

GLADSTONE

Jan Avgikos, "Carrie Mae Weems," *Artforum*, January 1, 2025

ARTFORUM

Gladstone Gallery

By Jan Avgikos



Carrie Mae Weems, *Cyclorama—The Shape of Things, a Video in 7 Parts*, 2021, 360-degree panoramic HD video projection, color, sound, 40 minutes. Installation View.
Photo: David Regen.

Like so many African American artists who emerged during the 1980s, Carrie Mae Weems mined the history of the United States to interrogate its racist legacies, deploying archival images of enslaved people and photographs of modern-day Black men and women accompanied by texts lifted from the language of bigotry to deliver explicit and searing messages about the state of contemporary culture. These messages constituted what bell hooks termed “talking back.”

After more than four decades, Weems’s art continues to define a space of resistance to hegemonic discourse, and that trajectory remains the dominant force of her practice. But the mood has shifted: The anger is still there, yes, but it has been leavened by an elegiac, meditative quiet. Her exhibition at Gladstone Gallery, “The Shape of Things,” borrowed its title from her *Cyclorama—The Shape of Things*, 2021, an immersive seven-part film installation that encircles viewers as if to include (and implicate) them in the action on-screen. The film is both an acknowledgment of the continuing unmitigated injustices directed against people of color in America today and a sustained requiem for our collective loss of freedom and the unrequited struggle to achieve cultural harmony.

Weems is a documentarian at heart. She culls footage that captures the horrors of our day: the bloody, vicious assault on the US Capitol on January 6, 2021; the dreadful plight of migrants attempting to cross America’s borders; the numbing isolation of the pandemic. Anonymous hooded figures make repeat appearances in the film, symbolizing the steadily growing numbers of Black men killed by police and vigilantes. She includes flashbacks to old news reports she used in *Cornered*, 2016, a video installation depicting Black and white protesters in a violent face-off over segregation. Excerpts from another piece, *The Louisiana Project*, 2003, featuring silhouettes of plantation ladies taking tea, are paired with a recording of a 911 call made by Amy Cooper (aka the Central Park Karen) in 2020, in which she falsely accused a Black man of threatening her. Interspersed with present-day events are montages of vintage circus acts, clowns, and other droll moments that continuously deliver an ironic punch.

All of the footage has been slowed down—an important distancing device that suspends urgency, similar to the way memory decelerates and distorts our recollections, merging past and present in one continuous flow. One of the most arresting elements in *The Shape of Things* is the recurring presence of a singular female figure, choreographer and actress Okwui Okpokwasili, who bears witness to all the events unfolding around her. Eyes wide open, rapt but not demonstrably emotional, she takes everything in without response. Her steady, unyielding gaze seems to personify our own predicament: We see what is happening and we know right from wrong, but we can do very little to change what's coming.

Toward the end of the film, Weems alleviates the spiritual burden of profound powerlessness by offering a quasi-religious cleansing. Rain begins to fall upon five figures—including Okpokwasili, who has seen it all and finally finds release. She and the others, who fill the circular screen, are rejuvenated by the life-affirming showers, as if relieved from the weight of existence with all of its precarities and hurtfulness. They emanate quiet joy; a sense of rapture is truly palpable.

The final sequence offers a dreamlike apotheosis executed in candy-colored pastels. Weems herself appears in the role of a glamorous bespangled creature who joyously beams and swings above the clouds to the tune of Jimmy Durante's "Make Someone Happy" (1964). It's a beautiful thing to see, all shiny and frothy and carefree. It's also the ultimate cinematic gesture, to look to the stars as the place where dreams come true. But this sequence feels so disconnected from the gravity of the real-life problems the film confronts that it pushes the idea of washing all our sins away, if just temporarily, into pure fiction. It's a moment of delight that frequently verges on delirium, held together by only the faintest thread of hope.