

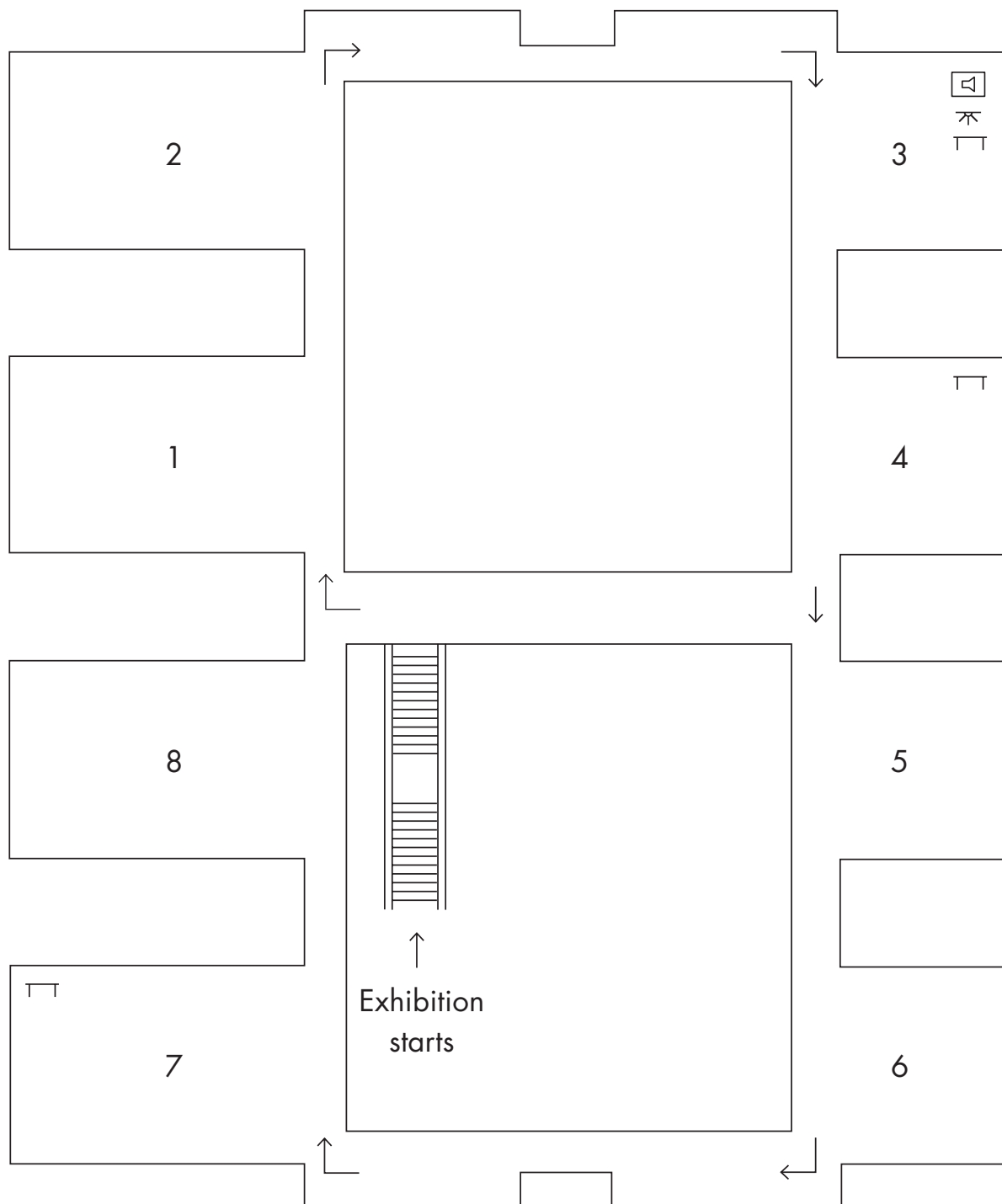
CARRIE MAE WEEMS

Reflections for Now

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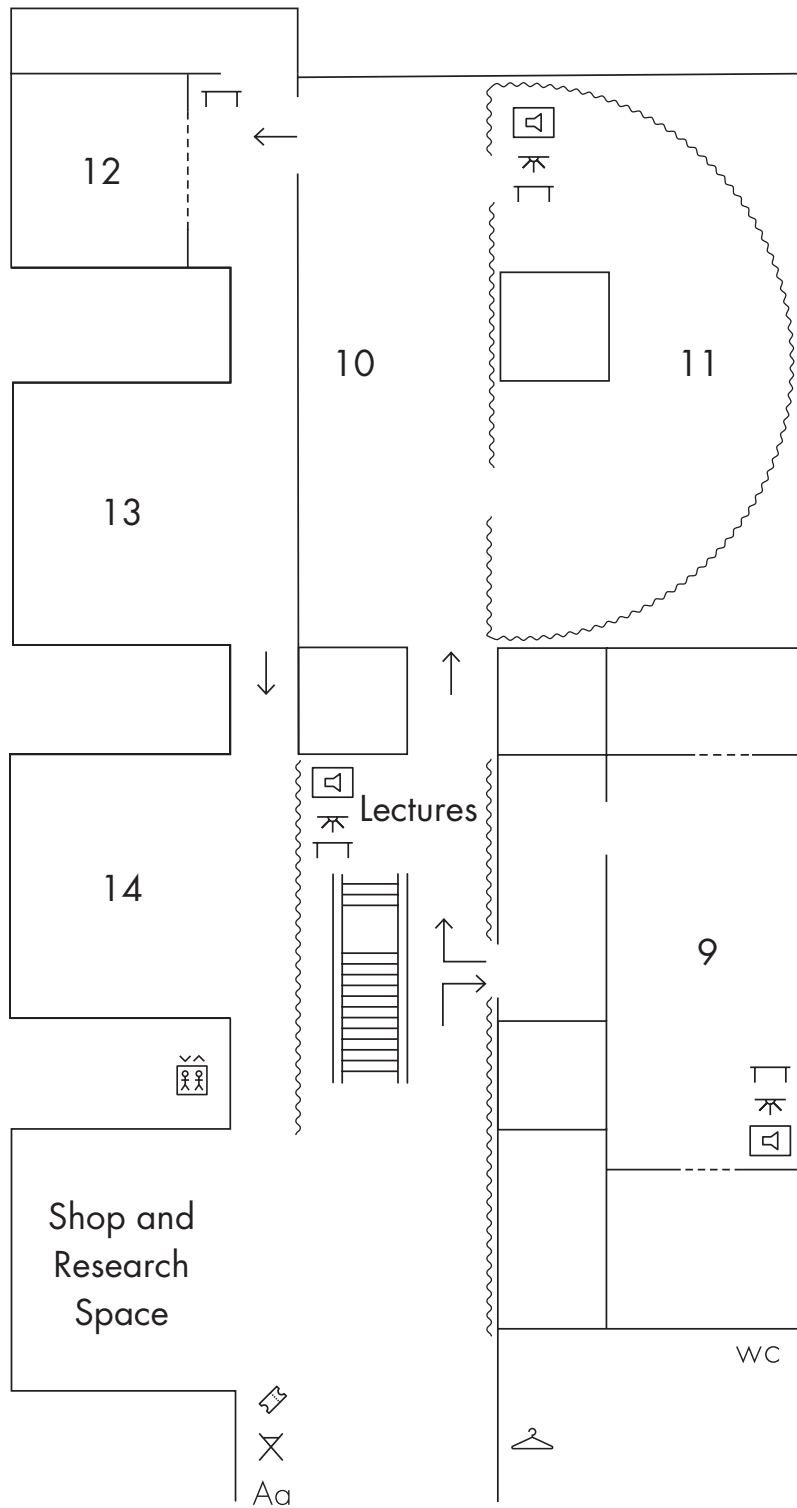
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Introduction

Carrie Mae Weems (b.1953, Portland, Oregon, US) came to prominence in the early 1980s through photographic work that questioned how the representation of the Black subject, particularly within the United States, has historically reproduced systemic racism and inequality. While responding to a particular social context, her approach to image making across film, photography and installation speaks to a shared human experience.

'Reflections for Now' surveys the development of the artist's career spanning over three decades, from the iconic 'Kitchen Table Series' (1990) contemplating desire and power dynamics in the domestic sphere, to the panoramic film installation 'The Shape of Things' (2021) focusing on the current political climate and the history of structural violence in the United States.

Using Weems's own words to guide the viewer through the space, this exhibition highlights the performative and cinematic nature of the artist's multi-disciplinary work, reflecting her long-lasting interest in language, poetry, rhythm, and music.

Often inserting herself as a performer and narrator of history, Weems states: 'I am both subject and object; performer and director.' As the exhibition unfolds, her lyrical sensibility encourages the viewer to move through the work and become a participant, to confront dominant historical narratives and to claim history as their own.

Anticipating many contemporary debates around oppression and discrimination, Weems's pioneering practice initiates a dialogue across generations and communities. Her commitment to social justice emphasises the urgency of deciding collectively by which model we want to live.

Exhibition starts upstairs

UPPER GALLERY

“Even in the midst of great social changes, for the most part our lives remain invisible. Black people are to be turned away from, not turned toward – we bear the mark of Cain. It’s an aesthetic thing; Blackness is an affront to the persistence of whiteness. This invisibility, this erasure out of the complex history of our life and time, is the greatest source of my longing.”

Painting the Town

2021

These works were photographed by Carrie Mae Weems in the wake of demonstrations in the artist's birth town of Portland, Oregon, following the murder of George Floyd by police in May 2020. Over several months of protests, boarded-up storefronts were repeatedly painted over to erase demonstrators' messages. Through her particular use of cropping and lighting, Weems transforms buildings into flat colour fields. Widely known for her photography which features the human subject, here Weems opens this exhibition with a radical body of work reflecting on the visual language of abstraction.

On the threshold between abstraction and representation, *Painting the Town* engages with art history. Black painters such as Norman Lewis were present in Abstract Expressionism since its inception, but their contributions have been historically overlooked. These artists explored how the abstract could be used to represent a range of concerns, from the aesthetic to the social. In *Painting the Town*, abstraction emerges directly from protest as a form of expression.

Archival pigment prints

Courtesy of the artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York,
Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin

“When we’re looking at these images, we’re looking at the ways in which white America – Anglo America – saw itself in relationship to the Black subject. I wanted to intervene in that by giving a voice to a subject which historically has had no voice. I use this idea of ‘I saw you’ and ‘You became’ as a way of both speaking out of the image and to the subject of the image.”

From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried

1995–6

Weems created this work after discovering a set of daguerreotypes (an early form of photograph) of enslaved men and women in Harvard University's museum archives. The daguerreotypes were originally commissioned in 1850 by Harvard scientist Louis Agassiz to support polygenism. This racist theory sought to reinforce white superiority through suggesting that human races have differing genetic origins. Placing these photographs alongside other appropriated 19th and 20th century images of African and African American people, Weems underlines how racial violence has historically been perpetuated through photography.

Weems made a series of changes to the original images. She enlarged them, added a red filter, and framed them with a circular mount evoking a camera lens. Such interventions recur across Weems's practice, inviting viewers to question how photographs are constructed to create meaning. Here, Weems restores humanity and agency to the subjects by adding texts which speak across the expanse of history.

Digital C-prints on paper and sandblasted text on glass
Courtesy of Tate: Presented by the Tate Americas Foundation,
purchased using funds provided by the North American
Acquisitions Committee and endowment income 2019

“Through the act of performance, with our own bodies, we are allowed to experience and to connect the historical past to the present – to the now, to the moment. By inhabiting the moment, we live the experience; we stand in the shoes of others and come to know first-hand what is often only imagined, lost, forgotten.”

Holocaust Memorial

2013

In this performance for camera, Weems creates a ritual dance through the pillars of Peter Eisenmann's 'Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe', completed in Berlin in 2005. Accompanied by the music of American composer Gregory Wanamaker, Weems appears and disappears, her fluid movement punctuated by short, sharp claps. Weems trained as a dancer in the early 1970s with the San Francisco Dancers' Workshop, led by Anna Halprin, a pioneering choreographer who shaped postmodern dance. Here, the artist assumes the persona of her own 'muse', a recurrent figure in her work who confronts history as a 'witness and a guide into circumstances seldom seen'.

Weems has spoken of an affinity between Black and Jewish communities, stating, 'I think there's a shared sense of struggle in the country, and that, I think, forms an incredible bond between these two apparently very different groups of people'. The title, 'Holocaust Memorial', refers both to the architectural memorial and to the process of memorialisation enacted by the artist, who reactivates the past through movement.

Video, sound, 02:49 min.

Courtesy of the artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York,
Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin

“The thing that I find so remarkable is how Black people have historically conducted themselves, in the embrace of not only their humanity but their extraordinary gift to extend their humanity.

But when you have the circumstances of our lives, which have stripped us to the bare bones of who we are, it's both a blessing and a curse that we stand before ourselves and the world, naked in a way that many groups don't have to stand up to. And it's both our gift and our tribulation.”

Land of Broken Dreams: A Case Study Room

2021

In this installation, Weems creates a meeting space, simultaneously public and private, in tribute to activists of 1960s Black Power movements. Photographs of leading figures such as Angela Davis and Bobby Seale appear alongside copies of 'LIFE Magazine', while an iconic portrait of Black Panther Party co-founder Huey P. Newton overlooks the installation. From a Black Panther lamp to a commemorative plate, the items on the shelves evoke how the political extended into people's homes. This archival display references African American resistance against four centuries of racism.

The room is also host to Weems's revised encyclopaedia on the 'History of Violence'. Titled by the artist, each volume describes the myriad forms of oppression faced by Black people in the US and globally: from 'The Prison Industrial Complex', referencing mass incarceration to 'The Battle for Representation', which points to the persistent erasure of Black people throughout history. On the wall, appropriated photographs document police violence against Black protestors during the 1963 uprising in Birmingham, Alabama. They are tinted different colours or blurred – a technique Weems often uses to invite reconsideration of otherwise familiar images such as media representations of protest.

Visitors are welcome to sit and interact with the View-Masters.

Installation

Courtesy of the artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York,
Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin

“I use my own constructed image as a vehicle for questioning ideas about the role of tradition, the nature of family, monogamy, polygamy, relationships between men and women, between women and their children, and between women and other women – underscoring the critical problems and the possible resolves. In one way or another, my work endlessly explodes the limits of tradition. I’m determined to find new models to live by.”

Kitchen Table Series

1990

In this pioneering series of photographs and accompanying text panels, a kitchen table becomes the stage for a variety of constructed scenes. Describing this work as her 'breakthrough project', Weems uses her own body to assume the role of mother, lover, friend, carer and cared-for.

At the time of making this series, Weems was teaching photography. She noticed that among her students, men squared themselves towards the camera whereas women presented themselves 'always slightly hidden'. While women's voices have often been excluded from the public stage, including during the civil rights struggle, the 'Kitchen Table Series' presents a journey towards self-emancipation. Here, the domestic sphere, itself a gathering place for resistance, forms the backdrop to a complex interplay of gender and power dynamics.

Gelatin silver prints and texts on screenprinted panels
Courtesy of the artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York,
Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin

Accompanying text panels:

Text panel 1

She'd been pickin em up and layin em down, moving to the next town for a while, needing a rest, some moss under her feet, plus a solid man who enjoyed a good fight with a brave woman. She needed a man who didn't mind her bodacious manner, varied talents, hard laughter, multiple opinions, and her hopes were getting slender.

He had great big eyes like diamonds and his teeth shined just like gold, some reason a lot of women didn't want him, but he satisfied their souls. He needed a woman who didn't mind stepping down from the shade of the veranda, a woman capable of taking up the shaft of a plough and throwing down with him side by side.

Text panel 2

They met in the glistening twinkling crystal light of August/September sky. They were both educated, corn-fed-healthy-Mississippi-stock folk. Both loved fried fish, greens, blues, jazz and Carmen Jones. He was an unhardened man of the world. She'd been around the block more than once herself, wasn't a tough cookie, but a full grown woman for sure.

Looking her up, down, sideways he said, "So tell me baby, what do you know about this great big world of ours?" Smiling she said, "Not a damn thang sugar. I don't mind telling you my life's

not been sheltered from the cold and I've not always seen the forest or smelled the coffee, played momma to more men than I care to remember. Consequently I've made several wrong turns, but with conviction I can tell you I'm nobody's fool. So a better question might be: what can you teach me?"

He wasn't sure, confessing he didn't have a handle on this thing called life either. But he was definitely in a mood for love. Together they were falling for that ole black magic. In that moment it seemed a match made in heaven. They walked, not hand in hand, but rather side by side in the twinkle of August/September sky, looking sidelong at one another, thanking their lucky stars with fingers crossed.

Text panel 3

She felt monogamy had a place but invested it with little value. It was a system based on private property, an order defying human nature. Personally she wasn't in the mood for exploring new rocky terrain. But nonetheless assured him she was secure enough in herself and their love to allow him space to taste the exotic fruits produced in such abundance by mother nature.

He was grateful for such generosity, He certainly knew the breadth of his own nature, so felt human nature was often in need of social control. For now he chose self-sacrifice for the long term benefits of her love and their relationship. Testing the strength of the relationship in this way was a dangerous game; taking a chance now might be more than either of them bargained for.

Text panel 4

In their daily life together trouble lurked. He said she was much too domineering. He didn't mind a woman speaking her mind, but hey, she was taking it a tad too far. Accused her of talking too loudly, being a little too wild in public places. No matter what the subject, she had to get her two cents in, ruined dinner parties with her insistent demand that everything – the flowers on the table – be viewed politically. He was tired of that base and superstructure white-boy-book-shit! Arguing til blue in the face bout them theories. Couldn't be cool or back-down just once. Naw!! She had to have the last word, had to be right. Plus she was always in the streets, running. Oh, and the way she was dealing with the kid! He didn't dig it at all. Something had to give.

She insisted that what he called domineering was a jacket being forced on her because he couldn't stand the thought of the inevitable shift in the balance of power. She assured him that the object of her task was not to control him, but out of necessity – freedom being the appreciation of necessity – to control herself. She went on to tell him that in the face of the daily force she understood his misgivings. But they were in a 50-50 thing. Equals. She wasn't about to succumb to standards of tradition which denied her a rightful place or voice, period. She was trying to be a good woman, a compadre, a pal, a living-doll and she was working. How could he ask for more!! She was really gettin tired of him talkin out of both sides of his mouth about the kinda woman he wanted. Fish or cut bait.

Text panel 5

She was a woman socially involved, loved to run her mouth, to talk things through. He was a man socially involved, who thought actions spoke louder than words. A thin line of difference was beginning to show itself, but they didn't want to lose this dream, so kept at it. Plus the loving was worth it. He liked his coffee in the morning, she was crazy about her tea at night and every time they did that wang-dang-doodle the earth moved. He discovered tremendous tenderness in her love, thought the sun rose and set in her eyes, said her butt was like butter. Started calling her butter-cup. She found in the mountains, valleys and the wide expanse of his chest: power, solace, and licked him like candy. She called him candy-daddy.

Text panel 6

Seeking clarity and purpose, she spoke about the problems with her momma who said, "There's a difference between men and women. I can't tell ya what to do. But I can tell you that I sided with men so long I forgot women had a side. Truth slapped me so hard up-side my head, I cried for days, got so I couldn't wash my own behind. Shonuff blue. Biggest fool in the world. Turning my back on friends for a piece of man. Oh sure, I've had a man or two – I mean with a capital "M" – but like a good friend, hard to come by. But look, ya got a good man, man puts up with mo a yo mess than the law allows. If he loves ya, ya best take yo behind home, drop them guns on the floor and work it out. Ya gotta give a little to get a little, that's the story of life."

Text panel 7

He felt her demands for more than he could presently give would cause her to lose a good thing. She felt his lack of compromise around her simple needs would soon have her singing,

I love you Porgy,
don't let him take me,
don't let him handle me
with his hot hands.
If you can keep me, I want
to stay here with you forever and
I'll be glad.

She went on a little run with a friend, and when they got back her girlfriend told what she had did. He cried big crocodile tears at the thought of another mule in his stall. So hurt by her infidelity, he felt Frankie and Johnny might have to be played out for real. This was the beginning and the end of things.

Text panel 8

Neither knew with certainty what the future held. It could be only a paper moon hanging over a cardboard sea, but they both said, "It wouldn't be make-believe, if you believed in me."

He wanted children. She didn't. At the height of their love a child was born. Her sisters thought the world of their children. Noting their little feats as they stumbled, teetered and stood. When her kid finally stood and walked, she watched with a distant eye, thinking, 'Thank God! I won't have to carry her much longer!!'

Oh yeah, she loved the kid, she was responsible, but took no deep pleasure in motherhood, it caused deflection from her own immediate desires, which pissed her off. Ha. A woman's duty! Ha! A punishment for Eve's sin was more like it. Ha.

Text panel 9

He wasn't working and she was, but ends meeting, ha! She felt like she was walking through a storm, like she was in a lonesome graveyard, like she had many rivers to cross, like making a way out of no way was her fate in life, like nobody knew the trouble she'd seen, like a change gotta come, like women were the mules on the world, like she needed to go tell it on the mountain, like she wanted to take a rocking chair down by the river and rock on away from here, like good morning heart ache sit down, like she needed to reach out and touch somebody's hand, like she needed her soul rocked in the bosom of Abraham, like momma said there'd be days like this, like her man didn't love her, like she needed him to try a little tenderness. Like maybe she'd get herself a white man, see what he'd do.

Text panel 10

John and Mary sitting in a tree

k-i-s-s-i-n-g.

First comes love, then comes marriage;
then comes Mary with a baby carriage.

The kid had seen her parents loving and fighting, and had started playing house herself. She felt like H O T spelled more than hot, like she was little Sally Walker, and not Mary with bleating sheep,

like she wanted to rise and wipe her weeping eyes, like she had been goody and deserved more than a rubber dolly, like Mother May I was too real to be called a game, like step on a crack and break your momma's back could be a plan, like red light, green light was the song to the key of life, like spinning the bottle could cause her to holler, like putting your foot on the right and letting the boys see you cock would have to wait, like hide and seek might be the best bet, like boys were rotten just like cotton described every boy she knew, like girls were dandy like candy described her to a tee, like dick, jane and their parents needed to take a hike, like over the rainbow, was where it was at, even though she didn't like flying, like being the best at jacks didn't mean dooty-squat. She felt like this mommy/daddy stuff was a remake of jack and jill.

Text panel 11

She was working, making long money, becoming what he called 'bourgie', he wasn't working and this was truly messing with his mind. He was starting to feel like a Black man wasn't supposed to have nothing, like some kind of conspiracy was being played out and he was the fall guy, like the mission was impossible, like it ain't a man's world, like just cause she was working and making so much dough, she was getting to where she didn't love him no mo, like he had bad luck, like he didn't have a dream, like he needed a night in Tunisia, like he needed to catch a freight train and ride, like if he felt tomorrow like he did today, come Sunday he'd pack up and make a get-away, like if he stayed, the kid would hate him for sure, like he just might have to contribute to the most confusing day in Harlem, like he had a tomb-stone disposition and a grave-yard mind. Like maybe a Black man just wasn't her kind.

Text panel 12

No really, she fussed, fussed all day long; he was worthless, not a man but a chump, couldn't fight his way out of a wet paper bag, she fucked with him all day long, and all day long he quietly took it all in, and then he quietly exploded. Before she could collect her wit or make a dash for the door, he seized her and hung her upside-down out of their seven story apartment window and said, "Talk shit now, goddamnit!!"

One day he placed a match-box on her clothes. It was time to book.

Text panel 13

In and of itself, being alone again naturally wasn't a problem. But some time had passed. At 38 she was beginning to feel the fullness of her woman self, wanted once again to share it all with a man who could deal with the multitude of her being. But that would have to come later. Presently she was in her solitude, so it wasn't nobody's business what she did.

Sit there and count your fingers.

What can you do?

Oh, girl you're through.

It's time you knew all you can ever count on

are the rain drops that fall on

little girl blue.

Step on a pin, the pin bends and that's the way the story ends.

“Sometime in the early 1980s, traditional documentary was called into question. It was no longer the form.

For my photographs to be credible, I needed to make a direct intervention – extend the form by playing with it, manipulating it, creating representations that appeared to be documents but were in fact staged. In the same breath I began incorporating text, using multiple images, diptychs and triptychs, and constructing narratives.”

And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People

1991

In this work, objects are staged against a sepia-toned background. While in isolation they possess a quality of stillness, across the whole series a web of associative meanings points to the building thrum of revolution. Works reference moments of conflict and unrest across history: 'A hot spot in a corrupt world' highlights the triangle formed by transatlantic slave routes; the musket and uniform in 'An Armed Man' evoke the 1860s American Civil War; while 'A Veiled Woman' alludes to the Algerian War for independence from France (1954–62).

A grassroots activist and organiser in Marxist and feminist movements before becoming a photographer, Weems locates the beginnings of resistance in quiet, unassuming moments which cumulatively create change. Domestic and mundane objects acquire significance as the tools of revolution: a rolling pin is captioned 'By Any Means Necessary', a phrase associated with psychiatrist and intellectual Frantz Fanon; 'A Hammer' and 'A Sickle' reference communist movements; 'A Bell to Ring' recalls the liberty bell, a symbol of American independence.

Archival pigment prints from Polaroid originals
Courtesy of the artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York,
Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin

“Recapping the last forty years of my own life – beginning with 1968 and ending with 2008, and all those amazing and horrific things, assassinations, brutal acts – has implications and great significance for us all. Now, part of that can be closed for me. I’ve gone back and I’ve revisited those assassinations. I’ve revisited the civil rights movement. I have looked at it in any number of ways through any number of works. For me this piece, while certainly not perfect, is an interesting place to pause.”

Constructing History

2008

Weems collaborated with students from the Savannah College of Art and Design to recreate a different historical moment in each photograph. Throughout the series, a classroom plays backdrop to scenes which unfold under softly focused lighting. The visible staging of the photographs – built film sets, camera tracks, and artificial lighting – remind us of the ways in which historical memory itself is constructed.

This work commemorates 40 years since 1968, the year in which civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. and Democratic presidential nominee Robert F. Kennedy were assassinated. The same decade also saw the turmoil of the Vietnam War and the murders of US President John F. Kennedy and human rights activist Malcolm X. Weems links the tragic implications of these events to Barack Obama's election to the White House, stating that 'this incredible, tumultuous, brutal history is absolutely what makes his presidency possible'.

From left

A Class Ponders the Future

The Tragedy of Hiroshima

The First Major Blow

The Assassination of Medgar, Martin, Malcolm

An Assassin's Bullet

The Fall of Bhutto

Mourning

Someone to Watch Over Me

Archival pigment prints

Courtesy of the artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York,

Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin

LOWER GALLERY

The Joker, See Faust

2003

Archival pigment print

Courtesy of the artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York,
Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin

Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me: A Story in Five Parts

2012

Weems has described 'Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me' as a 'portable theatre'. Recalling the wonders of an old-fashioned travelling show, the work deploys a 'Pepper's Ghost', a 19th century optical illusion. Across five theatrical acts, Weems's ghosts take us through history, unspooling the artist's relationships to American President Abraham Lincoln and her friend and collaborator, the artist-activist Lonnie Graham.

The stage is set by a dancer tapping to Blind Willie Johnson's 'Dark Was the Night, Cold Was the Ground'. This fades to Weems reading Lincoln's 1863 Gettysburg Address, which invokes a call to freedom in the name of those who died in the American Civil War. Graham's commentary presents the continual challenges of achieving Lincoln's vision of democracy today. Weems herself appears in several guises throughout: first as a trickster circus-master and then in a Playboy Bunny costume as the work turns to consider how the loss of women's bodily autonomy is connected to the stripping away of democratic freedoms.

Through the spectral, Weems suggests that we are haunted by repetitions of the past as we continue to grapple with all forms of oppression.

Installation, video, sound, 18:29 min.

Courtesy of the artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York,
Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin

If I Ruled the World

2004

Archival pigment print

Courtesy of the artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York,
Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin

Lectures by Carrie Mae Weems (excerpts)

Video, sound, 28:00 min.

Bellevue Productions

“I wanted to think about the way in which the whole of society is completely veiled and masked, the way in which the mask is traditionally used through carnival – what it really means, what it really tries to circumscribe.”

Missing Links from The Louisiana Project

2003

In these photographs, Weems appears in a tailcoat and masked as various animals. These works were originally made as part of 'The Louisiana Project', a multimedia series which addresses a long legacy of racism and colonialism in the state of Louisiana during the Antebellum period. The series was commissioned to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the Louisiana Purchase, a treatise which allowed the United States to colonise a vast area of land that doubled the size of the country. This land was mostly inhabited by Indigenous peoples.

'Missing Links' explores the white supremacy underpinning the Mardi Gras carnival in New Orleans. A parade in 1873, themed 'The Missing Links to Darwin's Origin of Species', was a direct attack on the increasing social mobility of Black people in the American South. Costumed in reference to the racist caricatures of that parade, Weems subverts their power and exposes their hollowness.

Archival pigment prints

Courtesy of the artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York,
Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin

Looking High and Low

1993

Wallpaper

Courtesy of the artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York,
Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin

The Shape of Things: A Film in Seven Parts

2021

This panoramic film installation reflects upon events past and present which have shaped the US political landscape. Its large-scale architecture immerses the viewer in an experience reminiscent of 19th century cycloramas, a precursor to the modern cinema. In 'The Shape of Things', which opens with performer and choreographer Okwui Okpokwasili surrounded by slowly falling pieces of paper, Weems combines archival footage and excerpts of earlier work with new material.

Videos of a pro-Trump rally and the January 6 insurrection at the US Capitol in 2021 are interspersed with a clown conducting a brass band and an animal trainer leading an elephant around a ring. Weems sets this circus of American politics against the gravity of a country torn by racism, protest, police violence, and immigration crises. An aerial view shows a landscape ravaged by industrialisation.

However, if Weems offers a troubling view of our current state of affairs, she also suggests a way forward – poetry and artistic collaboration underpin the work, with Weems's fellow performers appearing throughout. In part five, Weems asks the impossible question of how a life should be measured, while in part six, poet Carl Hancock Rux encourages us to assert our place in the universe and to open ourselves to wonder.

Installation, video, sound, 39:06 min.

Courtesy of the artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York,
Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin

The Push, The Call, The Scream, The Dream

2020

Archival inkjet prints

Courtesy of the artist, Jack Shainman Galler, New York,
Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin

It's Over – A Diorama

2021

The diorama is a method of display associated with natural history museums, the collections of which are often the result of imperial trade and theft. Placing commemorative photographs alongside a globe and a taxidermy swan, Weems makes a direct link between contemporary oppression and a long history of trauma caused by colonialism.

'It's Over – A Diorama' is Weems's tribute to Black people who have lost their lives due to police brutality in the US. The diorama spills over with candles, balloons, flowers, and stuffed animals, referencing the countless makeshift memorials created by families and communities devastated by ongoing state-sanctioned violence.

Installation

Courtesy of the artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York,
Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin

The taxidermy swan in this installation has been sourced legally and ethically. The swan was obtained as a result of accidental or natural death; no animals were harmed.

“I’m trying in my humble way to connect the dots, to confront history. Democracy and colonial expansion are rooted here. So, I refuse the imposed limits. My girl, my muse, dares to show up as a guide, an engaged persona pointing toward the history of power. She’s the unintended consequence of the Western imagination.”

Roaming

2006

In 2006, Weems travelled to Italy on a fellowship awarded by the American Academy in Rome. Her determination to engage with history led her to create the 'Roaming' series. Standing with her back to the camera in front of architectural sites across Rome, Weems appears as her 'muse'. Dressed in a long black gown, which in moments evokes a state of mourning, the 'muse' is a figure who transgresses time and place.

'Roaming' spans the ruins of the Roman Empire, the monumental architecture of Fascist Italy, and the film sets at the Cinecittá Studios, home to famed Italian directors who inspired Weems such as Federico Fellini. Her presence directly confronts her surroundings, which tell stories linked to imperialism. The artist shows how the construction of power in Western civilisation is materialised through architecture. As in other works which feature the 'muse', Weems embodies a presence which has often been buried within received historical narratives.

From left

The Jewish Ghetto – Ancient Rome

Department of Laborare – Mussolini's Rome

De Sica's Light – Ancient Rome

When and Where I Enter – Mussolini's Rome

The Edge of Time – Ancient Rome

Digital C-prints on paper
Courtesy of the artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York,
Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin

“Every place I go now, I stand in front of museums. I usually bring my camera along and I stand in front of them, and I think about them. I ponder them. It’s an act of engagement; it’s a performance; it’s a meditation; it’s a way of me understanding an architecture, and an experience of that architecture, and what that architecture might mean to a body that is similar to my own.

All roads lead to Rome. All those roads led to finally looking at the function of museums and who exists inside and outside of those spaces practically, culturally, historically, politically, and contemporarily.”

Museums

2006–present

Over the course of her career, Weems began to interrogate how art museums replicate exclusionary power dynamics. This series alludes to the complicated relationship of artist to institution, and of Weems as a Black woman to historically white, male spaces. As in her work 'Roaming', she turns her back to the camera: the 'muse' refuses the scrutiny of the viewer's gaze. Weems stands alone in stark contrast to the imposing architecture of some of the world's most renowned museums such as the Louvre in Paris and the Guggenheim in Bilbao.

Weems points to the imperial origins of the Western museum as an attempt to extend ownership over the world through the collection of knowledge. 'Museums' is an ongoing series, reflecting how cultural institutions continue to uphold structural forms of oppression. Through her presence as both performer and photographer, Weems contests the way in which such places insist on absence and erasure.

From left

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Philadelphia Museum of Art

Zwinger Palace, Dresden

Louvre, Paris

Guggenheim Bilbao

Digital C-prints on paper
Courtesy of the artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, Galerie
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Architecture Doing Place

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