Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video

Frist Center for the Visual Arts
Teacher Resource Guide
Preparing for your visit

The Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video teacher resource packet was designed to help teachers prepare students for their gallery visits and classroom follow-up. This packet contains a teacher resource guide and eight color art reproductions.

Teacher Resource Guide

This teacher resource guide begins with an introduction to Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video. The subsequent sections include information about exhibition themes and artwork that may be featured on docent-guided school tours. Designed for adaptation, discussions and activities encourage students to look closely (“Look and Learn”) and creatively respond (“Connect and Create”) to the featured artworks. Each section is accompanied by color reproductions.

Exhibition Themes and Artworks

Construction of Identity, pages 4-7
- Colored People
- Family Pictures and Stories
- Kitchen Table Series

The Legacy of History, pages 8-11
- Constructing History: A Requiem to Mark the Moment
- From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried

The Power of Place, pages 12-13
- Sea Island Series
- Roaming

Open Studio: A Collection of Art-making Ideas by the Artist, pages 14-15

Curriculum Connections

Carrie Mae Weems docent-guided school tours support the Tennessee State Curriculum Standards by introducing ideas relevant to the visual arts, language arts, and social studies curricula. Specific standards are addressed at grade-appropriate levels. View connections for all grade levels (K–12) at www.fristcenter.org.

Cover image: Untitled (Colored People Grid), 2009–10. 11 pigment ink prints and 31 colored clay papers, overall dimensions variable; individual components: 10 x 10 in. each. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. © Carrie Mae Weems
Over the past thirty years, Carrie Mae Weems (b. 1953) has longed to insert marginalized peoples into the historical record. She does this not only to bring ignored or erased experiences to light, but to provide a more multidimensional picture of humanity as a whole, a picture that ultimately will spur greater awareness and compassion. Weems believes deeply that “my responsibility as an artist is to . . . make art, beautiful and powerful, that adds and reveals; to beautify the mess of a messy world, to heal the sick and feed the helpless; to shout bravely from the roof-tops and storm barricaded doors and voice the specifics of our historic moment.” Weems’s art is widely recognized for its ability to effectively provoke contemplation on issues surrounding equality as it relates to race, gender, and class. She is interested in questioning who constructs power paradigms, histories, and identities, how they are formed, and why. Increasingly, Weems has moved beyond the specific to address broad humanitarian struggles against entrenched, oppressive practices. Although the subjects of her work are often African Americans, Weems wants “people of color to stand for the human multitudes” and for her art to resonate with audiences of all backgrounds.

Featured Online Resources

Carrie Mae Weems’s website: http://carriemaeweems.net
Carrie Mae Weems at Art21 on PBS: http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/carrie-mae-weems
Getty Education Open Studio: http://blogs.getty.edu/openstudio/artist/weems/

Image at top: Photography by Jerry Klineberg

Image at bottom: left to right: Untitled (Man smoking), Untitled (Woman and daughter with children), and Untitled (Woman standing alone) from Kitchen Table Series, 1989–90. Gelatin silver prints, 27 1/4 x 27 1/4 in. each. Collection of Eric and Liz Lefkofsky, 115-128.2010, promised gift to The Art Institute of Chicago. © Carrie Mae Weems. Photography © The Art Institute of Chicago
A friend gave Carrie Mae Weems a camera for her twenty-first birthday, and she quickly realized its potential as a tool for tangibly expressing abstract political and social theories and inciting change. Weems studied the work of such well-known documentary photographers as Henri Cartier-Bresson and Robert Frank. But, perhaps more importantly, through looking at images by Roy DeCarava and other African American photographers, she also saw the medium’s ability to rewrite black cultural myths and provide counterpoints to negative perceptions and stereotypes. In her earliest works, Weems photographed elements of surrounding communities and issues relating to contemporary African American identity. She also examined aspects relating to race and racism, often appropriating objects and words and re-presenting them to viewers as biting reminders of the persistence of bigoted attitudes in the United States. Although many works feature a black subject, they are meant to resonate across racial and class boundaries, reflecting Weems’s desire for the personal to become universal and for the black figure to represent humanity as a whole.

**Colored People, 1989–90**

*Colored People* investigates the beauty found in the range of skin colors encompassed within the term “black” while also critiquing the self-perpetuating hierarchy of social values assigned to skin tones within the African American community. The tinted colors and ascribed labels of the photographs highlight the artificiality of these naming traditions but also underscore the vibrancy of this diversity. “Colorism” continues to be a concept of interest to Carrie Mae Weems, especially in this so-called postracial era. She reworked the series almost twenty years later by removing the classifying labels, rearranging the individual portraits, and adding bright monochromatic square panels. One version greets visitors to the U.S. Mission to the United Nations in New York and announces our multifaceted character to a global audience. Another is displayed on the title wall of this exhibition.
The Construction of Identity

Art21 Activity: Social History, Personal History

Both social and personal histories influence our interpretation and understanding of the past. Carrie Mae Weems's work often refers to individual or family experiences, yet it also reflects her place within broader social systems. In her *Art in the Twenty-First Century* segment, Weems explains how the tension of race in America became an important part of her "own being."

Watch the art21 artist's segment, and discuss Weems's work in relationship to her personal and social history. How can personal moments and memories articulate or address a larger historical context?

- **Before Viewing**
  In what ways does personal or family history effect or influence our understanding of the past? What is the role of photography in documenting and constructing personal history?

- **While Viewing**
  List the historic events mentioned during this segment. In what ways are these events of American history significant for Weems, and why? In what ways are they significant to contemporary life and to you, and why?

- **After Viewing**
  Through her work, Weems has examined the last forty years of her own life along with "all the amazing and horrific things" that are part of our collective history. What responsibilities and ethical roles does she take on as an artist, and how does she address the challenge of doing so?

- **Create**
  Photograph a reconstruction or reenactment of an important moment in your own personal or family history, using friends or classmates as models. Tell the story in a text that accompanies the work. How does reenacting the event change your understanding of that moment in your own history? How do personal histories or social histories affect the present?

The Construction of Identity

Look & Learn

Family Pictures and Stories, 1978–84

This series, Carrie Mae Weems’s first major body of work, is composed of mostly candid photographs of her own large family at work and at home, as individuals and as a close interactive group. Accompanying the images are written captions and audio recordings offering further insight into the figures and aspects of their shared history. Together, the photographs and narratives create an in-depth and realistic portrait of a middle-class African American family. The work is meant to stand in contrast to a 1965 report written by Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan, which blamed “the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society” on a weak family structure. Weems did not hide the various problems that the family faced; however, by presenting issues within a broader context, not simply as statistics, the artist provides a more complete and empathetic view.

Kitchen Table Series, 1990

Like Family Pictures and Stories, this series offers a valid portrait of an often overlooked subject, in this case, a modern black woman—“the other of the other.” The images trace a period in the woman’s life as she experiences the blossoming, then loss, of love, the responsibilities of motherhood, and the desire to be an engaged member of her community. The protagonist is Carrie Mae Weems herself—a practice that will continue throughout the next decades of her career. The role of words has become more prominent with fourteen stand-alone text panels that relay the at times rocky story. Near the end, the woman stands alone, strong and self-reliant, looking directly at the viewer, her arms squarely planted on her kitchen table, where the events have unfolded under a light of interrogation. Although Kitchen Table Series depicts a black subject and is loosely related to her own experiences, Weems strives for it to reflect the experiences of Everywoman and to resonate across racial and class boundaries.


Image at bottom: left to right: Untitled (Man smoking), Untitled (Woman and daughter with children), and Untitled (Woman standing alone) from Kitchen Table Series, 1989–90. Gelatin silver prints, 27 1/4 x 27 1/4 in. each. Collection of Eric and Liz Lefkofsky, 115-128.2010, promised gift to The Art Institute of Chicago. © Carrie Mae Weems. Photography © The Art Institute of Chicago
Connection: Roles and Relationships

As you investigate the works of Carrie Mae Weems, consider how personal roles and relationships shape identity. Think about your own identity, and brainstorm a list of your life roles (son/daughter, sister/brother, student, friend, artist, athlete, etc.). Create two columns and categorize your roles according to the ones you choose and the ones that you were born into. Feel free to discuss your ideas with classmates and add to your list as you discover commonalities through conversation.

After you have filled your entire page, circle a role on your list (from either column) that is extremely important to you. Then use the following prompts to write about the role.

My Life Roles

I am a _____________________________________________________________

This role involves _________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________

It is important to me because_______________________________________
_________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________

Repeat the exercise by selecting an important role on the other side of your list. Then reflect on both of your written responses.

To what extent does each role involve your relationship with family members, friends, and/or community? What responsibilities are inherent in each role? As you discuss ideas with classmates, identify intersections in your personal experiences.
An overarching desire to better understand the present by closely examining the past is found throughout Carrie Mae Weems’s work. For example, *Constructing History: A Requiem to Mark the Moment* (2008) presents reenactments of important moments in the quest for civil rights, such as the assassinations of John F. Kennedy (which she entitles *The First Major Blow*) and Martin Luther King, Jr., using Atlanta-area art students. The constructed nature of history is underscored through the purposeful inclusion of the lighting tracks, pedestals, and cameras used on set. In many of her images, Weems becomes “the narrator of history” by using herself as the subject. Whether it be her own “acting,” that of collaborators, or of viewers themselves as they walk through an installation, Weems believes that “through the act of performance, with our own bodies, we are allowed to experience and connect the historical past to the present—to the now, to the moment.”

The Legacy of History

Connect & Create

Constructing History: A Requiem to Mark the Moment, 2008

Using member of the Atlanta community and students from a class Carrie Mae Weems taught as an artist in residence at Savannah College of Art and Design, this body of work presents staged reenactments of important historic moments in the global quest for civil rights. The scenes are based on well-known photographs or television footage of such critical events as the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., or Malcolm X and the killing of students at Kent State University. In the companion film, Weems links these tragic events of the past with the present by noting that they are what made it possible for a black man and a woman to be competing for the Democratic presidential nomination, as was happening while she was creating the series. She believes Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton were “standing on the ashes and spirit of all that has come before.” The constructed nature of history is underscored through the purposeful inclusion of the lighting tracks, pedestals, and cameras used on set.

Art21 Activity: Questions

How is history perceived, shared, and taught? Research the term social history, and discuss how this approach to history and historical research differs from history, traditionally defined and interpreted.

How does Weems "construct" history? What techniques does she use to tell a larger story, through her work? How do these techniques represent historical events while also addressing the nature of history itself? What is the relationship between Weems's work and social history?

Research a historical primary document that is important to you or your community—such as a speech from Harvey Milk, or a photograph from the presidential inauguration of Barack Obama—and create a visual response that reflects its legacy, or lack thereof, in the history of your community, city, state, or nation.

This series poignantly examines the history of African American subjects in photography, from early pseudoscientific daguerreotypes intended to justify racism through physiognomy to sexually charged depictions of black men and women that bolster a stereotype of heightened sexuality. All of the portraits are appropriated (“pre-existing,” as the artist states), a methodology Carrie Mae Weems uses to call into question the original intention of the white photographers and the current ownership and dissemination of the representations. The images have been enlarged to a consistent size and tinted a bold red. The glass of each frame has been etched with text related to the photo beneath and resulting societal image: “You became a scientific profile” or “playmate to the patriarch.” The artist aims to restore a level of humanity and dignity to these men and women who historically have had no voice. Two mirrored images of a royal Mangbetu woman bookend the pictures. Tinted a somber shade of blue, she, like the artist, mourns the heartbreaking history of her people.


Art21 Activity: Appropriation and Borrowing

What are the issues involved in borrowing, adapting, or recycling imagery produced by other people? Weems sometimes uses appropriated imagery in her work, and the process raises important questions about authorship and originality. In her Art in the Twenty-First Century segment, Weems describes how she used images of African Americans from the Harvard University Archives to create a new photographic series.

View Weems's art21 segment, and discuss how her use of borrowed images recontextualizes historical, legal, and moral issues of ownership and the role of the artist.

Before Viewing
Define and discuss the terms borrowing, appropriation, and plagiarism within the context of art. From what sources do artists appropriate or borrow materials, to create their own art? Why do they do this?

While Viewing
Weems discusses several disputes in relation to borrowing and owning historic photographic images. How have these disputes and attitudes toward appropriation shaped her work?

After Viewing
In what ways has Weems reconsidered portraiture? What visual elements and devices does she use to reframe the people and events that she represents in her work?

Create
Animate a series of found or borrowed images, to create a critique or comment on a current social issue.
The Power of Place

A yearning to examine more deeply the underlying causes and effects of racism, slavery, and imperialism spurred Carrie Mae Weems to travel widely, throughout the United States and beyond, to Africa, Europe, and the Caribbean. During extended visits to these places, she looked to the surrounding land and architecture to create a communion with the inhabitants, both past and present. She states, “I start every project by reading and by looking around in an attempt to develop a sense of place. . . . It’s often the little known facts and secrets that make a place/thing/person; the little things illuminate and reveal the essence of a thing.” A sensitive portrayal of place results, as demonstrated through the Sea Island Series (1991–92), which documents the unique Gullah communities off the coasts of South Carolina and Georgia, The Louisiana Project (2003), which critiques the relationship between the New South and its antebellum history, and Dreaming in Cuba (2002), which examines the island’s particular place within the African diaspora as well as the Cold War.

Sea Islands Series, 1991–92

Carrie Mae Weems became interested in the unique Gullah culture found on the Sea Islands off the coasts of Georgia and South Carolina while studying folklore in graduate school. Because of the islands’ physical isolation from the mainland and their majority black population, the residents were able to retain many aspects of African culture. By presenting these particular African American cultural details, especially those with direct links to Africa, Weems demonstrates a developed and persistent heritage, one that stands in contrast to what has often been erased in mainstream historical accounts. Many of the images and texts refer to folklore concerning everyday modes of conduct and Gullah spiritual beliefs, such as a mattress spring in a tree meant to keep evil spirits away. Weems also traces the linguistic evolution of several English words to their African sources. A group of ceramic plates pays tribute to the Gullah funerary tradition of laying food and dishes at the grave of the recently departed.

The Power of Place

Carrie Mae Weems created this series during her residency at the American Academy in Rome. In it, she wanders like history’s ghost through the streets and landscapes of various Italian sites, pondering humanity’s past and present condition. Of the muse figure, Weems states, “This woman can stand in for me and for you; she leads you into history. She’s a witness and a guide.” A sense of the passage of time, human accomplishment, and an individual’s relative insignificance are simultaneously evoked as she stands before once grand monuments and sweeping vistas. Weems’s interest in how architecture can control its subjects is revealed through the placement of her body in relation to various monuments of power such as the Italian Department of Labor.


Connection: Cameras and Community in Action

The Frist Center for the Visual Arts invited the public to participate in a project photo-documenting the Nashville community. One thousand disposable cameras were distributed for people to capture particular aspects of their community they noticed, were moved by, or would like to see changed. Five hundred of those photographs are on display at the Frist Center in the Education Corridor on the Upper-Level. Cameras and Community in Action was organized in conjunction with the Ingram Gallery exhibition, Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video.

Now go out and capture your own community with a camera! Is there a place that has a special significance to you? Do you want to document a place or tell a story? Is there something in your community you would like to see changed?

Share your pictures with the class and talk about why you chose to photograph what you did.
Experimental Activities for Boys and Girls of All Ages, Shapes, Sizes, and Colors
By Carrie Mae Weems

Keep all the activities and exercises below in a book that you make with your own hands. After you complete all of the tasks, place them in the book, and tie a red or yellow ribbon around the book. With a camera, or pencil, or pen, make a small portrait of yourself; it should be no larger than 5 x 7 inches.

Take two dolls—one black and one white. Describe each, saying what you like and dislike about both.

On a plain white piece of paper write, “I love myself when I’m laughing, and then again, when I’m looking mean and impressive.”

In the library find a book about Roy De Carava. Tell someone else about your experience of looking at these pictures or write your thoughts on a piece of paper.

Take a picture of your family, then write the names of each person beneath the picture along with other thoughts that come to mind, even if it makes you uncomfortable.

Look in a mirror, then write down what you like best and least about what you see or feel.

Write a short poem about the music you like best and put it in a bottle and throw it in the sea or post it in a public space.

Take four pieces of paper: one black, one white, one yellow, and one red. Make each square the same size and paste each one on a brown piece of paper. With a black crayon or marker write the word “equivalence.”
Ask an adult—not your teacher—what three things are most important to them. Listen closely, write down what you’ve heard and give it to them as a gift.

Look at the sky and make a wish—if you like, make a photo or drawing of the sky; write the wish across the picture.

Take a globe and spin it three times. Each time, stop the globe with the tip of your finger and write down the name of each country you land on.

Take a walk along the shore or beach. When you return home, write down your strongest thoughts and feelings.

Take a long look at yourself in a mirror, then write down:
the color of your eyes
the shape of your face
the color and texture of your hair
your height
your weight
your clothing size
your shoe size

Make a peace sign and mail it to President Obama.

With your parents’ permission, call the White House, and state your opposition to the war. Write down what you felt by taking this action.

On a sunny day, buy or borrow a globe or beach ball. Between 12:00 and 2:00 p.m., go to a beach or park or your own backyard. Toss the globe into the air multiple times, being careful to catch it each time. While doing this exercise, think about the world you live in and your responsibility to the earth.
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Frist Center for the Visual Arts

This exhibition was organized by Kathryn Delmez, curator, Frist Center for the Visual Arts.

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