Carrie Mae Weems

B 1953 Portland, Oregon, USA

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.

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 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 convictions 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.

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Untitled (Man smoking) from The Kitchen Table Series 1990

Gelatin silver print and text panel
Image: 27 3/16 × 27 1/16 in. (69 × 68.8 cm),
text panel: 13 × 10 1/16 in. (33 × 25.5 cm)
The Family of Man Fund. 1991



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Carrie Mae Weems

You Became a Scientific Profile, **& A Photographic Subject**, **You Became Uncle Tom John & Clemens' Jim**, and **Some Laughed Long & Hard & Loud** from **From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried** 1995

Four from a series of thirty-three chromogenic color prints with sandblasted text on glass
Each: 26 ¾ × 22 in. (67.9 × 55.8 cm) or 22 × 26 ¾ in. (55.8 × 67.9 cm)
Gift on behalf of The Friends of Education of The Museum of Modern Art. 1997

We are invited to take a seat at the table. From our position at one end, we are at once guests at an intimate gathering and spectators observing a drama built around domestic relationships. The characters in front of us—the protagonist, played by the artist herself, and the eponymous *Man smoking*—communicate without words, the bonds and messages between them evident in the shared gaze, the bodies turned toward one another. The action unfolds in a kitchen that doubles as a stage set, a hanging lamp above the table providing a glowing spotlight on the scene.

The image and text reproduced here are part of Carrie Mae Weems's Kitchen Table Series (1990), twenty photographs and fourteen text panels that weave a thread of narrative storytelling together with visual compositions anchored by the performative poses of the characters and their props. The series offers a complex rumination on the representation of women through the lens of domestic life. All twenty pictures focus on the woman embodied by the artist, who is joined by other characters around the same table. In this evening scene, she and the man smoking sit kitty-corner across from one another, playing cards, drinking whiskey, and shelling peanuts. From our vantage point over the man's shoulder, we know he holds only a pair of fours. Yet he gazes at Weems straight on, his posture exuding confidence. As Weems has said of herself, in a conversation with photographer Dawoud Bey, "From the very beginning, I've been interested in the idea of power and the consequences of power; relationships are made and articulated through power." In *Untitled (Man smoking)*, the signs of power (in play between the characters pictured, but also through the historical forces brought to bear on them) are various and complicated, and emerge from both dynamic speech—in the accompanying text panel—and silent gestures.

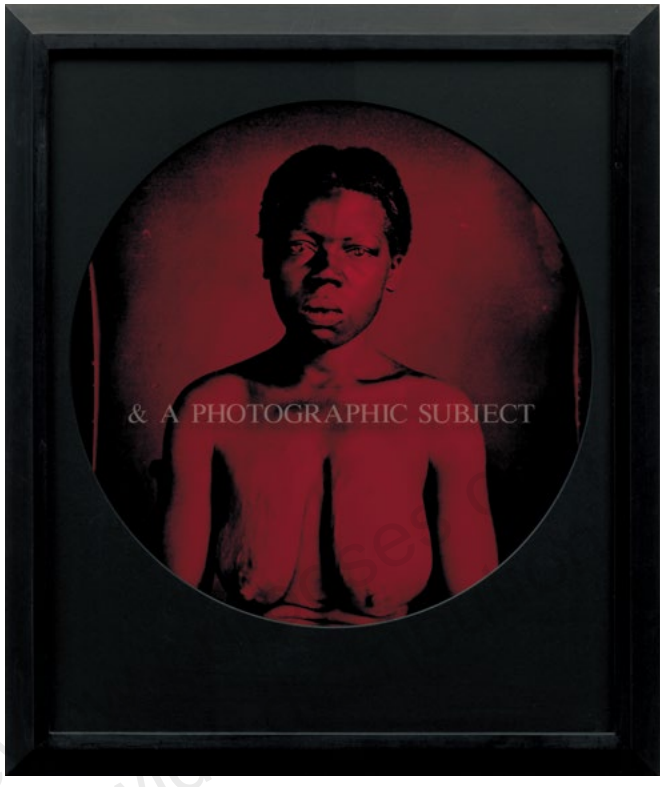
From her seat at the head of the table, the protagonist looks sidelong at the man, trying to get a read. Her pose, a closed hand covering her mouth, contrasts with the outward gesture of Malcolm X, whom we see in a poster on the wall behind her. In fact her stance almost exactly mirrors that of the pensive John Coltrane in the photograph from the cover of his 1958 album *Blue Train*, also adhered to the wall, above her right shoulder. Malcolm and Trane are just two in the cultural lineage referenced in the constellation of images on the wall, connecting Weems's character (and indeed the artist herself) to the figures and histories that have shaped her. Some of these pictures are too obscure to make out, but on examination we can recognize the second-from-the-top image in the right column as a postcard reproduction of Garry Winogrand's famous 1967 picture of a stylishly dressed interracial couple walking through the Central Park Zoo holding a pair of chimpanzees as if they were infants. And we can pick out blurry details in other images: Egyptian pyramids in one of the images on the right, the curved female nude of a Renaissance painting on the bottom left, and finally, circling around to the upper left, the word "warning" in bold type. Together, each of these details contributes to a social and historical framework through which to read the contemporary relationship represented here.

The Kitchen Table Series set the pace for Weems's photographic investigations, over three decades, into the ways in which human experience is shaped by distinctions of race, gender, and authority. In Weems's work, such experiences are often framed by the perspective of a black female protagonist—frequently (as here) the artist herself—providing an integration of the personal in the telling of complex national and global stories.

Lucy Gallun

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YOU BECAME A
SCIENTIFIC PROFILE


& A PHOTOGRAPHIC SUBJECT


YOU BECAME UNCLE TOM
JOHN & CLEMENS' JIM


SOME LAUGHED
LONG & HARD & LOUD