

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Rianna Jade Parker, "Black People Work from the Position of 'We':
An Interview with Carrie Mae Weems," *Frieze*, October 25, 2019

Frieze

'Black People Work from the Position of "We"': An Interview with Carrie Mae Weems

BY RIANNA JADE PARKER

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The lauded photographer of Black American life discusses community, cooking and Aretha Franklin with Rianna Jade Parker



After three decades of image-making, Carrie Mae Weems reigns as one of the most highly regarded American artists. Since the 1980s, Weems has produced more than a dozen photographic series, overlapping text and audio-video work to construct delicate and deeply considered portraits of Black American life. Upon receiving her first camera at 21, she began taking pictures, developing a slow and contemplative practice that led to such landmark works as her famed 'Kitchen Table Series' (1990) and a MacArthur Fellowship in 2013. In 2014, she became the first Black artist to have a retrospective at New York's Guggenheim Museum.

This year, Weems closed the Serpentine Galleries' annual Park Night series in London with *A Meditation on the History of Violence*. A collaboration with the artists and musicians Nona Hendryx and Carl Hancock Rux, the evening of readings and performances testified to Weems's continued dedication to social activism and her growing concern for the widespread state violence impacting Black American men and their families.



Carrie Mae Weems, 2019. Courtesy:
Serpentine Galleries, London;
photograph: ©David Broda

RJP I had a very specific question for you because I was thinking about how much money I spend on everything else but cooking. When you were making 'The Kitchen Table Series' did you get to sit and actually eat at the kitchen table?

CM (Laughs) I cook every day I'm home. I think I use it as a segue between my workday and my evening. It's something that pulls me out of the studio. I go upstairs and prepare some meal for me and my husband.

RJP What do you like to eat?

CM I eat all kinds of food, but my favourite food is really good food. I love oxtails. And since I can't make really good food every day because I'm too busy to do that level of shopping, I keep telling my husband, 'I think we're going to have to do something about this.' It's time for a change.

RJP What are you reading at the moment? I chose Saidiya Hartman's *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* (2019) as my summer read but, admittedly, I have not yet finished it. She has such an impressive and poetic ability to weave together very complex histories of Black women in 20th-century America with miniscule fragments of material overlooked in the archives.

CM I know, I'm so excited. She just won a MacArthur Fellowship. I think that's fabulous. I made a photograph of her long ago, so it's really lovely.

I'm currently reading a biography of Aretha Franklin, which is extraordinary. It's an official biography, because Aretha had very specific ideas about how she wanted to be represented. She was a very closed woman. The only thing that she ever gave up was in her song. That was where you discovered her – her meaning, her message, her life.

There's a section of the biography where the writer, I can't think of his name at the moment, goes to speak with her sisters and brothers. They say, 'We're really hoping that maybe she might open up to you, because she's never spoken to anyone about her life, including her sisters and her brothers.'



Carrie Mae Weems, *Untitled (Woman playing solitaire)* from 'The Kitchen Table Series', 1990. Courtesy: © the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

RJP Very interesting, she was exercising her right to opacity.

CM There's a theme in most people's life, there's a theme in my life, that we come back to over and over again. How do I talk about Blackness now, for instance? You talked about it in one way 15 years ago, you talked about it in another way ten years ago and you talked about it in another way last year: you come back to that theme over and over. There's something about that that I find extraordinary. That there is a single theme, or two, that run through your life, that you attempt to unpack.

RJP I find self-archiving important because I want to have some say in how people remember me.

CM It's an interesting thing isn't it? I save invitations. I'm just collecting it all, because I think some of it is fascinating. I'm interested in what people ask me to do and how they ask: what the requests are and how the request is made. I've been saving all this material and, occasionally, when I have a moment, I build it into a diary.



Carrie Mae Weems, *On the Verge*, 2016. Courtesy: © the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

RJP Amazing! We will appreciate that in days to come.

CM We'll see. The thing that I'm most interested in is actually what people are doing in the world. My connection with other artists and what those artists are doing and how they're doing it; how they're building it, how they're making it. I'm interested in what Theaster Gates is doing through his Dorchester Projects, what Mark Bradford might be doing through Art + Practice, what Rick Lowe might be doing with Project Row Houses.

These are deep practices that bring together hundreds of other artists. The ideas of generosity that are embedded in that kind of work are amazing and, in a lot of ways, unique. There are not a lot of Anglo artists who work in this way, because the position of 'I' has been so totalized there. Black people are working from the position of 'we'. We talk about community much more. We talk about who we are as a people emerging out of a situation.

We participate differently around the question of social and artistic responsibility and then social possibility. And so, mapping that is something I'm deeply interested in and that I've been doing for a very long time.

But let me ask you about your own curatorial practice (as part of the collective Thick/er Black Lines). I'm really happy to be in London – I haven't been here for maybe 10 or 12 years, or something. The last time I was here I actually made photographs at the British Museum and at the Tate. I flew in, I shot them and I left. The thing that I'm noticing on this trip is what seems like an unprecedented rise of young Black British artists, curators, historians, writers, critics, etc. But there is very little crossover between artists working here and artists working in the United States.



Carrie Mae Weems, *Slow Fade to Black*, 2019, installation at Metro Hall, Toronto. Courtesy: © the artist, CONTACT and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York; photograph: Toni Hafkenscheid

RJP This is very true!

CM They are a world apart. There's a tiny group that cross over, but not very many. John [Akomfrah], David Adjaye, Isaac Julien etc. But I can't really think of a single Black woman artist of their stature who is also operating in the United States. Why do you think that is?

RJP I attended the press conference for the opening of Kara Walker's (Tate Modern Turbine Hall commission), *Fons Americanus* (2019). The work is a grand reiteration of the Victoria Memorial in front of Buckingham Palace. The Tate director and curators described the work as a 'joyous' and 'liberatory' monument 'taking on Britannia'.

CM I've never seen Kara's work as joyous.



Carrie Mae Weems, *Heave, A Theatre Room*, 2018, installation at Cornell University, New York. Courtesy: © the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

RJP Right! But this is exemplary of how UK institutions are very particular about who they provide with highly visible platforms. Although race and gender are frequent themes, these are made a lot more palatable and issues of responsibility are relinquished when historical connections to the UK are shrouded. It's less grating to have someone pointing the finger from further away.

The most recognized Blackness – by which I mean the most cited, the most 'real' or 'authentic' Black voice – is American. Whilst home talent like Lubaina Himid has only become widely recognized since winning the

Turner Prize in 2017, at the age of 64, after a very active career of addressing the British Empire. Himid is easier to ignore than Walker is.

CM I understand what you're saying, the distant view. That's a very interesting take. Ultimately, it gets back down to a similar question, probably for both your generation and mine, which is: How do you build connections across the diaspora? Of course, I'm always interested in knowing who's who and what's what. Who is being lauded, who's being heralded as the next great? Who is fabulous and interesting and dynamic?

I'm also interested in people like you, who are working and asking the deep questions that allow us to advance and progress deeply in the significance of the art and therefore in the significance of our humanity? What does it mean to be Black? What does it mean to be a woman? What does it mean to be a creative thinker? It seems to me that those are some of the questions that you're also unpacking. And I'm very interested, ultimately, to know how you're going to answer them in the future. It's lovely to meet you.

Main image: Carrie Mae Weems, Heave, A Case Study: A Quiet Place?, 2019. University of Toronto. Courtesy: ©the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York; photograph: Dominic Chan.

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