

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Cassie Packard, "Work by Carrie Mae Weems Acquired by National Gallery, Displayed With Memorial to Black Union Soldier," *Hyperallergic*, May 19, 2021

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NEWS

Work by Carrie Mae Weems Acquired by National Gallery, Displayed With Memorial to Black Union Soldiers

Two panels of Weems's work feature a photograph of a 19th-century memorial to the soldiers in the 54th Regiment, now on display beside the original sculpture.



Cassie Packard May 19, 2021



Carrie Mae Weems, "Untitled" (1 of 7) (1996, printed 2020) inkjet print with sandblasted text on glass in wood frame (National Gallery of Art, Washington, Patrons' Permanent Fund; all photos courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC)

A stirring work by Carrie Mae Weems, a seven-part suite of blue-toned inkjet prints featuring an array of historical photographs, overlaid with sandblasted text or musical scores on glass, is the latest acquisition by the National

Gallery of Art in Washington, DC. “Untitled” (1996, printed 2020) features reproductions of a c. 1915 photograph of the Morris Williams family — a Black family that lived on Chicago’s South Side — and Doris Ulmann’s 1930s photogravures of ceremonial foot-washing, which are layered with textual allusions to the Great Migration, the mass exodus out of the American South by over six million Black Americans between 1915 and 1970. Two reproductions of Russell Lee’s 1941 photograph of a processional at an Episcopal church in Chicago’s South Side are overlaid with Miles Davis and Duke Ellington musical scores.

The first and final panels pair poetic wartime writings with reproductions of Richard Benson’s 1973 photograph of a memorial to the soldiers in the **54th Regiment**. Formed shortly after President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, the 54th Regiment was among the first infantry units to be composed of Black Union soldiers during the Civil War; by the end of the war, 10% of Union soldiers were Black.

Benson’s photo, reproduced by Weems, is a detail shot of *The Shaw 54th Regiment Memorial*. The monument, the bronze version of which was installed on Boston Common in 1897, was sculpted by Augustus Saint-Gaudens in the late 19th century on commission from private citizens. Saint-Gaudens worked on the memorial for over a decade. Radical for its time, it sensitively honored not only the commander of the 54th Regiment — Robert Gould Shaw, the son of white abolitionists — but also those soldiers who fought alongside him, storming Fort Wagner in 1863.



Augustus Saint-Gaudens Shaw Memorial, 1900 patinated plaster, US Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Saint-Gaudens National Historic Site, Cornish, New Hampshire, on long-term loan to the National Gallery of Art

Highlighting the intimate relationship between two works made almost a century apart, the National Gallery has installed the new acquisition by Weems alongside Gaudens' historic memorial, which is on long-term loan to the museum from the US Department of the Interior, the National Park Service, and the Saint-Gaudens National Historic Site. Alongside the display, the museum has included a list of the names of the soldiers at the Battle of Fort Wagner who ended up killed, wounded, captured, or missing.

“Ever since their heroic actions during the Civil War, the 54th Regiment has served as a touchstone for the country as it wrestles with issues of race and racism,” said Kaywin Feldman, the National Gallery’s director, in a statement. “At a time when monuments to the Confederacy and to Confederate military leaders were appearing across the nation, *The Shaw 54th Regiment Memorial* stood as a glorious exception — a monument honoring those who fought against slavery, fully aware of the sacrifice required. The juxtaposition of these works reminds us once again how the past remains relevant, providing profound inspiration for contemporary artists.”



Carrie Mae Weems, "Untitled" (4 of 7) (1996, printed 2020), inkjet print with sandblasted text on glass in wood frame (National Gallery of Art, Washington, Patrons' Permanent Fund)

The National Gallery, which reopened to the public on May 14 after being closed for six months, recently overhauled its public image for the first time since its founding. In addition to more cosmetic changes, such as new signage, the museum — whose collection is currently 92% male and 97% white — has committed to acquiring work by a more diverse group of artists; programming exhibitions that highlight work by women and people by color; and hiring more diverse museum leadership.