

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Zoë Lescaze, "8 Artists on the Influence of Carrie Mae Weems,"  
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## 8 Artists on the Influence of Carrie Mae Weems

LaToya Ruby Frazier, Laurie Simmons and more reflect on how the photographer helped them see things differently.

By Zoë Lescaze

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The art of Carrie Mae Weems is as subtle and sublimely elegant as it is uncompromisingly political. One of the six cover subjects of T's 2018 Greats issue, she is among the most radically innovative artists working today. In a career spanning nearly five decades — working across photography, video, installations and public art campaigns — Weems has laid bare the historical biases that guide our own actions and shape our perceptions of others. Take, for example, her series "Museums" (2006–present), in which the artist stares down the pyramidal glass portal to the Louvre, the sinuous curves of the Guggenheim Bilbao, and the august colonnade of the British Museum, as though to challenge the institutions that have long determined what counts as culture and beauty. In this project, and in the dozens more that comprise her practice, Weems addresses questions of power, violence, exclusion, access and authority — especially as they pertain to race and gender — and dares her viewers to do the same. The pathos in all of her works, from intimate photographs of her family to series involving archival images of enslaved Africans, unites her subjects and viewers in a common humanity.

Here, eight contemporary artists reflect on Weems's art and activism. To some, she is a teacher or mentor, to others, a lifelong friend. To all of them, she is an icon.



Carrie Mae Weems, "Blue Black Boy," 1997.

© Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

**LaToya Ruby Frazier, born in Braddock, Pa., in 1982**

Carrie Mae Weems, who was my teacher and mentor at Syracuse University, and whom I now consider a dear friend, continues to be a source of inspiration and significant influence. Carrie's practice teaches me to hold myself accountable at all times, to raise questions from my own perspective and, most of all, to leave the door open and keep a seat at the table for others when given an institutional opportunity. Her unwavering support for all artists and her courage to confront the inequities of our time never cease to amaze me. Take, for example, how she generously used her position as the first black woman to have a major retrospective at the Guggenheim in New York in 2014 to create "Carrie Mae Weems LIVE: Past Tense/Future Perfect," a gathering and platform for black artists, historians, critics and curators to speak truth to power.

I was first introduced to the work of Carrie Mae Weems nearly 20 years ago, in my undergrad photography class at Edinboro University in Pennsylvania. As the only black female student in the classroom, I was struggling to speak about the portraits I was making with my mother and grandmother. My teacher pulled me aside one day and handed me a catalog titled "Carrie Mae Weems" (1993). The cover of the catalog struck me deeply, it was the portrait "Blue Black Boy" (from the "Colored People" series of 1989-90), and in that moment, I knew I was participating in a collective dialogue about race, class, gender, innocence, humanity and power with a community of black artists scattered throughout the world — with Weems at the helm. From bodies of work like "Family Pictures and Stories" (1981-82) in which Weems challenges and disrupts the ideology of Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who blamed "the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society" on a weak family structure, to "Colored People," in which she confronts the oversimplification of skin tone, how the black community internalizes colorism and how America uses it against us, Weems has found compelling and expansive ways to challenge how we think about race and class in America.



Carrie Mae Weems, "Untitled," 2009-10.  
© Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

I had the honor and privilege of studying with Weems in her course Social Studies 101 while pursuing my master's at Syracuse University in 2005, and it was this encounter with Weems that would have a profound impact on my understanding of what role artists play in our society. Carrie taught me that I was not simply a photographer making beautifully framed objects but rather an artist who articulates creative thoughts and ideologies that dismantle institutional and systemic racism, injustice, hierarchy, violence against black bodies, and crimes against humanity. In one semester, I would witness Carrie Mae Weems take to task academic politics at Syracuse in numerous lectures in various departments, in which she gracefully defended ideas and concepts in her work; I would participate in her interviewing and questioning the inclusivity and diversity within the administration, curatorial staff, board and membership at the Museum of Modern Art; and I would witness Carrie Mae Weems speak with residents at the Southwest Community Center on the South Side of Syracuse about their public school education system and how the community grieves for the violent loss of black and Latino men. These endeavors led to Carrie's Institute of Sound and Style for high school students, the art collective Social Studies 101 and her public art campaign to combat gun violence, Operation: Activate. These, to me, are monuments embedded in the social fabric of Syracuse, New York.

The artwork and art practice of Carrie Mae Weems impact American culture at large because she shows us how an artist and a citizen ought to be: selfless, caring, loving, empathetic and passionate about the work we do in the face of political corruption, bigotry, white supremacy and grave inequality. And for this, in my eyes, Carrie Mae Weems is a national treasure.



Carrie Mae Weems, "Untitled (Nude)," 1990, from "The Kitchen Table Series." © Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

**Laurie Simmons, born in Queens, N.Y., in 1949**

I've only met Carrie Mae Weems a few times, but I remember intensely her energy and warmth. It felt like a huge hug (although I can't remember if we actually hugged).

I love her work and have often thought there were overlaps in our subject matter. Not to sound simplistic, but I would call our shared terrain "women in interior space." Carrie Mae's photographs and videos take women as their central subjects and delve into their interiors, drawing out experiences of friendship, motherhood, memory and race in order to make visible the near invisibility and lack of understanding and documentation of the domestic lives of women, in particular women of color.

Her black-and-white photo series of a bare kitchen table shows a round robin of characters appearing and disappearing, forcing us to contemplate what body language and facial expressions intimate about relationships. My favorite video, "Italian Dreams" (2006), includes a moment that shows the back of a woman sitting alone at a desk in a darkened room with only a high single window, through which we can see blue sky and falling snow. In that single image, Carrie Mae captures the loneliness that possibly every artist experiences as we face the task of trying to make something new.



**LOOKING INTO THE MIRROR, THE BLACK WOMAN ASKED,  
"MIRROR, MIRROR ON THE WALL, WHO'S THE FINEST OF THEM ALL?"  
THE MIRROR SAYS, "SNOW WHITE, YOU BLACK BITCH,  
AND DON'T YOU FORGET IT!!!"**

Carrie Mae Weems, "Mirror Mirror," 1987-88.

© Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

**Lyle Ashton Harris, born in the Bronx, N.Y., in 1965**

Carrie Mae Weems is, for me, the Ida B. Wells of the contemporary art scene. Her work is unflinching and has been for decades. She remains a vital force in the art world, but also in the world at large, thanks to her precise, critical language and her uncompromising ability to speak to power with finesse, brilliance and clarity.

I first saw Carrie's work in the "Black Male" exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1994, although I had been exposed to some of it as a master's student at CalArts, where she had also studied. It's important to recognize now, when identity politics are in vogue, that Carrie Mae was making this work 20 years ago, at a time when these issues were not so accepted by the art world. The "Kitchen Table Series," for instance, is so deeply elegant and affirmative of the "black familiar" decades before this subject matter was in museum shows. That series feels universal and highly culturally specific — grounded in black life — which is no easy accomplishment.

The piece that has really always stood out to me, though, is from the "Ain't Jokin" series (1987-88), the one with a woman looking into the mirror ("Mirror, Mirror"). It's a work whose sting resonates today as much as it did 25 years ago, when it was made. And it's funny because it's formally not the most elegant of her works, but its succinct, matter-of-fact language — the way the reflection in the mirror cuts through so many of the excesses of beauty and fashion and culture, through notions of beauty that are the foundation of Western art — registers deeply.

Carrie's influence is wide, and not just in terms of the work being made by young artists who admire her. Her event "Carrie Mae Weems LIVE" at the Guggenheim was the most important cultural conference of that caliber since the Black Popular Culture Conference at the Dia Center for the Arts in 1991. This conference was the trigger for me to investigate my own photographic archive of Ektachrome images, which documented many of our first encounters, and resulted in the book "Today I Shall Judge Nothing That Occurs." Her presence and work pushes other artists to reflect on ourselves and interrogate our histories.

She doesn't make concessions and that is part of what makes her a legend. She has never been seduced by fame or prizes or museum exposure. In fact, she occupies those financial and cultural spaces and opens them up to others. Her retrospective at the Guggenheim in 2014 — that could have very easily just been a midcareer exhibition of Carrie Mae Weems. It's a very different thing to use that opportunity to crack open the edifice of whiteness, if you will, and bring necessary voices into that space.



Carrie Mae Weems, "Untitled (Woman Brushing Hair)," 1990, from "The Kitchen Table Series." © Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

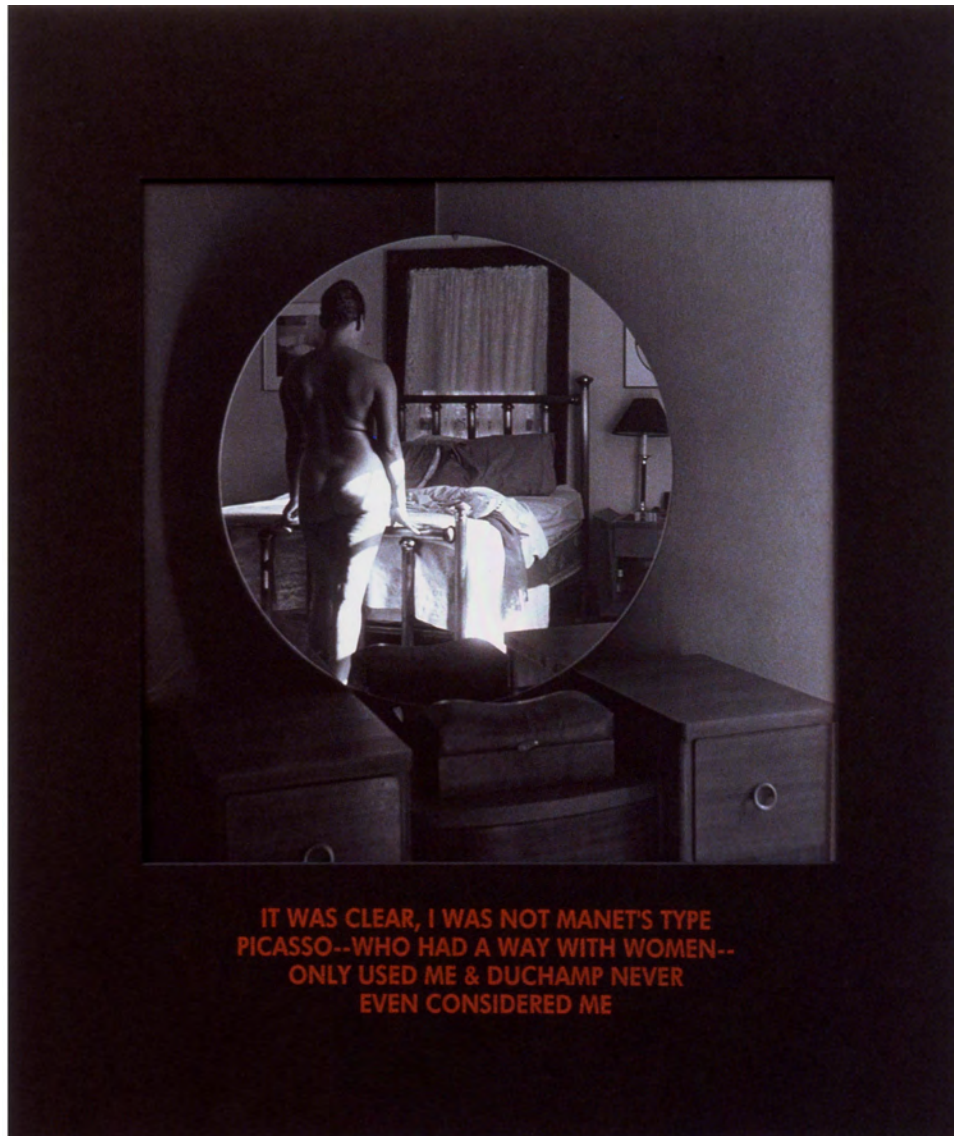


**Kalup Linzy, born in Clermont, Fla., in 1977**

My first encounter with the work of Carrie Mae Weems was in 2002, when I saw her iconic “Kitchen Table Series” from 1990 in an exhibition titled “The Field’s Edge: Africa, Diaspora, Lens” at the University of South Florida Contemporary Art Museum in Tampa. During that time, I was completing my M.F.A., which included my 2003 thesis video “Conversations Wit De Churen II: All My Churen,” in which I play all the members of a black Southern family. As I looked at her photographs, I remember reflecting on my personal experiences with my own family, and on how many important conversations happened around the kitchen table, which was the central location in our home.

Being an artist of color, I knew there would be challenges and potentially pushback to sharing these kinds of stories in a museum context. Seeing Weems present staged domestic moments in a museum had political and cultural implications — I felt I, too, could present my work here — even as certain other works by Weems confirmed there would be obstacles. Photographs from her “Ain’t Jokin” series come to mind. One picture is captioned: “Looking into the mirror, the black woman asked: ‘Mirror, mirror on the wall, who’s the finest of them all?’ The mirror says: ‘Snow White, you black bitch, and don’t you forget it!!!’”

Her work still resonates with me and continues to be relevant. Although I hadn’t met Weems until recently, I have always felt close to her through her work. I was ecstatic when she told me she was also a fan of mine!



A panel from Carrie Mae Weems's "Not Manet's Type" (1997). © Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

**Shirin Neshat, born in Qazvin, Iran, in 1957**

Carrie Mae Weems is one of the most influential artists of our time and certainly one of the most inspiring artists on my list. The evolution of Carrie's work, from photography to film to performance art, and her longstanding and unapologetic conviction in targeting issues of race, political injustice and feminism, have resulted in a remarkable career.

Carrie is a pioneer, an artist who stayed the course at a time when the art world was oblivious to artists of color, particularly if their art was politically charged, and she helped pave the way for a new generation of African-American artists who are flourishing today.

What I'm most impressed by is how Carrie has continued to reinvent herself and her relationship to her audience. With the use of her powerful voice and position as an artist, she has turned into a cultural activist, bringing various communities together on a grass roots level to engage in discourse about the role of art and artists today. Her call for dialogue seems particularly timely in the current political climate in America.

It's my opinion that artists like Carrie are rare in how they mobilize and inspire other artists who may have fallen into a state of despair, questioning the place of art in a moment in history when we are faced with growing threats of fascism, and an art world that is primarily concerned with market value. Artists like Carrie Mae Weems elevate the role of artists within the cultural and political landscape, and reinforce the concept of art as a catalyst for hope and change to come.



Carrie Mae Weems, "Welcome Home," 1978-84.

© Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

**Catherine Opie, born in Sandusky, Ohio, in 1961**

As a woman artist, there has never been a moment in my life that I haven't followed the artistic brilliance of Carrie Mae Weems. The word "Bravery" instantly comes to mind when describing her work: It is brave to be bold and to call out the wrong within the world. Critically important, her photographs speak to the rawness of racism in American culture. I thank Carrie Mae Weems for making us all better artists through her dedication and ever-questioning eye.



Carrie Mae Weems, "Untitled (Man reading newspaper)," 1990, from "The Kitchen Table Series." © Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

### **Xaviera Simmons, born in New York, N.Y., in 1977**

My first recollections of Carrie's work are of viewing parts of "The Kitchen Table Series" in 1994, at Thelma Golden's critical "Black Male" exhibition at the Whitney. I can vividly remember the wave of excitement I felt as a young person laying eyes on those images, which were like nothing I had seen in my high school art history courses. All of the emotions embedded in that rich, mysterious project formed questions in my mind: Who was this artist, what were her motivations for picturing these characters and how could each individual photograph contain so much complexity? From that moment, I have followed Carrie's work and watched it continuously mature, awed by her formal engagement with photography and her ability, as an artist, to be an image maker, performer, director, producer and actor.

Carrie Mae Weems is breathtaking, a brilliant intellectual whose presence is viscerally felt. As a student at Bard College, where I studied photography, I came to appreciate the nuance with which she shapes image, narrative and history in her work. To experience the many facets of her practice — its formal, textural, narrative, critical, artistic and social historical layers — is to witness a stunning, intensely critical mind. Her work has had an enormous impact on my understanding of the formal qualities of photography, of art historical concerns and of the relationship between art historical and present-day practices. Carrie's work lays bare the responsibility of the artist to document, portray, construct and innovate through images.

Carrie Mae is a committed champion of photography and its ability to pierce the sociopolitical landscape. Her work holds the key to visually linking many aspects of our collective American history, especially those parts that can slip beneath the wave of cultural amnesia. The artistic exploration of history and its bearing on the present requires the skilled hands of a master. Carrie is one of those masters.





A billboard by Carrie Mae Weems for Hank Willis Thomas's For Freedoms project, entitled "With Democracy in the Balance There is Only One Choice," Cleveland, Ohio, 2016. © Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

### **Hank Willis Thomas, born in Plainfield, N.J., in 1976**

I've known Carrie Mae Weems my entire life. She's not only a peer, but has been one of my mother's best friends for over 30 years. My mother is a curator, and she included Carrie Mae's work in exhibitions all over the country and abroad, and they collaborated on certain works together, so she and I go way back. I was always in awe of her — Carrie Mae is a person that you don't forget. She's incredibly charismatic and thoughtful and on point about so many things — she's an inspiration, a fabulous person making strong, powerful and beautiful statements.

Carrie Mae is one of the first artists I knew to use images and text, and to use archival materials in the making of her work, and that shaped my vision when I chose to become an artist. My world was formed by her series "Not Manet's Type" (1997), in which she challenges the aesthetics of beauty in Western art. "The Kitchen Table Series" has also always stuck with me; it's both intimate and an enigma. Her use of language and sense of justice is extraordinary. We recently did a billboard together, for instance, for my project For Freedoms, which read, "With democracy in the balance there's only one choice." She made a print for People for the American Way, an advocacy organization that defends constitutional values under attack, in 1996, that says, "Tell me, I beseech you, when I casted my vote to you, did I cast it to the wind?" There's this amazing poetry to her work, both visually and textually, that I think keeps her in a league of her own.

Her career has been a marathon. Her work was not honored for a long time in the way that many of her peers were, but she just kept at it. Now, I think her influence is everywhere, from the conference she staged at the Guggenheim in 2014, to the project she just did at the Park Avenue Armory, to projects she's done at the Kennedy Center. She's tireless and relentless, and you can't be in her orbit without being in some way shaped by her. I think people miss how much a mentor she has been to so many artists like Deana Lawson, LaToya Ruby Frazier, myself and many others. I'm not sure if I've succeeded, but I'm trying my best to follow in her footsteps.