

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Aruna D'Souza, "Carrie Mae Weems Sets the Stage and Urges Action,"
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CRITIC'S PICK

Carrie Mae Weems Sets the Stage and Urges Action

In "The Shape of Things" at the Park Avenue Armory, the artist tells us how we got to this political moment, and asks us to decide what comes next.

By Aruna D'Souza

Dec. 6, 2021

At the beginning of the seven-part film projected onto a cylindrical screen, a Cyclorama that forms the centerpiece of Carrie Mae Weems's walk-in installation at the Park Avenue Armory, we see the performer and choreographer Okwui Okpokwasili sitting in a chair with papers falling like leaves around her. Weems's voice, with its deep, round tones, tells us that to navigate the now, "she needs to look back over the landscape of memory."

Incorporating work from throughout the artist's four-decade-long career, "The Shape of Things" has a strong retrospective quality — confronting the past in order to understand the present — without being a retrospective exhibition. The artist traces our current national predicament, with ever-present anti-Blackness and eroding democracy foremost among many woes, while reminding us that what we're seeing in our political landscape is nothing new. In fact, she's been telling us about it for decades. What is less present, sometimes frustratingly so, are ways to imagine a different future.

Weems is a MacArthur award winning photographer, performance artist, video maker, activist — and one of the most important image-makers working today. With her penchant for gathering artists and thinkers of all sorts to mull over urgent issues shaping our cultural climate, she is also an impresario of sorts. This show grew out of a daylong convening that she produced during her residency at the Armory in 2017, shortly after Donald Trump was elected president, in which she asked participants questions like "How do you characterize violence?"; "How can artists continue to work in the current climate?"; and "With terror pressing on us from so many angles, how do you maintain hope?"



The 55,000-foot Drill Hall with “Seat or Stand and Speak” in the foreground, and the Cyclorama in the background. Stephanie Berger/Park Avenue Armory

Three years later, with Trump out of office but the specter of the Jan. 6 assault on the U.S. Capitol and murders of Black people at the hands of police and vigilantes fresh in our shared consciousness, Weems once again takes up the role of ringmaster. This exhibition has the structure of a circus, complete with side shows, 19th-century optical devices, and illusions that reveal the tragicomic spectacle of our recent and not so recent past.

Our entry is choreographed through the drill hall’s vast, darkened, 55,000-square-foot space, past a group of spotlighted wooden chairs and giant megaphones (“Seat or Stand and Speak,” 2020). Frustratingly, these ersatz invitations to speak out are only for show — they don’t contain any mechanism to amplify your voice, a strange message in an exhibition that is designed to spur us to take action.

Next comes the curtained space of “Cyclorama — Conditions, a Video in 7 Parts” (2021). The installation nods to the 19th-century proto-cinematic device, in which continuous mural paintings were shown on the walls of a circular building, allowing viewers a 360-degree view. Some of the most famous American examples depicted famous Civil War battles.

The 40-minute video projected inside grapples, sometimes poetically and other times in a documentary way, with what Weems suggests is a contemporary civil war, as a rising, unapologetic white supremacy is met full force by anti-racist activists and the movement for Black Lives. Consisting of found footage, video and still photos culled from her earlier work as well as newly-shot, and a voice-over narration by Weems that looks back on recent events — sometimes violent protest, immigration crises, environmental disasters, police and institutional violence — as if from a distant future.



In the Cyclorama, shadow puppets enact a scene of slave-owning from “Louisiana Project,” which Weems sets today against Amy Cooper’s call to the police. Stephanie Berger/Park Avenue Armory

Weems’s analysis of our current political landscape will be familiar to anyone who has been paying attention over the past few years — including, I would imagine, most of those who visit the show on Park Avenue. What is more compelling are the visual and historical connections she makes — often insightful, sometimes funny, and occasionally quite direct — and the way she remixes her earlier work.

In the Cyclorama video, we see two different clips projected on the curved surface: one, a group of white, pro-segregation marchers in 1960s Boston; the other, a group of Black anti-segregation marchers who confronted them in the streets. Weems had originally used the footage in her 2012 installation “Cornered,” installing each on adjacent walls in a gallery in a way that highlighted the confrontation between two sides. Here, we see not so much contrast as continuity — the endless racism and the endless need to protest that racism.

Later, Weems lifts a sequence from her “Louisiana Project” (2003) of shadow puppets enacting a scene of slave-owning ladies having a tea party on the porch of a plantation house. This she overlays with audio of Amy Cooper, who, when an African American bird-watcher asked her to leash her dog in Central Park, infamously called 911 to report him as a threat. The commentary — on the way white women benefit from white supremacy, in the past and in the present — couldn’t be more biting, or stark.

In another sequence, a video of a clown dressed in red, white and blue conducting a brass band is intercut with cable news images of the Jan. 6 pro-Trump insurrection at the Capitol and historical footage of an animal trainer leading an elephant around a ring. (Tom Eccles, the curator of the exhibition, cites the adage “Elect a clown and expect a circus” in his note on the show.)

Other associations are more subtle, and gratifying so, as when Weems alternates silhouettes of men in hoodies walking across the screen in a gridlike array with historical images of prisoners, and coal miners in elevators being transported deep underground, spinning a delicate thread that connects race, incarceration and capitalist exploitation.



In a side show to the main event, “It’s Over — A Diorama” (2021) includes a makeshift memorial to victims of police violence. Stephanie Berger/Park Avenue Armory

A door festooned with stage lights leads to a series of “side shows.” “It’s Over — A Diorama” (2021) juxtaposes a makeshift memorial to too many victims of police violence, including Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery, and strange natural history displays. The most interesting, “Missing Links (2 Different Bodies of Work)” from 2004, includes images of Weems sporting various masks (donkey, elephant, chicken, monkey — the full range of American politicians).

The second ring in the circus is “Lincoln, Lonnie and Me — A Story in 5 Parts,” a 2012 work that takes the form of a 19th-century optical illusion called “Pepper’s Ghost.” (The piece has just been acquired by the Smithsonian American Art Museum.) The conceit is fantastically simple: by projecting light on a pane of glass (here, a sheet of Mylar), you could create the effect of spirits.

Weems’s version is housed in a black box; the screen is framed by half-closed red velvet curtains. Images — civil rights protesters, a sparring boxer, a re-enactment of the Kennedy assassination (from the artist’s 2008 “Constructing History” series), Weems dressed in the top hat and striped pants of a vaudeville performer and as a Playboy bunny trying to squeeze into her costume — emerge from, and then dissipate into, the ether.



Carrie Mae Weems, "Lincoln, Lonnie and Me – A Story in 5 Parts," includes ghostly images that disappear into the ether. Stephanie Berger/Park Avenue Armory

Voice-overs contrast the challenge made by President Abraham Lincoln in the Gettysburg Address — “that these dead shall not have died in vain” — with a clear-eyed, but ultimately pessimistic assessment of the state of the world by Lonnie Graham, a photographer, activist and Weems’s sometimes-collaborator, who talks about the futility of changing the attitudes of people who are steeped in preconceived ideas: “The curtains won’t fall apart, the lightning won’t come from the sky, the light bulb won’t illuminate,” he explains. Graham’s dedication is palpable, but so is his exhaustion, and I felt that exhaustion in my bones.

In a 2014 interview, Weems insisted that she wasn’t a political artist, and while that insistence has sometimes been hard to buy given her enduring engagement with the history of race and current events, her new project offers some insight into why this might indeed be the case. Throughout the show, and especially in “Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me,” Weems offers her analysis of the shape of things: a crossroads for democracy, in which white anxiety over waning power may well result in the end of our political institutions. Never, though, does she prescribe a path forward.



In the Park Avenue Armory, a multidisciplinary installation challenges the audience to act. Stephanie Berger/Park Avenue Armory

Instead, she creates opportunities for her audiences and collaborators to decide whether and how to take up the challenge of the moment. This may occur during a series of talks and performances here Dec. 9 through Dec. 11. In fact, at times I wondered if “The Shape of Things” functioned best as a stage set for the convening, where the real work of the exhibition might take place.

That point is also made manifest in “All Blue — A Contemplative Site” (2021), the last installation. Enclosed in a gauzy white scrim, on a stage bare as the set of a Samuel Beckett play, a door sits in front of a huge circular screen, onto which is projected the surface of the moon. It is as if Weems is saying to us: “I can bring you to the door, but only you can decide whether to walk through.”

Carrie Mae Weems: The Shape of Things

Through Dec. 31, Park Avenue Armory, 643 Park Ave. (212) 933-5812; armoryonpark.org.