

Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video,
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, January 24 – May
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Installation view, *Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2014.
photo: David Heald © Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation

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Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video is the first exhibition by an African-American woman at the Guggenheim. The plausibility of that scenario and the national-political sensibility it engages go under the knife in Carrie Mae Weems's challenging and crucial presentation. Consider work like her 2003 *The Louisiana Project* series: in a number of ghostly, almost incandescent photographs, Weems stands in front of Southern plantation estates dressed in the garb of a nineteenth-century domestic worker. With her back to the viewer, she stays at a remove from the romanticized gravitas of American mythology, cast as its actor but ambivalent about performing its roles. Her sumptuous formalism renders the scene with a forceful sense of presence, but that ordered containment also rings as illusory: what emerges through Weems's exhibition is a key thematic dilemma—how to imagine oneself in an historical subject-position whose very trajectory is always already sketched by forces of domination. In work both difficult and generous, Weems opts to express the sheer trouble of such a cultural impasse.

Captions turn out to be Weems's most effective tools. As with the domestic scenes of her *Kitchen Table Series* (1990) or the imposing architecture of *Slave Coast* (1993), captions rarely explicate the contents of an image. Instead, they challenge or contradict the photograph in hesitant proximity. In her stunning *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* (1995-96), Weems appropriated nineteenth-century ethnographic daguerreotypes of American slaves, staining them blood red and inscribing them with captions alternatively furious, mournful, or sardonic. On a portrait of a white family and their female slave, Weems writes, "YOUR RESISTANCE WAS FOUND IN THE FOOD YOU PLACED ON THE MASTER'S TABLE—HA." The affective ambiguity of the laugh haunts the series, and

much of the exhibition as a whole, as a reaction to the unbearable opacity of a document whose production and reception have been brokered by violence. Weems attends to the force of political trauma while allowing for its reframing, and the frame becomes Weems's most effective arena of action on both discursive and aesthetic levels. Frames stage both the lonely beauty of Weems's *Roaming* photographs (2006) and the theatricality of the *Constructing Histories* tableaux (2008), in which epochal moments of political violence are treated like didactic dioramas. In her efforts to narrate stories of historical mistreatment, Weems is pedagogical, but it's a pedagogy whose emotional and personal thickness remains an intense, strangely disorienting aesthetic experience.

[Joseph Henry]



Carrie Mae Weems, *Untitled (Woman and daughter with mirror)* from the *Kitchen Table Series*, 1990.

photo: © Carrie Mae Weems and The Art Institute of Chicago



Carrie Mae Weems, *Untitled (Man and mirror)* from the *Kitchen Table Series*, 1990.

photo: © Carrie Mae Weems and The Art Institute of Chicago