weems’s version, a young girl is also learning, perhaps unwittingly, what it means to be a woman, and what it means to be looked at by men. “What do women give to one another? What do they pass on to one another?” says Weems, recalling the girl who modeled for the picture, whom she spotted in her neighborhood in Northampton, Mass., where she was living and teaching at the time. “I just thought she was the perfect echo of me as a young person. The same intensity and the same kind of hair.”

After her parents’ divorce, Weems moved with her mother and siblings into a large house owned by her grandfather. She would pirouette down the long wood-floored hallway and look out the attic windows, wearing her mother’s work smock, imagining she was a dancer or an actress. “I was simply becoming interested in this idea of being an artist in the world in some sort of way, not knowing really what the arts were,” she says. “I had these great, grand visions that I would move to New York City and that I would always arrive fabulously dressed, and I would always arrive late, and I would always leave early and everybody would want to know who I was. ‘Who is she?’ That was my fantasy.” After a visit from her drama teacher, her mother agreed to send her to a summer program in Shakespearean theater, freeing her from having to earn money by picking strawberries with the other kids in her neighborhood — giving her permission, essentially, to create. The program led her to other opportunities in theater and street performance, “dancing at the crossroads at night to bring up the gods,” she tells me.

Her father gave her another, equally crucial kind of permission. “My earliest memories are of my father picking me up and setting me on his knee. I was about 4 or 5. He looked at me, and he said, ‘Carrie Mae, always remember that you have a right. Right? That no matter who messes with you, you pick up the biggest stick that you can, and you fight back with it.’ This was a great gift. He would say, ‘There’s no man greater than you. You are greater than no other man.’ This is the bedrock of my understanding, the bedrock of my belief system that really was instilled very, very early in my life, and repeated throughout my life, this idea that we had a right to be there. So, if I arrive at some sort of big, fancy gala, I always feel really comfortable. It just doesn’t really matter who is in the room.”



Weems's "May Flowers," featuring in the center a model, Jessica, whom she has recently begun working with again after 15 years.  
Carrie Mae Weems. "May Flowers." 2002. © Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

IT'S A COMMON fallacy in talking about an artist's formative years to imply that it was all inevitable, that A led simply to B. But nothing was straightforward for Weems, who left home at 17, following her best friend, the film director Catherine Jelski, to San Francisco, where the choreographer Anna Halprin invited her to join her modern dance company. Later, Weems earned degrees from California Institute of the Arts and University of California, San Diego, where she lived with the artist [Lorna Simpson](#), another longtime friend, and she also studied folklore at U.C. Berkeley.

But equally, if not more essential, was a different, more intuitive kind of education gleaned from self-study, reading and youthful misadventures, including a memorable trip to East Berlin where she was mistaken for Angela Davis. Weems first moved to New York in 1971 "with a baby on my back and a cardboard suitcase," as she puts it, only to return quickly to San Francisco. It was too soon; she needed work and child care. Faith, who was born when Weems was 16, was raised mostly by Weems's aunt and uncle. Weems and Faith are very close (they vacation together in Martha's Vineyard), and a handful of Weems's pictures are nearly definitive artistic representations of motherhood — the emotional intensity, the moments of ambivalence — but she doesn't see the subject as central to her work. "I've never really been a real mother," she says. "I think my daughter and I are more friends. Of course, there's an element of mother and daughter, but because I didn't raise her, we have a very different kind of relationship."



Looking through the Black Photographers Annual, she saw her future in artists — mostly men — who looked like her, who were doing the kind of work she wanted to be doing, and in 1976, she tried New York again. “I came to New York to be with them, to see them, to talk to them, to interview them, to study with them, to become their friends, to see their exhibitions,” she remembers. While studying photography at the Studio Museum in Harlem, she made money as a Kelly Girl — a kind of temp worker — and later as an assistant to the photographer Anthony Barboza. She found a community in the Kamoinge Workshop, an organization of black photographers, and a friend and mentor in the photographer Dawoud Bey, who taught her at the Studio Museum, and who recalls her “humility and passion” as a student. Both were influenced by Roy DeCarava’s Harlem Renaissance-era images merging rigorous craft and “the lives of ordinary black folk,” Bey says. “We also both shared a sense that our very presence in the world, as human beings who were also black, demanded that we live lives and make work that somehow made a difference, that left the world transformed in some way, and that visualized a piece of that world that was uniquely ours and that participated in a larger cultural conversation inside of the medium of photography.”



In our 2018 Greats issue, T celebrates 50 people who have inspired us to forge a different world of our own. See more.

*Alessandra Michale*

*Carrie Mae Weems*

*George RR. Martin*

*Solange*

*Bruce Nauman*

*Viggo Mortensen*

Literature, too, helped her imagine her way into the world — I notice books by George Saunders and Mario Vargas Llosa on her reading table. Hurston was an inspiration for “[Family Pictures and Stories](#)” (1981-82) — representing a black experience that was vital and real, fractious and deeply loving and humanly imperfect. But by the 1980s, fueled in part by Laura Mulvey’s landmark 1975 essay on gaze, “[Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema](#),” art was in a more reflexive mode, and Weems was exploring her own sense of herself in relation to a visual culture in which black women scarcely appeared at all. Unlike other female artists who have used their own bodies to play characters that challenge representations of women — think of Sherman’s cribbing of Hollywood

tropes in her early photographs, or Francesca Woodman's near-gothic self-portraits — Weems had to invent largely out of whole cloth, forcing her to confront more private feelings about femininity and relationships. “I think artists are always trying for, struggling for, clamoring for, unearthing, digging for what is most authentically true about their understanding of the world and how they fit in it,” she says. “And the one thing that I did know was that the ways in which women had photographed themselves up until that moment for the most part really didn't interest me. I was also deeply concerned about the lack of representation of African-American women generally.”

She was teaching at Hampshire College in Massachusetts in the late 1980s when her concern became impossible to ignore. “I always had an exercise in self-portraiture in my classes. Invariably, all of the female students were in some way covered. They were always slightly behind the thing, whether it was their hair or an object or a piece of clothing,” she says, raising her hands in a gesture of coy femininity to her face. “They were always sort of hidden. They were never square. They were always doing something to obscure the clarity of themselves. Because women were always sort of interested in being objects, because we've been trained to be objects. We've been trained to be desirous in some sort of way, to present ourselves in that sort of way.”

In “The Kitchen Table Series,” Weems stares out at us in a way that insists we not simply look at her but really see her — a charged exchange, but also a beautifully leveling one: Here we are, human to human, across the table from one another. She plays a character: friend, parent, breadwinner, lover, a woman who resists classification, a woman of the world, of political conscience. These are roles that transcend race, but behind her, on her wall, we see a photograph of Malcolm X, his fist upraised, reminding us of an inescapable precedent of imagery, of a larger conversation that black women had been missing from.

As Weems tells it, the idea of making a series of tableaux vivants about a woman's life began with an evening with a man and a chance shot at her kitchen table, the expository triangle of light demarcating a kind of domestic stage. In 1989 and 1990, she worked on it obsessively. The narrative, which explores the life cycle of a romance, unfolds over nearly two dozen photographs and accompanying text panels. In one panel, she writes, “In and of itself, being alone again naturally wasn't a problem. But some time had passed. At 38 she was beginning to feel the fullness of her woman self, wanted once again to share it all with a man who could deal with the multitude of her being.” In the final image, she's playing solitaire.



Weems's recent "Blue Notes" series (2014-15) features blurred and obscured images of black icons. Here, the dancer and choreographer Katherine Dunham.

Carrie Mae Weems, "Slow Fade to Black (Katherine Dunham)," 2009-2011. © Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

“‘Kitchen Table’ is about really unpacking these relationships, about unpacking monogamy, the difficulty of monogamy, the trumped-upness of monogamy, this sort of ideal that never seems to pan out,” Weems explains. “Life is pretty messy stuff. Can we use this space, this common space known around the world, to shine a light on what happens in a family, how it stays together and how it falls apart? What women have to be and what men have to be, because you’re always struggling for equilibrium. Somebody always has the upper hand. Every once in a while you get stasis. If you’re lucky.”



As if on cue, Weems's husband arrives at home and comes out to say hello. They first met in 1986, in the darkroom at the Visual Studies Workshop, where she had a residency. She had seen his name on an announcement for a black caucus in support of the Society for Photographic Education. "I was like, 'Hmm, Jeff Hoone, that's an interesting name for a brother. I don't know any brothers named Hoone.' So I wrote him this note, thinking that he was a black man: 'It's very nice to know that a brother is in charge over there, running this organization at Syracuse University.' " A mutual friend told her he would be stopping by the darkroom that day. "And Jeff walked in, and I was a little taken aback. I think I was probably embarrassed because of the letter that I had written. He walked in, and I looked at him, and I thought, 'Oh my God. This is going to be my husband.'"



Another photograph from "Blue Notes." Here, the artist Jean-Michel Basquiat.  
 Carrie Mae Weems, "Blue Notes (Basquiat): Who's Who or a Pair of Aces #1," 2014, © Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York



The singer Eartha Kitt.  
 Carrie Mae Weems, "Slow Fade to Black #1 (Eartha)," 2009-2010. © Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

FOR A LONG TIME, her father's womanizing made Weems wary of commitment. "I thought, 'Well, I really don't want to have any serious relationships with men.' I see what my father is doing, and I love him. So I was really pissed off at him for a while. It's like, 'Daddy, you really need to understand the impact you've had on my life. It ain't all been good.' At a certain point, I had so deconstructed my father that he almost became ash. That was pretty scary. So, I came to understand one day that I had to accept that he was a man and not a god." She was in her 40s when she decided to throw a sleepover party for the two of them, flying out to Oregon, taking him to the beach, shopping for matching pajamas, gambling, talking the entire time. "We just worked through some things.

You can't do this on the phone for five minutes. It's touch-base time, Dad." She ended up taking him to a recording studio to do an interview, in which he talked about his childhood in the South and his love for her mother. "It was just one of the great conversations of my life," she says. At his funeral in 2003, Weems played excerpts from the interview.

Burying her father also gave way to a new appreciation for her mother, "this dynamic, powerful woman." These days, #MeToo has her thinking once again about gender and power, about color and power and the ways, subtle and not, in which private relationships can reflect larger structural imbalances. She touches on the bravery of her friend, the author Tanya Selvaratnam, who recently went public with claims that her ex-partner, the former New York attorney general Eric Schneiderman, had abused her. She recounts her own experiences on the board of a major arts organization in which her suggestions were sidelined, even after other women in the room supported them, only to be put forward after a man voiced support. No one is immune to this kind of unconscious bias: Recently, a female assistant confronted Weems with the fact that a male assistant was being paid more. "Really, Carrie?" she says, recounting her disgust with herself.

We still live in a world in which the highest price ever paid for a work of art by a woman (in 2014) was Georgia O'Keeffe's "[Jimson Weed/White Flower No. 1](#)," for \$44.4 million, while dozens of male artists sell in the hundreds of millions. Of her own work, Weems tells me, "It is not embraced in the marketplace. And this is a sustained problem across the board, in the ways in which the work of women is valued and the work of men is valued. This is a real problem. And it's worse for women of color, for sure. And I make a fine living." Recently, her work was up for auction around the same time as the artist Kerry James Marshall's. "And it was fascinating. My work sold for \$67,000 and his sold for \$21 million. Kerry Marshall and I became artists together, we were friends together, we were lovers together, we participated in this field together. On the social value scale, we're equal. But not in the marketplace," she says. The numbers are stark and shocking, but Weems's real value is reflected in the vast scope of her influence, visible in the intimate photographs of Deana Lawson, the her influence, visible in the intimate photographs of Deana Lawson, the transhistorical portraits of Henry Taylor and the subdued longing of Kara Walker's silhouetted paintings.



A person's — and people's — worth has always been a through line in Weems's work. Dior top and skirt, (800) 929-3467. Cartier earrings, bracelet and ring.  
Photograph by Mickelene Thomas. Styled by Shiona Turini

A person's — and people's — worth has always been a through line in Weems's work, which has become more explicitly concerned with contemporary violence, from the countless cases of police brutality targeting African-American men to violence within black communities. She is interested in the conditions that give rise to this violence, the corrupt power systems that perpetuate it — both subjects of her recent short films from 2017, [“People of a Darker Hue”](#) and [“Imagine if This Were You.”](#) The camera has long had a fraught relationship with the black body, but the way in which we as a culture are exposed to the atrocities of systemic violence has changed the stakes of this relationship: How, I ask Weems, does an artist operate within a visual culture in which videos of black men being murdered regularly go viral — on the one hand, forcing us to witness injustice for ourselves, on the other, presenting black death with a terrible, numbing casualness? Weems immediately brings up Philando Castile, who was shot and killed by a Minnesota police officer in 2016 during a routine traffic stop. His girlfriend, Diamond Reynolds, filmed the encounter from the passenger's seat. “I mean, I will never understand how she was able to do that,” Weems says. “I see a deer hit, and I'm completely — I can't do anything but just hold my head. But this is crucial. I'm always thinking, ‘How do I show this? What do I show? And how do I contextualize it?’” A camera has become more than just a journalistic or artistic tool, but a kind of weapon itself — one that reveals the truth. Two years ago, she saw a trio of young black boys being stopped in the middle of the road by a white police officer. She pulled out her camera, and another car, driven by a white man, stopped to block her. “And then I move back, and he moves back. And then I move forward, and he moves forward. Just a citizen decided that, whatever this is, you're not going to photograph it, I'm not going to allow it.”



ONE EVENING, as the sun begins to drop, Weems gives me a driving tour of Syracuse, a city that has sunk, like so many postindustrial towns, into poverty and violence. In 2002, Weems co-founded [Social Studies 101](#), which mentors local youth in creative professions. In 2011, after a 20-month-old black toddler named Rashaad was shot and killed in crossfire between two gangs, the same group collaborated on Operation Activate, an anti-violence campaign, putting up billboards and signs around the city and distributing matchbooks at bars and bodegas with slogans like “A man does not become a man by killing another man” and “Contrary to popular belief, your life does matter.” Recently, a community activist told her about a young man who’d kept the matchbook on his nightstand, totemlike, for two years. “There are days, especially when we’re editing, when we just leave the studio in a shambles, or we’re just too mentally exhausted to look at another image of someone being shot,” she says. “But as much as I’m engaged with it, with violence, I remain ever hopeful that change is possible and necessary, and that we will get there. I believe that strongly, and representing that matters to me: a sense of aspiration, a sense of good will, a sense of hope, a sense of this idea that one has the right, that we have the right to be as we are.”

Part of that involves mobilizing others. This year, out of the blue, Weems received a phone call from Jessica, the young girl — now a woman — who once modeled for Weems in “May Flowers.” Jessica now has a daughter of her own, and a partner, a woman who also has a child. They’re struggling to make a go of it. “I just decided, ‘You’re going to be the subject of a whole project. It’s just going to be you,’” says Weems. “What happens to a black woman who is her age, who drops out of school but has ambition. Who is trying to do the right thing, who is raising children, who’s decided that she’s also gay.” For the project, Jessica will also be self-documenting, telling her own story. Weems gestures as though she’s presenting a gift, passing it on matter-of-factly. “I said, ‘Here’s a camera.’”

At top: **Valentino** top, (212) 355-5811. **Tiffany & Co.** earrings, [tiffany.com](http://tiffany.com). **Van Cleef & Arpels** bracelets. **Manolo Blahnik** shoes.

Hair by Nikki Nelms. Makeup by Yumi Lee at Streeters. Stylist’s assistant: Mayer Campbell. Hair assistant: Krysten Oriol