

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Emily Dinsdale, "Carrie Mae Weems wants to shake us out of our bullshit," *Dazed*, June 22, 2023

DAZED

Carrie Mae Weems wants to shake us out of our bullshit

As Reflections for Now, her first major solo exhibition in the UK opens, the artist shares her wise words on 'beautifying the mess of a messy world'



Carrie Mae Weems, *Untitled (Woman and Daughter with Make Up)* from *Kitchen Table Series* (1990). © Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York / Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin.

Emily Dinsdale

As one of the most powerfully influential American artists of the day, Carrie Mae Weems makes art capable of elevating all who are willing. Her work, which engages directly with crucial

questions of cultural identity, social justice, power structures and desire, is able to “shake us out of our bullshit” and cut through the noise of ongoing discourses straight to the visceral, physical, beating heart of the matter.

Reflections for Now at London’s Barbican Art Gallery (Dazed Club members can book half-price tickets [here](#)) is Weems’ first major UK retrospective. The survey encompasses work from across the multidisciplinary artist’s career and spans three decades of extraordinary photographic series, films, and installations. From her seminal *Kitchen Table Series* (1990) to more recent work such as *Roaming* (2006), *Museums* (2016), *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* (1995–6) and the seven-chapter panoramic film *The Shape of Things* (2021), the exhibition draws us in with the sheer beauty of what we are encountering, before hitting us hard with the profundity of the message it delivers.

Alongside voicing “the specifics of our historic moment”, Weems writes: “My responsibility as an artist is to work, to sing for my supper, to make art, beautiful and powerful, that adds and reveals; to beautify the mess of a messy world.” The exhibition’s co-curator Raúl Muñoz de la Vega stressed the importance of beauty in Weems’ work. “Beauty and elegance is a key formal aspect of saying her work,” he tells Dazed. “In order to lure you to enter a very difficult conversation, she does it with the trick of beauty.”

Much of Weems’ work on display in *Reflections for Now* also examines the way in which history is culturally produced and by whom. What ideologies are impregnated within the enduring stories we tell ourselves about our own histories? How are seemingly self-evident truths created, disseminated and upheld? How are systems of power and oppression present and visible in everything around us? From scientific studies, anthropologic studies, architecture, urban planning, and the persistent narratives that supposedly make the world legible to us.

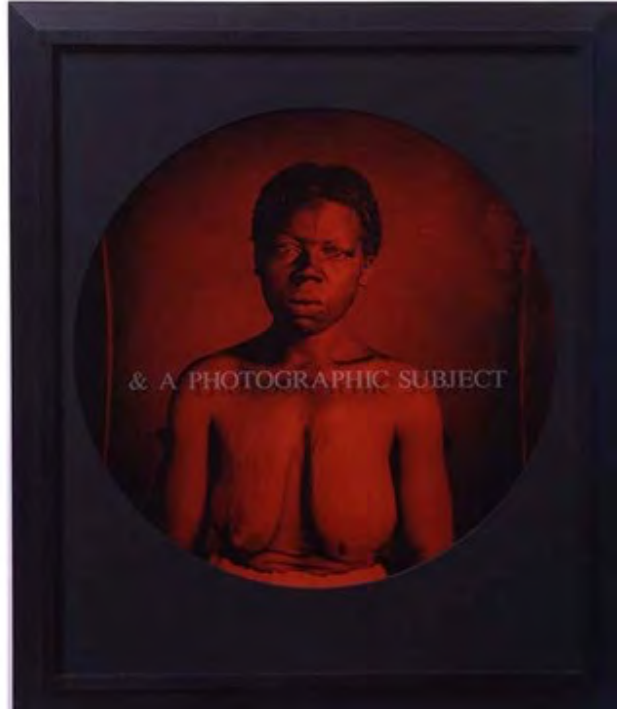
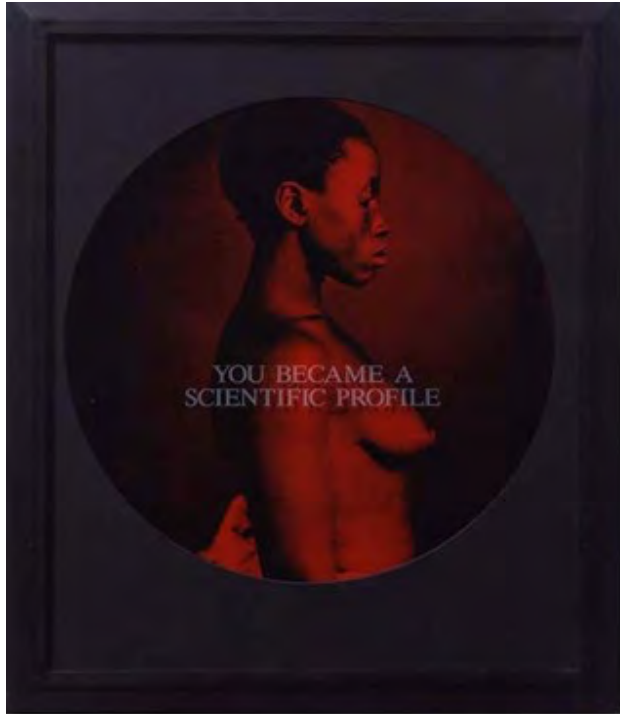
Museums (2006) saw the artist taking a series of self-portraits in which, with her back to the camera, she contemplates the monumental structures of institutions and architecture, from Mussolini’s Fascist architecture to the ruins of ancient Rome and the Louvre. The images are beautiful, cinematic. “I’m standing right there as a witness and I’m asking the audience to bring their criticality, along with me, into the examination of cultural space, political space, social space, Empire,” she explains in a press conference at the Barbican. “Immediately, I was very involved in the act of affordance. Like, what did it really mean for me to stand in front of the British Museum as a body, as a woman, as a brown person, as a Black person, as a critical observer thinking and wondering about the role of institutions in the construction of history; the construction of culture, the construction of a certain kind of knowledge that is considered to be preeminent and important.”

From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried (1995–6) is a potent, desperately moving artwork which uses 19th and 20th-century photographs of African and African American people to show the insidious ways in which the representation of this diaspora has been historically reduced to a collection of degrading stereotypes. The pictures were originally commissioned by Harvard

with the purpose of proving phenological theories about the superiority of whiteness. Placing poignant text across the portraits, Weems' attempts to restore the humanity that was denied the subjects in the making of these portraits.

When an image from the work appeared on the cover of *Art in America*, Harvard threatened to sue Weems. Muñoz de la Vega tells Dazed. "After reflection and, of course, a little moment of fear, she said, 'Well, actually, maybe you should sue me. Because maybe we should discuss who owns these images of people that were in slavery.'" Harvard swiftly withdrew their threat. But the anecdote speaks volumes about ideas of ownership and erasure, reminding us how systems of power continue to attempt to assert control over the dominant narratives that shape our perception of the world. Time and time again, Weems fills in those spaces and omissions in the complex, messy stories of history which have either been neglected or erased. "She has said of her work, 'I just tried to connect the dots.' And we see here how she makes these powerful connections between histories to see how we can navigate what is happening and what has happened."

In an afternoon hosted at Barbican, Weems sat down with the exhibition's curators Raúl Muñoz de la Vega and Florence Ostende to discuss the importance of compassion, the terror of perpetual whiteness, and the unique potency of art. Below, we share some quotes from their conversation.



Carrie Mae Weems, You Became A Scientific Profile; A Negroid Type; An Anthropological Debate; and & A Photographic Subject from From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried (1995-96). © Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York / Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin.

ON REFLECTIONS

“I’ve been really doing a lot of deep thinking. And I’m always surprised by the work, I’m always learning something from it. An artwork has its own power; its own ability to reveal specific kinds of knowledge. But I’ve been really thinking a great deal about this notion of reflection. I’ve used ideas about reflection over and over and over and over and over and over again. Probably some of my very first works as a young artist starting out when I was in my early 20s were about reflection. I’ve used mirrors a great deal. I’ve used mirrors as a reflection for myself and I’ve turned the mirror onto society itself.

“The idea is not only the way in which the work reflects our historical moment – which is important – but the more important thing is the way the audience then begins to reflect on self – on your own position in relationship to the moment in which we live, on your own position in relationship to race, on your own position in relationship to class, on your own position as it relates to gender, and sexuality, etc.

“An artwork has its own power; its own ability to reveal specific kinds of knowledge” – Carrie Mae Weems

“Often, there’s this idea that I am examining African American culture. It is *partly* an examination of African American culture, but it is much more about whiteness – the terror of perpetual whiteness as a source of power, suppression, exploitation and oppression. The work is only talked about in relation to the ways in which that reflective surface is bouncing off the Black body, to the extent that whites are the enemy, which I think would be a really wrong reading of the work. It is very much about *us* – what our interactions mean and the way in which we have – both sides - experienced it. What is our mutual responsibility in the examination, and in the result?

“We are in trouble... As much as we talk about inclusion, I really don’t see it, I really don’t experience it that richly” – Carrie Mae Weems

“We are in trouble. I look at this constantly, and I see binaries everywhere. As much as we talk about inclusion, I really don’t see it, I really don’t experience it that richly. I see groups of women together, groups of Asians together, groups of Blacks together groups. We live our lives in segregated, binary ways. And if that’s the way you live your life, that’s what’s reflected in society. It’s just that simple. And so, if you decide if you want to change – that we need something that is more holistic – then you actually have to live your life in that way. I think that that’s why I keep going back to this idea of reflection... because what is really being reflected back is you”



Carrie Mae Weems, *The Louvre from Museums* (2006). © Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York / Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin.

ON THE POLITICAL MOMENT

“America is shifting its demographics, we’re shifting from white to Black, to varying shades of brown, and this is going to have substantial and serious implications. The rise of Trumpism in the United States is the perfect example of that. Brexit is a perfect indication of this fear of the immigrant; this fear of the shifting demographics. And what it’s really going to mean to society is here, it is upon us. It’s having serious consequences and sometimes you get to get to see the

consequences on bodies in real ways. And so [the exhibition] is an exploration, I think, in the deepest way, of what this moment means for us and *to us*.”



Carrie Mae Weems, *It's Over — A Diorama* (2021). Installation view at Park Avenue Armory, New York, 2021. © Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York / Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin.

ON PERPETUAL WHITENESS

“Perpetual whiteness is the source of the greatest anxiety, in terms of its construction of power and its ability to dominate lives. And that’s what the work at its core is really about – the way in which the Black body attempts to maintain or hold on to its humanness in the course of battling and struggling against forces that are attempting to destroy you.

“I read something this morning about pathology – that’s not the word they used but that’s what it was – and I was thinking about the pathology of whiteness and the pathology of sexual violence used in war... this sort of sick kind of pathology and the circles of power that are encoded within it.

“The idea that one would see a child – an innocent body – during the act of war, and decide to perpetrate a series of sexual crimes against that child or woman is so wrapped in this twisted notion of power and privilege that it is only able to persist because of a certain kind of pathology wrapped around it. And so how do we break past that? How do we *see* one another? How we see one another as human is deeply important to our survival, to the extent that we

can act a certain kind of brutality upon one another. And that happens because of these circles of corrupt power, and privilege related to power. I think that if we don't deal with this, we are in for further degeneration within the culture itself. We're really in this twisted, twisted place"



Carrie Mae Weems, Untitled (Woman Standing Alone) from Kitchen Table Series (1990).© Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York / Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin.

ON GRACE

"I am angry, I am enraged, I am deeply upset, I am deeply hurt. And yet, as an artist, I like things to look a certain way. I'm extremely interested in crafting materials in such a way as to bring you into the room, close to these very complicated issues.

“Therefore, I think this idea about grace is so important. I was working on this piece, *Grace Notes* [2016], and I kept thinking, I love the word ‘grace’ but I wasn’t sure about its meaning. So I called my mother one day to ask her and we had this incredible conversation. She was not the person that I expect to give me the most complicated answer, but she is the one who came up with the fullest answer: that grace lies in compassion and love; that, in the face of rejection, you still offer the other yourself as a witness to their humanity; you counter their rejection by saying, ‘I still see your humanity.’ What an offering of love and understanding and forgiveness.

“Whether I’m critiquing institutions or museums, social systems or relationships it has to come through a lens of compassion because, otherwise, it’s just anger, it’s just noise” – Carrie Mae Weems

“I think these ideas are really embedded in my work; they carry through the work. Whether I’m critiquing institutions or museums, social systems or relationships it has to come through a lens of compassion because, otherwise, it’s just anger, it’s just noise. But when it comes through a lens of compassion, we’re actually able to see one another in a slightly different way, hopefully in a way that obligates us all. Because I think, and I’m hoping, that in some way, my work is attempting to elevate us and also to shake us out of our bullshit.”

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

Carrie Mae Weems’ Reflections for Now is running at Barbican Art Gallery until September 3 2023. Dazed Club members can book half-price tickets to the show [here](#).