

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Ben Luke, "Carrie Mae Weems at the Barbican review: a transcendent show from an artist who has delivered for 30 years," *Evening Standard*, June 21, 2023

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Carrie Mae Weems at the Barbican review: a transcendent show from an artist who has delivered for 30 years

The American artist's first major UK museum show is breathtaking



By [Ben Luke](#) | 21 June 2023

Review at a glance



A neat trick opens Carrie Mae Weems's first major UK museum show. It begins in the upper mezzanine. And climbing the stairs, you see what appear to be abstract paintings. These surveys often start with the artist's earliest work; "I hadn't realised that she began as a painter," I thought. Except she hadn't.

These aren't early works, they're from 2021. Neither are they paintings; they're photographs, the medium that Weems has used with tremendous flair and power over more than 30 years. And they're very definitely not abstract.

They show boarded up shopfronts in Weems's native Portland, Oregon, where people demonstrating against the murder of George Floyd had written slogans, only for them to be erased by the coloured paint, framed here by Weems to look like Franz Klines or Clyfford Stills. The riffs on abstraction are not accidental, either. She points to another deletion: of many black painters from official histories of abstraction.

This silencing of voices of colour is a consistent theme through the show. "This invisibility, this erasure out of the complex history of our life and time, is the greatest source of my longing," Weems says. And that longing is expressed through everything from poetry to activism across this stirring, angry-making yet perfectly paced and brilliantly staged exhibition.

Weems's voice is a compelling guide: each group of works is framed by quotes from the artist. Her spoken voice, too – all lyricism and gravitas – accompanies us throughout, most notably as it spills from the show's magnum opus, the seven-act panoramic video installation *The Shape of Things* (2021).

This extraordinary 40-minute work, shown on a high, curving screen several metres wide, is something of a summation, a retrospective of previous projects. These include the Louisiana Project (2003), where silhouetted slave-owning ladies take tea on the plantation, and *Cornered* (2012), where 1960s pro- and anti-segregation marchers confront each other on the Boston streets.

To this, she adds news footage of the Capitol riots on January 6 and desperate refugees across the world. She reads a series of beautifully written texts, including *Histories of Violence*, about police brutality – "Imagine that you are always stopped, always charged, always convicted" – and *How Do You Measure a Life?* "Do you measure it by the moments lost, or by the moments gained?"

There are scenes of masked people, isolated even among a crowd. It is solemn, tremendously moving. But then, cut into the original footage is a scene of apparent deliverance, where five figures, including the choreographer Okwui Okpokwasili, stand, dreamily drenched, amid pouring rain.



Carrie Mae Weems, *If I Ruled the World*, 2004 /



Jemima Yong

The Shape of Things evokes 19th-century Cycloramas – not Weems’s only nod to early forms of image-making. She uses the early hologram-like technique called Pepper’s Ghost to create marvellously spectral images, set amid a classic red-curtained stage in Lincoln, Lonnie and Me (2012). It’s a meditation on US history, and the legacies of oppression and violence in her homeland.

Weems herself reads from Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg address. But there are flashes of performance and art: a tap dancer moving to bluesman Blind Willie Johnson, a brief, flickering restaging of the nude reclining figure from Marcel Duchamp’s *Étant Donnés*. It’s confounding and haunting.

Even in these video and moving-image presentations, photography is ever present. And Weems is among the most distinctive image-makers using a camera. In her early Kitchen Table Series (1990) she stages scenes of domestic encounters – lovers or spouses, friends, mothers and children – with her as protagonist. Fictional texts that hint at the meaning of these scenes hang next to them.

Weems here fuses performance and photographic images to probe identity, race, class, womanhood and selfhood, every bit as dramatically and powerfully as better-known series like

Cindy Sherman's Untitled Film Stills. Weems is also the figure of her *Roaming* (2006) and *Museums* (2016) series, in which she stands in as her own muse, she says, with her back to us, looking at architectural temples of power and cultural value.



Carrie Mae Weems, *It's Over - A Diorama* / Jemima Yong

Perhaps most powerful of all is *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* (1995-96). She uses images of enslaved people found in Harvard University's archives – once used for racist polygenist theories – as well as other historic images of African American men and women, including a horrific shot of a brutalised enslaved man. She enlarges them, gives them a red filter and a vignette frame, and finally, crucially, gives them a voice through text written on the works.

Weems is using her own medium critically to reveal its disturbing past. Conceptually precise, formally spare, it's breathtaking stuff. And Weems has relentlessly delivered in the three decades since, as this transcendent show proves.

Barbican Art Gallery, June 22 to Sep 3; barbican.org.uk