

Carrie Mae Weems: A Photographer for Our Times

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, when Carrie Mae Weems began to make a name for herself in the art world, it was not uncommon to hear that she was not a photographer but, rather, an artist who used a camera. For various reasons many artists who were using cameras at the time positioned their work as contemporary art rather than photography. Nevertheless, those artists who were creating photo-based works relied upon photochemical processes. Weems was a photographer with darkroom experience, and she also used the twenty-by-twenty-four-inch Polaroid camera. It was on the strength of her photographic images that Weems' career gained its initial traction. Her alignment with photography was pivotal for her contributions to the discourse of identity politics; nevertheless, her photographs, in no small part, changed how we view and value photography today. Her oeuvre includes film, multimedia installation, and her own performances before the camera, all of which are included in the exhibition and are discussed in the accompanying catalogue for *Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video*, edited by Frist Center curator Kathryn E. Delmez.

Regardless of decades of criticism establishing the potential fallacy of photographic truth and the further diminution of its veracity imposed by digital photography, the documentary mode retains a connection to an implied truth in the images and stories it depicts. In times of great stress or unrest, such as the Great Depression or the 1960s, the documentary mode rises in currency as a credible means of addressing relevant social issues. In these circumstances, photography is predetermined to be authoritative. It was again so in the 1980s and 1990s, when the issues of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and identity were prevalent concerns for many visual artists. Weems acknowledges the impact of the photographs of Roy DeCarava on her sensibilities. Although his work could be classified as documentary, his luscious tones, which established a high water mark for life in Harlem in the 1950s, turned the conversation toward images of empowerment.

In her seminal work *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography* (1994), Deborah Willis addresses the efficacy of the documentary mode in photography as a means of singling out community responsibility and spirituality among African Americans, in contrast to the long history of negative stereotypes of a slothful or exotic and sensual *Other*. Weems, an artistic descendant of DeCarava, used the documentary mode to its full advantage when bringing the histories of African American middle-class life to mainstream consciousness.

In her early series *Family Pictures and Stories* (1978–84) and *Kitchen Table Series* (1990), the artist imbued each scene with the long history of narrative in both fiction and nonfiction as told by African Americans. Following a well-established tradition in literature and film, Weems embraced the documentary mode to tell stories that are significant but not necessarily or even importantly based in fact. Broadly speaking, these photographs are documents—journalism, street photography, or social commentary. The events occurring around a kitchen table may be literal, but they also can stand for domesticity, matriarchal authority in an African American home, the working environment for paid domestics, or the gathering place for families. In the latter case, a depiction of an African American kitchen stands more for what connects us as a society than for ethnic or racial divide. What is compelling in these images is that we do not know the whole story. A kitchen can be fraught with tension or a place of healing and nurturing, and Weems gives the viewer ample room for personal interpretation.

Similarly, in the 21st-century series *Eatonville* and *The Louisiana Project* (both 2003), Weems created photographic surveys that allude to the past, evoke connections, and speak to universal issues. Eatonville, Florida, the oldest black incorporated town in the United States, was the home of Zora Neale Hurston, the celebrated writer associated with the Harlem Renaissance. Using a traditional documentary approach, Weems conjured the history of Florida's racial history and paired it with homage to Hurston's literary achievements and influence. For a commission to commemorate the bicentennial of the Louisiana Purchase, Weems examined the historical attitudes toward people of color and toward women of color in particular. By photographing herself, frequently from behind as if looking into the image, Weems is both integral to and an observer of locations such as plantations, railroad tracks, and chemical plants. She becomes a latter-day eyewitness to the past. In these series, Weems charts a new path for photography as documented by empowering her pictures with a tension that stems not from the certainties of these images, but from their possibilities.

Through the subversion of negative stereotypes and the appropriation of existing photographs, Weems became a leading spokesperson for women, African American women especially, and a critic of gender politics in the art world and in society as a whole. In her series *Ain't Jokin'* (1987–88), she labels photographs with racist text to confront one of racism's most heinous and insidious outposts, humor, thereby staking her claim for self-determination. By recontextualizing photographs of African slaves by J. T. Zealy and other depictions of African Americans taken by white photographers in the series *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* (1995–96), Weems cast a critical eye not only on the imperialism, racism, sexism, and anthropological practices of the 19th century, but also on what has changed so little since then.

It was in these uses of photography that Weems joined her peers Cindy Sherman, Richard Prince, Lorna Simpson, and others in pushing the boundaries of the photographic image as a means of delivering social messages.

If Weems keeps one foot solidly in the technical world of photography, then the other is literally and metaphorically framed by modernism, a term she used for the 1997 series of photographs she made with the African American artist Robert Colescott in his studio. Weems positioned herself as the artist's model and muse in a critique of racial exclusion and gender dynamics in the art world. In the series *Not Manet's Type*, also created in 1997, Weems elaborated on these themes, noting that Marcel Duchamp would not have even considered her—a woman of color—as a model. But Duchamp's inculcation of irony into 20th-century art ultimately became the vehicle for Weems's poignant carnivalesque inversions of power and subjugation in her late 20th-century work.

Another strategy used by Weems, the incorporation of image and text, has its roots in the advances in camera technology and printing techniques that occurred in the period between the world wars. The ability to print photograph and text simultaneously paved the way for innovative uses for the signs and symbols of mass culture in high art. Several of the Russian Constructivists, Bauhaus artists, and Surrealists, who identified themselves as photographers, added text to reach new levels of ideological potency. By the 1930s, the documentary mode with and without captions had become the dominant use of photography around the world. The melding of visual and verbal rhetoric practiced between 1919 and 1939 was a precursor for many of the strategies employed by Weems in the 1980s and 1990s.

Many 20th-century performances or records of ethereal art projects are best known through their photographic documentation—*Spiral Jetty* by Robert Smithson or Robert Rauschenberg's dance performance *Pelican*, for example. Throughout her career, Weems has staged and documented her own presence in her work. In *Sea Islands Series* (1991–92), Weems makes powerful use of several photographic strategies to shed light on the African diaspora: enlarging and coloring daguerreotypes of slaves, but also combining image and text and having the artist immerse herself physically into the project. Writing about this series, Houston A. Baker, Jr. notes:

Carrie Mae Weems is the photographer who carries us to these islands. She is also the woman in the white plantation dress, the woman with the anguished face in the picture. Through self-portraiture, Weems implies that the only way an image maker can find Africa is by stepping into the picture. . . . The famous anthropologists Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead discovered so many decades ago, that even documentary photographers can never provide objective, unbiased records.

The photographer is always a culture bearer in her own right, seeking to create useable images for cultural conversation.¹

For *The Louisiana Project* and the *Museum Series* (2007–present), Weems again steps into the picture frame, bringing us closer to the points she is making. She and the artists of her generation rejected the formalist strictures of medium specificity and self-referentiality to reset the boundaries of high art so as to be inclusive in a variety of ways.

Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video makes clear that the scale, ambition, and messages of Weems's work have kept up with the ways photography is produced, displayed, and valued. Her breakthrough art embraced the ways and means of photography, but it could not be contained. Her objectives pushed the boundaries of the medium to enrich our notions of how an artist can initiate a cultural conversation—a conversation that we as viewers and consumers are invited to join.

Susan H. Edwards, PhD
Executive Director and CEO
The Frist Center for the Visual Arts

¹ Houston A. Baker, Jr., *In These Islands: South Carolina and Georgia by Carrie Mae Weems* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama, Sarah Moody Gallery of Art, 1995), 15.