

Projects 52 : Carrie Mae Weems : the Museum of Modern Art, New York, November 2, 1995-January 2, 1995

Author

Weems, Carrie Mae, 1953-

Date

1995

Publisher

The Museum of Modern Art

Exhibition URL

www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/476

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carrie mae weems

projects



**The Museum of Modern Art
New York**

November 2, 1995 – January 2, 1996

To put it boldly, the new kind of critic and artist associated with the new cultural politics of difference consists of an energetic breed of New World bricoleurs with improvisational and flexible sensibilities that sidestep mere opportunism and mindless eclecticism; persons from all countries, cultures, genders, sexual orientations, ages and regions with protean identities who avoid ethnic chauvinism and faceless universalism; intellectual and political freedom-fighters with partisan passion, international perspectives, and, thank God, a sense of humor that combats the ever-present absurdity that forever threatens our democratic and libertarian projects and dampens the fire that fuels our will to struggle.

Cornel West¹

At heart Carrie Mae Weems is a storyteller. For nearly two decades, she has been drawing upon personal and family histories as well as African-American history and folklore in the creation of poetic ensembles of photographs and texts. Her work informs and entertains as it recounts tales infrequently or never before told. It provokes and challenges through the deadpan presentation of insidious stereotypes of race, gender, and class. In thrall to her skillful jokes and poignant stories, Weems's audience is led to critical reflection upon the underlying social, political, and economic structures out of which all particular stories are generated and to a heightened awareness of the role of various representational practices in reinforcing a dominant racist, sexist, and classist ideology and status quo here in the United States.²

The following conversation about the evolution of this **projects** installation is drawn from an interview with the artist on September 15, 1995.

Thomas W. Collins, Jr.
Beaumont and Nancy Newhall Curatorial Fellow
Department of Photography

Thomas Collins: What general concerns drive your art making?

Carrie Mae Weems: I want to make things that are beautiful, seductive, formally challenging, and culturally meaningful. But somehow, I also imagine that, within the confines of the art world, I insert a voice that is somewhat different. It's a voice that assumes cultural fluidity. I'm also committed to radical social change—that's the reason that themes of social relations recur in my art practice. Of course, the formal dimensions of how politics will play out in the work change over time, but the core of the work remains the same. Any form of human injustice moves me deeply—I mean, sends me straight to the moon. So the battle against all forms of oppression keeps me going and keeps me focused. I'm a sucker for hope!

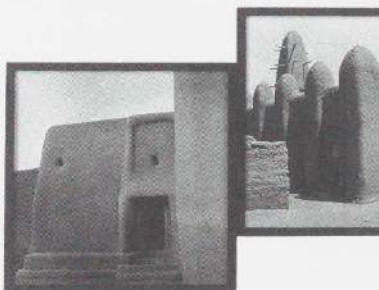
TC: Critics infrequently do justice to this range of interests, most often treating only the way you handle questions about race.

CMW: Unfortunately, many white critics assume that there exists little in their social experience that provides them with the "means" to critique the work of black artists. Of course their art history M.A.'s didn't provide them with much to draw from either. So they feel as though they lack the grounds for providing a culturally informed critique that goes beyond questions of race relations. Presumably blacks as a social group operate within a closed system, and presumably so does the art produced. And since blacks are constructed as "the central problem" it's easier to talk about questions of race than to discuss the formal dimensions of black artistic production. Of course, it's important to know that ethnicity/gender

does play a role in how works of art are processed through the body of the artist, but the question is: what role?

TC: The present installation is the result of a series of related exploratory journeys that you've taken in the last five years. In 1991 you traveled to the Sea Islands off the coast of Georgia and South Carolina, making photographs and generating texts responsive to what you've called the "Africanisms," the language, customs, and material culture traceable directly to African precedent, that persist in this isolated American community densely populated with the descendants of slaves from West Africa. When you finished this body of work and the accompanying commemorative plate series *Went Looking for Africa*, you then made your first trip to Africa.

CMW: After the Sea Islands series—a project that not only allowed me to think about art making differently, but to make a different kind of art—it was necessary for me to finally go to Africa. You know, West Africa, Senegal, is only five and a half hours from New York—dig that! I was shocked. Like everybody else, I had bought the idea that Africa was that distant and dark place, as far away as Timbuktu. Impossible to get to!



As I was flying over, I thought about how it had been essential to the American political project to construct Africa as a distant and Godforsaken wasteland. It was a psychological distance based on America's need to distance itself from its historical involvement in the slave trade, but further to absolve itself from any contemporary involvement, even though both Europe and America have forced Africa's underdevelopment.

When I arrived, I immediately began photographing the vestiges of slavery: the slave ports, forts, castles along the coast of Ghana, Elmina and Cape Coast, and Ile de Gorée in Senegal.

As much as I like photographing people, the pictures are primarily architectural. For example in *Went Looking For Africa*, I was a subject in search of myself and attempting to map a new psychological terrain for myself and others. I suppose in the Sea Islands series and in this installation, I'm trying to construct a new prism for looking at certain aspects of African-American culture and gender relationships—as James Baldwin said, "searching for the evidence of things unseen." Both the Sea Islands series and this installation are about how I see and understand material culture as the structure—the evidence—of my own world view.

TC: This new work, though also inspired by your first stay in Africa, marks a departure from your examination of the institutionalization of slavery and its legacies in both Africa and the United States. It does participate, however, in this theme of search and discovery—something you make clear in the way you've wrapped the installation in a very particular decorative motif.

CMW: The wallpaper comes from the endpapers of George Bernard Shaw's book, *A Black Woman in Her Search for God* [1933]. I loved the motif, and decided to use it as the ground that my photographs and text would rest on. And besides, I was really getting tired of white walls. The wallpaper is a metaphor for the searching, probing, looking.

TC: This search led you to a reconsideration of myths of the creation of the first woman and the first man and their fall from grace. How did Africa as place and idea initiate this process?

CMW: Life began in Africa. I concentrated on the look and feel of the place. But what was deep was the gender specificity of the architecture, particularly in Djenne, Mali. The idea that space is "gendered"—you know, male and female space—knocked me out. It was so clearly presented in the structure of the buildings—beautiful. In fact, this entire installation spins around several buildings I photographed in Djenne. Seeing these buildings and trying to get a handle on their meaning were the raw materials for imagining and creating a visual/textual myth.

TC: How, specifically, did the pieces involving architectural and landscape photos and your original texts evolve?

CMW: By simply letting the photographs tell me what I needed to do with them. The text came months later. The pictures feel old, dusty, as though they were made long ago—they are the structure of my imagined world. But I wanted a text that felt even older—a text that would function as a myth, and it does, I hope.

Myths are stories about the historical past that are believed to be true that tell us how the

present world came to be. And as you know, human life began in Africa, so in this installation I play with these ideas. But fortunately, I'm an artist, not an ethnographer, so I blend my own myth with those from other cultures. Every culture has a creation myth and almost all of them begin with the battle between the first woman and man. I'm just playing it up in a different light.

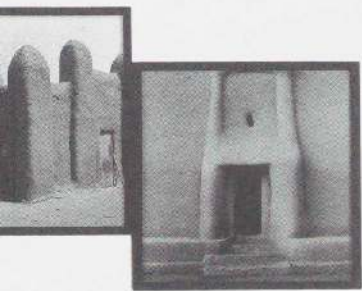
TC: In your retelling of this creation myth—and by "retelling" I mean the entire ensemble of photographs, texts and objects—you highlight your own particular understanding of gender difference and the dynamics of heterosexual relationships that necessarily arise from this difference. Will you elaborate?

CMW: Everything spins around this divide between men and women. The organization of the installation suggests that a unity, a resolve between them is essentially impossible. In fact, no resolve is the only resolve. In the beginning a rupture occurred and that's that. What it leaves open, however, is the possibility for fashioning a new model for our relationships.

TC: The screen *The Apple of Adam's Eye*, the first of these new pieces, is a focus of the installation. How do you think it announces these ideas?

CMW: Even though there is a divide, there is also great desire, seduction, sexual charge and points to be made—you know, stuff that makes the world go round. Both the text on the screen and on the text panels play with creation myth. The image and text on the screen challenge a number of assumptions about sexual desire, about religious belief, and about looking. It's an unsettling piece in many ways.

The installation is in some way about how both men and women are accomplices in their own downfall, in their own oppression,



in their own victimization. It pushes against the way we live our lives, and asks the viewer to consider new models. You know, the old ones certainly aren't working.

TC: Will you explain the ways in which both the pieces involving photographs of African sculpture and the actual sculptural objects you've included amplify and extend these themes?

CMW: First, they're gorgeous. I love the song "Climbing the Stairway to Heaven" by the O'Jays; thus the ladders. The pieces loosely relate to the central idea of my project: after their battle, he sits with his tools of power and she with her generations—fertility being her greatest gift.

Also, these figures are symbolic representations of perfection and future possibility. In certain African countries both men and women will carry this kind of figure with them throughout their adult lives; the object signifies the perfect man or woman waiting for them on the other side. These sculptures represent your perfect afterlife mate. So they're perfect in this context.

TC: You've made clear that the dynamic you illustrate here is anchored in your own lived experience. How does your interpretation square with the socialist-feminist theory you've espoused?

CMW: Of course, I'm a feminist, and I was involved with the socialist-feminist movement. The work is certainly from a woman's viewpoint, but has little to do with reactionary feminism—denial feminism—you know, that kind of self-righteous, finger-pointing, "you did this to me" kind of feminism that hasn't figured out how women have been accomplices in their own victimization. It's much more interesting to think about how I participate in my own victimization. If I can figure that out, I can also start to figure out how to liberate myself from, as my girlfriend says, the "-ism brothers."

1. "The New Cultural Politics of Difference," in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russell Ferguson, et al. (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990), p. 36.

2. For examples of Weems's work produced 1978–92, see the exhibition catalogue *Carrie Mae Weems* (Washington, D.C.: The National Museum of Women in the Arts, 1993). For work produced after 1993, see the exhibition catalogue *Carrie Mae Weems* (Philadelphia: The Fabric Workshop and Museum, 1995).

biography

Born Portland, Oregon, 1953

B.F.A., California Institute of the Arts, 1981

M.F.A., University of California, San Diego, 1984

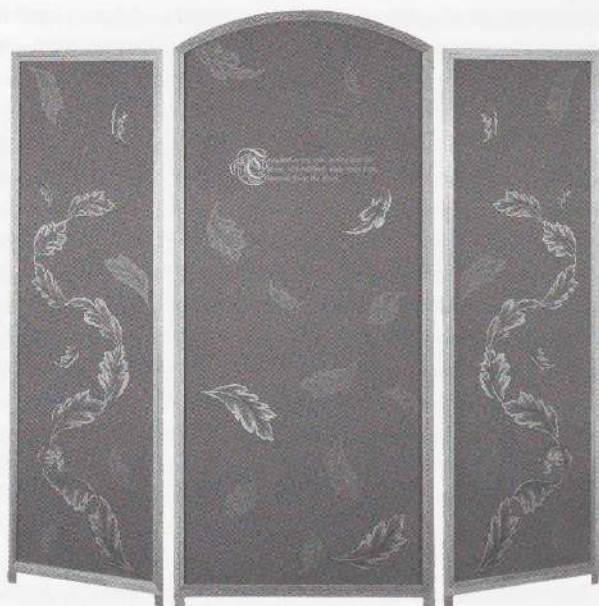
M.A., Graduate Program in Folklore, University of California, Berkeley, 1987

selected awards and solo exhibitions

- 1995** Biennial Exhibition, Seoul, Korea
Fellow, The Mary Ingraham Bunting Institute,
Radcliffe Research and Study Center, Cambridge,
Massachusetts
The Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati
The J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu, California
- 1994** Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia
Portland Art Museum, Portland, Oregon
Walker Art Center, Minneapolis
- 1993** California Afro-American Museum, Los Angeles
Center for Fine Arts, Miami
The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia

- The Forum, St. Louis
 The National Museum of Women in the Arts,
 Washington, D.C.
 San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
- 1992** Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art
 Greenville County Museum, Greenville, South Carolina
 Louis Comfort Tiffany Award
 Nexus Gallery, Atlanta
 P.P.O.W., New York City
 San Francisco Art Institute
- 1991** Art Complex Museum, Duxbury, Massachusetts
 Freedman Gallery Center for the Arts, Albright College,
 Reading, Pennsylvania
 Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston
 New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York City
 Trustman Gallery, Simmons College, Boston
 University of Southern California, Irvine
 Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut
- 1990** CEPA Gallery, Buffalo
 P.P.O.W., New York City
- 1989** Red Eye Gallery, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence
- 1987** Hampshire College Art Gallery, Amherst, Massachusetts
- 1984** Alternative Space Gallery, San Diego
 Multi-Cultural Gallery, San Diego

Special thanks to Marion Boulton Stroud, Kelly Mitchell, Sue Patterson, and Pam Vanderzwan of The Fabric Workshop and Museum; Penny Pilkington, Wendy Olsoff, and Scott Catto of P.P.O.W., Inc.; and Paula Osagie.



Front and back covers: *The Apple of Adam's Eye*. 1993. Pigment and silk embroidery on cotton sateen with Australian lacewood frame. 75 1/4 x 81 1/2 x 1 3/4" overall. (Text, front: "She'd always been the apple/Of Adam's eye." Text, back: "Temptation my ass, desire has its place, and besides, they were both doomed from the start.") Photo: Will Brown
 Inside: *The Shape of Things*. 1993. Gelatin-silver prints. 20 x 20" each

The Apple of Adam's Eye courtesy The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia. All other work courtesy the artist and P.P.O.W., Inc., New York.

The **projects** series is made possible by generous grants from the Lannan Foundation, and The Contemporary Arts Council and The Junior Associates of The Museum of Modern Art.