

Carrie Mae Weems



Carrie Mae Weems, 2012 (Photo by Jerry Klineberg)

Carrie Mae Weems was born in Portland, Oregon, on April 20, 1953, as the second of seven children. After graduating high school in 1970, she moved to San Francisco with her friend, film director Catherine Jelski (b. 1953), and was invited to dance in Anna Halprin's (b. 1920) troupe. Halprin is a pioneering figure in the postmodern dance movement and helped redefine it in post-war America. Weems headed to New York City in 1971, however, failing to find work, she soon returned to San Francisco and became involved with leftist political organizations. When the artist turned twenty years old, her boyfriend, who was also an organizer in a local Marxist group, gave Weems her first camera. She began photographing their organization's meetings, family, friends, and herself.

Weems first saw the work of other artists of color in the *Black Photographers Annual*, which was published from 1973 to 1980 and featured prominent black cultural producers, such as Roy DeCarava (1919–2009), Dawoud Bey (b. 1953), and Toni Morrison (b. 1931). "I truly saw the possibility for myself—as both subject and artist,"

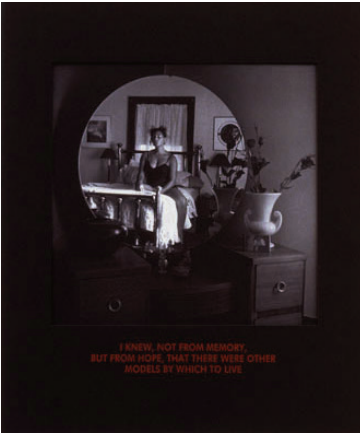


Carrie Mae Weems (American, b. 1953), *From Family Pictures and Stories*, 1981–1982

Weems has said, "I knew that I would emulate what they had begun." In 1976, she returned to New York to seek mentorship with these photographers. While working as a secretary, Weems studied photography at the Studio Museum in Harlem, an important hub for black artists and thinkers in New York City's Harlem neighborhood. She shuttled between New York and California throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, earning a Bachelor of Fine Arts at the California Institute of Arts in 1981 and a Master of Arts degree in photography from the University of California, San Diego in 1984.

Weems primarily works in series, creating groups of images that correspond to an overarching theme or idea. Her first major body of work was titled *Family Pictures and Stories* (1981–1982). This project consists of intimate portraits of Weems' own tight-knit family and is accompanied by text recounting anecdotes about her subjects. Weems has continued to bring together text and images in her work. Two series, *Ain't Jokin'* (1987–1988) and *American Icons* (1988–1989), call attention to the normalization of racist imagery and dialogue in our culture. In 1990, Weems created *Kitchen Table Series*, a breakthrough project that remains an iconic example of the artist's use of self-portraiture.

Weems created the series *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* from 1995 to 1996. Working with found imagery, she draws on historical events and photographs in order to examine the way images shape our view of history. At the time, Weems was also reflecting on the lack of black representation in the art world. *Framed by Modernism* (1996) and *Not Manet's Type* (1997) both address the imbalance of power between white male artists and their models,



Carrie Mae Weems (American, b. 1953), *Not Manet's Type*, 1997

as well as the lack of both subjects and artists of color in the art historical canon. The artist's later work is largely characterized by an interest in the lack of black

representation in both historical and art historical narratives, and especially in the attempt by black artists to reclaim and rewrite the record. In her 2006 series *Roaming*, Weems poses with her back to the camera in historically significant sites throughout Europe, serving as silent witness to history and urging the viewer to consider her presence in spaces normally unwelcoming to people of color.

Weems' influence is wide-reaching and significant, and her work continues to be exhibited and collected nationally and internationally. She has been awarded numerous prizes, including the MacArthur "Genius" Grant and the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation's Lifetime Achievement Award, both in 2013. In 2014, Weems was the subject of a retrospective at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York City, becoming the first African American woman to receive this honor.



Carrie Mae Weems (American, b. 1953), *African Jewels* Installation at Jack Shainman Gallery, 2009 (Photo by Larry Qualls)

Weems as the Subject



Carrie Mae Weems (American, b. 1953), *Kitchen Tables Series*, 1990

Carrie Mae Weems has shared that she "had a really.... deep sense of [her] body from a very early age." Before she received her first camera, she danced in choreographer Anna Halprin's (b. 1920) workshop. Halprin's work engages with the social and communal roles of dance, such as the impact of practicing kinesthetic awareness with individuals who have terminal illnesses. Although Weems is drawn toward visual art, she has rooted her practice in the awareness of her physical body that developed during her time as a dancer.

Weems often serves as the subject in her work, saying, "I use my own constructed image as a vehicle for questioning ideas...underscoring the critical problems and the possible resolves." However, the artist does not think of these photographs as self-portraits. Rather, Weems explains that "this woman can stand in for me and for you; she can stand in for the audience." Weems' *Kitchen Table Series* (1990), comprising twenty photographs and fourteen text panels, constructs a loose narrative around an unnamed character—played by the artist—and her interactions with her family, friends, and partner. Through this character's relationships with others, the artist examines what it means to be a black woman and how it shapes life in her domestic space.

In her 2006 series *Roaming*, Weems poses with her back to the camera in sites across the world that represent historical oppression. The artist describes this stand-in character: "[she is] a witness and a guide.... Carrying a tremendous burden, she is a black woman leading me through the trauma of history. I think it's very important that as a black woman she's engaged with the world around her; she's engaged with history, she's engaged with looking, with being. She's a guide into circumstances seldom seen."

Much like *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* (1995–1996), this series questions the dynamics between the powerful and the powerless in history. In *Roaming*, rather than attempting to retroactively return power to those who lost it, Weems uses her role as both subject and photographer to challenge the exclusivity of these spaces and defy history by being present and observing in these historically charged places. Weems explains that rewriting history is essential to her work and to the process of coming to terms with historical trauma.



Carrie Mae Weems (American, b. 1953), *Roaming*, 2006

Examining Racism through Photography



Carrie Mae Weems (American, b. 1953), *Family Pictures and Stories*, 1981–1982



Throughout her career, Carrie Mae Weems has used photography to meditate on narratives and imagery that perpetuate racism and stereotyping. Her first major body of work, *Family Pictures and Stories* (1981–1982), is often framed as a response to Daniel Patrick Moynihan's 1965 report *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, commonly known as "The Moynihan Report," in which the author attributes the economic gap between white and black families to the prevalence of single-parent households in the black community. In Weems' photographs, the artist portrays her family as tight-knit and supportive of one another, providing an alternate narrative to the stereotypes perpetuated by other mainstream media representations of black families. Weems also engages with the history of black migration out of the South, saying: "In *Family Pictures and Stories*, I was thinking not only of my family, but was trying to explore the movement of black families out of the South and into the North. My family becomes the representational vehicle that allows me to enter the larger discussion of race, class, and historical migration." This early work initiated Weems' interest in historical systems of oppression and their continued impact on contemporary social relationships and stereotypes.

Timeline

1950

1953 Carrie Mae Weems is born on April 20 in Portland, OR



Carrie Mae Weems, MacArthur Foundation Fellow, Class of 2013 (Photo credit: John D. & Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation)

1960

1970 Moves to San Francisco; joins Anna Halprin's modern dance troupe

1973 Receives first camera

1976 Meets American photographer and educator Dawoud Bey

1978 Lives bi-coastally until 1981; works as Anthony Barboza's assistant

1981 Receives BFA from the California Institute of the Arts

1984 Exhibits *Family Pictures and Stories* at Multicultural Gallery, San Diego; receives MFA from University of California, San Diego



Carrie Mae Weems (American, b. 1953), *The Louisiana Project*, 2003

1991 Participates in the Whitney Biennial

1993 Moves to Paris; National Museum of Women in the Arts publishes catalogue *Carrie Mae Weems* in conjunction with her first major museum exhibition

1994 Returns to New York City; moves to Syracuse, NY in 1996

2005–2006 Tours Europe

2013 Becomes MacArthur Foundation Fellow; receives Lifetime Achievement Award from the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation

2014 Becomes first African American woman to have a retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum

2017 Named one of the 100 most influential women of all time by *Ebony* magazine



Carrie Mae Weems (American, b. 1953), *Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me* Installation view, 2012

2000

2010

Carrie Mae Weems

American, b. 1953

1995, from the series "From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried"
chromogenic development print and sandblasted glass, 26 3/4 x 22 3/4 in. (67.95 x 57.79 cm),
Museum purchase, 1997.19.A, 1997.19.B

From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried (1995–1996) consists of thirty-three framed photographs with superimposed text. For this series, Carrie Mae Weems employs photographic appropriation, a strategy in which artists use found images and alter them in their own work. Weems combed through universities' and museums' photographic collections where she discovered pictures taken by Swiss naturalist Louis Agassiz, who photographed enslaved people in the American South in the 1850s in an attempt to support his claims that people of African origin were racially inferior to whites. Weems

photographed the historical images from these archives for this project without securing permission from the institutions that held them. She then increased the size of the images to make them consistent with one another and tinted them red, a color evocative of blood and violence. The artist framed each with a black circular matte—to mimic the camera lens—and sandblasted text into the glass over each image.

Weems has addressed the second-person viewpoint of the text, explaining that she used "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." When reading the entire series from left to right, the text forms an essay that recontextualizes the images into a narrative of reclaimed power and lost majesty, elevating the subjects of these photographs from objects of racist scientific observation to dignified portrait sitters. Bookending the thirty-one red-tinted images are two profile portraits of dignified women, tinted blue and bearing the title of the series.

In 2000, Weems remarked, "When we're looking at these images, we're looking at the ways in which Anglo America—white America—saw itself in relationship to the black subject. I wanted to intervene in that by giving a voice to a subject that historically has had no voice." Not only does the artist counter the narrative surrounding these images, but she also creates a new poetic storyline to tie them together: "I was trying to heighten a kind of critical awareness around the way in which these photographs were intended," she has said, and give "the subject another level of humanity and another level of dignity that was originally missing in the photograph."

Discussion Questions

How does Carrie Mae Weems give her subjects power?

What role does text play in Weems' work?

Why does Weems act as a "silent witness" to historical traumas? Why do you think it is imperative to understand and process these events or experiences?

Describe how Weems confronts racism in her work. Why is that important?

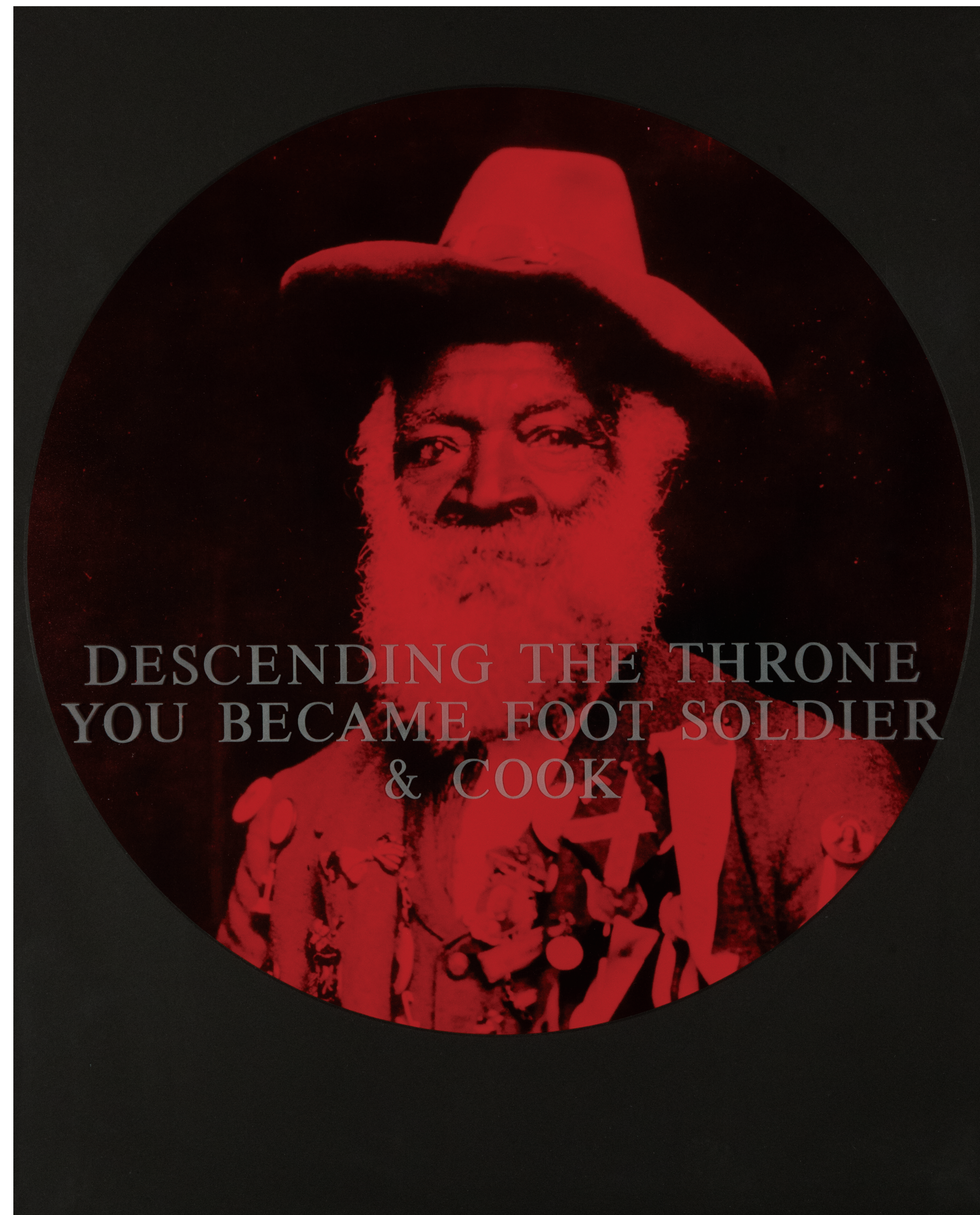
Teachers: go to www.joslyn.org/education for this poster's related academic standards and lesson plans.



YOU BECAME MAMMIE, MAMA, MOTHER & THEN, YES, CONFIDANT-HA

CARRIE MAE WEEMS
American, b. 1953

1995, FROM THE SERIES "FROM HERE I SAW WHAT HAPPENED AND I CRIED"
chromogenic development print and sandblasted glass, 26 3/4 x 22 3/4 in.



DESCENDING THE THRONE YOU BECAME FOOT SOLDIER & COOK

JOSLYN ART MUSEUM® OMAHA, NEBRASKA
Museum purchase, 1997.19.A, 1997.19.B