

“Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video” at New York’s Guggenheim Museum

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Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video, at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York City, January 22-May 14, 2014

The work of Carrie Mae Weems (born 1953), a highly honored contemporary African American artist, is widely praised for its examination of “race, gender and class.” This latter formulation, associated with the rise of identity politics, is virtually embedded in the DNA of so much contemporary art, especially that which is considered, or considers itself, “political” or “radical.” But the focus is really on race and gender, while class is relegated to a negligible position in the triad.

What makes Weems’s work in photography and video particularly interesting is its evolution, which was brought out by the recent retrospective exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. The photographs in the early collection, *Family Pictures in Stories and Words* (1981-82), stand out as her most straightforward work. The photographs of her mother on the job at a garment factory and various other members of her close-knit, extended family at home in crowded kitchens, or heading out for a night on the town, capture the experiences of a working class household with liveliness and intimacy.

Weems conceived of the project for her Master of Fine Arts (MFA) degree at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD), as a response in part to what became known as the Moynihan Report (1965), authored by then Assistant Secretary of Labor, and subsequently US senator from New York, Daniel Patrick Moynihan. The report, which presaged the shape of much of the ideological reaction to come, absolved American capitalism and the abysmal conditions in which the minority population was forced to live and, instead, blamed the “deterioration of the Negro family” (single mothers, unemployed or absent men, etc.) for the “weakness of the Negro community,” i.e., endemic poverty, discrimination and social inequality.

In the early 1980s, when Ronald Reagan was intensifying

the counter-offensive against the gains of the working class, including the reforms won through the bitter struggles of the civil rights movements, the Moynihan Report was brought forward again. Once more, it provoked opposition. Now, the report also came in for a “Marxist-feminist” critique, which argued that the document was primarily offensive, not for its racism, but its sexism. According to this argument, single working mothers represent not a breakdown of the patriarchal family structure, but the liberation of women from their economic dependence on men.

As a black feminist, Weems was able to object to the report on both counts.

According to her online biography, Weems worked as a labor organizer from 1972-82, and the media still sometimes describe her as a “grassroots Marxist,” a characterization that denotes a turn away from the working class in favor of middle class protest and single-issue politics.

Like many of her generation, Weems’s youthful opposition to the social order became channeled into identity politics, initially under the rubric of Marxist-hyphenatedisms, like “Marxist-feminism,” and subsequently refashioned as the more general concern with “race, gender and class.”

Her *Family Pictures in Stories and Words* collection was exhibited in 1984, the same year she received her MFA from UCSD. Weems then obtained a second masters degree in folklore from University of California, Berkeley in 1987, inspired by anthropologist and writer Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960). Hurston’s research into the folkloric traditions of African American communities in the South, and her novels such as *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), had been widely read during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1930s. Hurston’s writings were rediscovered in the mid-1980s by feminist and African American studies departments.

From then on, Weems’s series of photographs, including *Ain’t Jokin* (1987-88), *American Icons* (1988-89) and

Colored People (1989-90), paired visually striking photos with acerbic texts to condemn the negative stereotypes of black people that still pervaded American culture. The *Kitchen Table* series (1990) epitomizes her talent for creating elegant images, in this case staged with herself as the central figure, paired with text to tell the story of African American womanhood, eventually empowered.

From Here I Saw What Happened and Cried (1995-96) secured Weems wider critical exposure and success. Bookended with mirror images of an African tribal princess tinted blue, a series of 30 “appropriated” photographs culled from anthropological studies, Civil War era photographs and other stereotypical images of African Americans are stained blood-red and etched on glass with labels decrying the objectification of African Americans as “negroid types, slaves, sexual playmates, etc.”

The piece has emotional and visual impact, but one wishes it had something more complex to tell us about the legacy of American slavery, at that point almost a century and a half after the Emancipation Proclamation, as well as 30 years after the Civil Rights Act of 1964. In focusing attention on these images of America’s “peculiar institution,” the point is perhaps that the majority of African Americans have yet to achieve the goals of decent jobs and living standards—but the question is why?

And what was the fate of people like those present in her early photographs from the 1980s and 1990s? The conditions of every section of the US working class were being devastated, with the collusion of the unions, by de-industrialization and globalization. The focus on the degradation of slavery precisely when “affirmative action” was benefiting a narrow layer of the black petty bourgeoisie—including Weems herself—became a means of evading the fundamental class divisions intensifying in the US and within the African American population itself, substituting a false racial unity instead.

Weems’ prolific work has continued its trajectory since the 1990s: sophisticated, visually elegant and often ironic images are intended to inspire indignation at the continuing injustices of American society. With titles like *And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People*, (1989-1990), *Ritual and Revolution* (1998) and *Dreaming in Cuba* (2001), they deliver the clichés dear to pseudo-radical circles.

Since the early 2000s Weems has often worked in video as well as photography. With the possible exception of the amusing *Afro Chic* (2009), these “poetic” successions of inchoate images narrated by Weems delivering political commentary are painful to watch, in part because one still feels that Weems is intelligent, sincere and talented, but that she has long since ended up in an intellectual and artistic blind alley.

The Obama Project (2012) is particularly putting. Available on her website, but not at the Guggenheim, it champions Hillary Clinton as the “defeated woman,” and superimposes multiple personas over the face of Obama—including that of Abraham Lincoln, the Joker, Mad Magazine’s Alfred E. Newman, Chairman Mao and Adolf Hitler—while musing whether the election of the first black man to the US presidency was engineered to be a new face on an old game, a last resort of a failed system, etc.

Nevertheless, Weems’s stature has only grown since Obama’s election. She has received countless accolades, exhibitions and awards, including a medal from the US State Department in 2012 and a 2013 MacArthur Foundation Fellowship for \$625,000. Her *Colored People* greets visitors to the US Mission to the United Nations (UN) in New York City.

In an interview published earlier this year, Weems defended Obama from the criticisms of certain “liberals.” She commented, “The patterns that govern racism are so entrenched that his hands are tied, and it’s so, so painful to see.” When asked whether Obama and his wife were familiar with her work, Weems replied, “Yes, my work has been at the UN and in various American embassies, and it was also hanging in former UN ambassador Susan Rice’s apartment. Michelle was very moved when she saw ‘From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried,’ 1995–96, at MoMA [Museum of Modern Art] and said, ‘I have to call the president. He has to come and see this.’ When I met her at the White House, it was really wonderful. She said to me, ‘Carrie Mae Weems, I’m so glad to meet you.’ And I said, ‘I’m so happy to meet my first lady!’”

Despite her considerable talents and sympathy for the oppressed, Weems has become a comfortable part of the establishment that she intended to oppose, due in no small part to the diversion of her opposition into the safe channels of racial and gender politics.



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