

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Marley Marius, "Carrie Mae Weems Considers the American Political Circus With Her Startling and Powerful New Exhibition," *Vogue*, December 3, 2021

VOGUE

ARTS

Carrie Mae Weems Considers the American Political Circus With Her Startling and Powerful New Exhibition

BY MARLEY MARIUS

December 3, 2021



Foreground: Carrie Mae Weems, *Seat or Stand and Speak*, 2021. Background: Carrie Mae Weems, *Cyclorama - Conditions, A Video in 7 Parts*, 2021. Photo: Stephanie Berger Photography/Park Avenue Armory

This week marked the opening of "[The Shape of Things](#)," an exhibition of new and recent work by the artist Carrie Mae Weems at the Park Avenue Armory in New York. Spanning film, sculpture, and large-scale installation, the show comprises a deeply compelling—at moments even revelatory—exploration of our socio-political moment as interpreted by one of our greatest living image-makers.

As much an activist as a creative, Weems has a long and celebrated history of engaging social issues with her art. In 1984, her first show, titled “Family Pictures and Stories,” drew on the writings of Zora Neale Hurston and the photography of Roy DeCarava for its vibrant depictions of Black American life. In subsequent projects, Weems often inserted herself into the frame (as in her [Kitchen Table Series](#) from the early 1990s), centering issues of racism and sexism both in art and the world beyond it. As the critic and writer [Megan O’Grady](#) once [described](#) Weems’s 2016 series *Scenes & Take*, the artist 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.”

In “The Shape of Things,” Weems uses one very pointed metaphor to discuss the American political arena: a circus. “I was very interested in the politics of the circus, and the circus of politics,” she explained during a press preview on Wednesday—but it wasn’t until the presidency of Donald J. Trump that she found her perfect ringleader. The centerpiece of the show, which occupies the Armory’s 55,000-square-foot Wade Thompson Drill Hall, is a towering cyclorama in which the seven-part video work *Conditions* (2021) plays. Popular in the late 19th century, cyclorama paintings—comparable to 360-degree murals—effectively placed viewers at the center of scenes like the [Battle at Gettysburg](#), as captured by the French artist Paul Philippoteaux in 1884.



Carrie Mae Weems, *Cyclorama - Conditions, A Video in 7 Parts*, 2021. Photo: Stephanie Berger Photography/Park Avenue Armory

At the Armory, Weems re-creates that form as a cinema screen-in-the-round, where all kinds of inspired and startling projections play. In one moment, footage from the January 6 insurrection is spliced together with clips of clowns and circus troupes; in another, three silhouetted figures step endlessly, restlessly in place, moving neither meaningfully forward nor obviously back. Weems mostly narrates these vignettes, employing her richly resonant speaking voice to discuss, among other things, the ubiquity of police brutality (“Imagine the impossible. Imagine the worst of the worst. And know that it is always happening”). Remarkably, “The Shape of Things” was not postponed by the pandemic, but the events of this year and last have certainly left their mark on it. “Since we’ve been talking, of course, a lot has happened in America and in the world,” the Armory’s artistic director, Pierre Audi, noted, “and some of this work today is probably colored in a novel way from how [Weems] originally intended it.”



Carrie Mae Weems, *It's Over – A Diorama*, 2021. Elements courtesy of Dienst + Dotter Antikviteter. Photo: Stephanie Berger Photography/Park Avenue Armory

Elsewhere, in a darkened passage rather evoking a haunted house, *It's Over–A Diorama* (2021) doubles as a memorial to victims of anti-Black violence, like Breonna Taylor and [Ahmaud Arbery](#), filled with flowers, candles, balloons, and framed photographs; the darkly humorous portrait series *Missing Links (2 Different Bodies of Work)*, from 2004, blurs the line between man and beast; and in *The Weight* (2021)—flanked by tufts of what looks like cotton candy—miniature Black busts have big, pink helium balloons coming out of their heads, a precarious pressure objectified. Next, comes Weems's mesmeric *Lincoln, Lonnie and Me* from 2014 (a direct precursor to *Conditions*), which uses a "Pepper's ghost" illusion to picture American history "as a racialized theater of deadly repetition," as Huey Copeland [has written](#). The piece also collages a reading of the Gettysburg Address and remarks by the artist and activist Lonnie Graham with footage from busing protests, images of boxers and dancers and jokers, and other scenes.



Carrie Mae Weems, *Lincoln, Lonnie and Me – A Story in 5 Parts*, 2014, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. Photo: Stephanie Berger

The final work in “The Shape of Things”—should you adhere to the prescribed route, and *you should*—is *All Blue*—A *Contemplative Site* (2021), a door before the moon. Is it a way out? A reprieve from our “time of murder, mayhem and mass protest,” per Weems? Or does it point, instead, to the fact that there *is* no way out; that our strange blue planet is all we know and all we’ve got?

The new show takes its name from a “convening” at the Armory that Weems staged in 2017, as an artist in residence. Then, she invited creatives and scholars, including the playwrights Lynn Nottage and Anna Deavere Smith, jazz pianist and composer Jason Moran, and artist Hank Willis Thomas for a series of conversations, readings, and performances—and she will do the same this year with “Land of Broken Dreams,” a summit lasting from Thursday, December 9 to Saturday, December 11. With Agnes Gund, Antwaun Sargent, Julie Mehretu, Deborah Kass, and Deborah Willis among its participants, the program will offer space for listening, thinking, learning, and most importantly, reflecting on work still left to be done.

“The Shape of Things” is on at the Park Avenue Armory in New York through December 31. For tickets and more information, visit [here](#).