

Carrie Mae Weems
Ritual & Revolution
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Carrie Mae Weems: *Ritual & Revolution*, 1998

Every individual is not only the synthesis of contemporary relationships he is also a summary of the entire past.

This statement by the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci is part of a longer quote given by Carrie Mae Weems with her 1991 work, *Some Theory*.¹ As Mary Jane Jacob has pointed out,² Weems's art presents and involves us with a drama of society, not of individuals. Over a twenty-year career, Weems's themes have focused on issues of race, class, gender, and identity. We are alerted to Weems's complex artistic strategies by the above quotation from an Italian theorist used in a series whose title—*And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People*—overtly refers to the long road to full emancipation for African Americans.

"The truth," said Oscar Wilde, "is rarely pure and never simple." Weems typically presents us with what at first seems a simple artistic concept—pictures of her family, or the history of a love affair, or a meditation on the relationship between Africa and America—and complicates it. What she complicates it *with* are what complicates life: sex, greed, fear, weakness, regret, and hope. What emerges is a sense of the spiritual reality underlying the social reality, and an implicit charge to liberate the future from the past.

Weems created *Ritual & Revolution* for the Dakar Biennial, DAK'ART 98, in Senegal, whence slaves were shipped from Africa to America. There, her audience was primarily African. For the Berkeley Art Museum's MATRIX installation, Weems has amplified the piece, adding three more images to her original eight, expanding the light-filled, maze-like environment of

muslin panels on which large photographic images drawn from both nature and culture have been digitally printed. Coexistent with this visual dimension, the space is filled by the dimension of sound: the artist's voice, reciting her ode to history, memory, and resistance. The viewer experiences the piece through space and time, participating in the production of multi-layered meanings. The meanings emerge from visual and aural images that span the history of humankind, conveying beauty and tragedy, error and loss, ending on a millennial note of courage and hope:

in the May flowers of
May Days
long
forgotten
O, Rise

These are the final words of the spoken text, though "spoken" is not truly adequate to the experience of Weems's melodious voice.

Carrie Mae Weems developed her early artistic reputation as a photographer, and her mastery of this uniquely direct medium gives her work its considerable power. Yet from her first major series, *Family Pictures and Stories* of 1978-84, Weems has integrated words, sometimes in the form of printed text, sometimes accompanied or replaced by the human voice, as an integral aspect of her work. Her installations activate multiple responses, intellectual and emotional as well as sensual. *Ritual & Revolution* is a further stage in Weems's drive to make her expression both truer to her own experience of the world and meaningful to a wider audience.

Born in 1953 in Portland, Oregon, Weems received her undergraduate degree from the California Institute of Arts in Valencia and

her Master of Fine Art degree from the University of California at San Diego. Twenty-seven when she began the B.F.A. program at CalArts, she was driven to full-time studies in art by her frustration with politics. But the professors she remembers best there taught literature, folklore, and writing, not art. At UCSD, Weems worked with Fred Lonidier, who inspired her to explore the conceptual complexities underlying the documentary photography she had been creating for several years. Among the goals of this early work was to contradict official accounts of social reality by interjecting the emotional reality of personal history, interpersonal dynamics, and feeling.

Family Pictures and Stories combined images of the artist's family members with audio-taped narratives of their migration from Mississippi to Oregon, and first-person text comments by Weems. The six-year process of creating this work so stimulated Weems's interest in storytelling that in 1984 she entered a master's program at the University of California at Berkeley, where she studied Folklore with Alan Dundes. Storytelling was her intellectual focus at Berkeley—specifically the oral tradition within African American culture, but also encompassing the storytelling traditions of Ireland, Russia, and Africa.

Storytelling is fundamentally an expression of and comment on the human condition, and the human condition has been a focus of Weems's art from the beginning. *Family Pictures and Stories* was followed by increasingly layered and psychologically complex works such as *Ain't Jokin* (1987-1988), *Colored People* (1989-1990), and *Kitchen Table* (1990).

In these series, Weems intertwined themes that are entwined in life—racial, sexual, and cultural identity, and history—presented with overtones of humor and sadness, loss and redemption. In the 1990s, Weems broadened both her geographical scope and the forms of her expression. She explored the African diaspora beginning with her *Sea Islands* series of 1991-92; she went to Africa in 1993 and out of this visit came work focusing on the evocative forms and persistent cultural traditions of that continent.

Both a continuation and a broadening of Weems's past themes, *Ritual & Revolution* intends to be a public forum for cultural dialogue as well as a private meditative experience. It integrates images of natural beauty and human achievement with references to cruelty, suffering, and revolution against oppression. The references are poetic, yet very specific; they range through history, from the slave trade, to the Russian revolution, to the Irish potato famine, and the holocaust. The recitation of these specifics yields a cumulative awareness of human frailty and courage, and generates feelings of love for our benighted species. *Ritual & Revolution* defines struggle through historical time and place, and aims to bridge cultural barriers. As relevant as the installation may have been in Senegal, it seems equally relevant in different ways to Berkeley, as the means if not the goal of achieving equality in education threaten to unravel. In the twilight of an old millennium *Ritual & Revolution* urges us to gather hope and strength for the next era in the history of our fragile world.

Jacquelyn Baas
Director

1 The entire quotation, which accompanies a Polaroid color print of a standing black book or notebook, reads: "Necessary relationships change in importance, appearance, and significance to the extent that their necessity is recognized. In this sense, knowledge is power. But the problem is further complicated. It isn't enough to understand the totality of relationships at a given moment, as a given system, but we must understand it genetically, understand how the system and the relationships were formed. Every individual is not only the synthesis of contemporary relationships, he is also a summary of the entire past. It may be objected that what each individual can change is very little. This is true up to a point. But since each person can join others who want the same changes he can multiply himself an imposing number of times. If the change desired is 'rational,' historically possible, then even a very radical change can be achieved, one that did not seem possible at first sight."

2 In *Carrie Mae Weems*, The Fabric Workshop/Museum, Philadelphia, 1996, p. 10.

Ritual & Revolution, 1998, digital photographs on muslin, with audio component. Courtesy of the artist and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York.

Selected bibliography:

Andrea Kirsh and Susan Fisher Sterling, *Carrie Mae Weems*, The National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C., 1993.

Carrie Mae Weems, The Fabric Workshop/Museum, Philadelphia, 1996; introduction by Mary Jane Jacob, essay by bell hooks.

Forthcoming: *In Light of the Facts: Recent Work by Carrie Mae Weems*, George Braziller, November 1998; essays by Thomas Piché Jr. and Thelma Golden.

Learn more about and comment on *Ritual & Revolution* on our website: <http://www/bampfa.berkeley.edu/exhibits/weems/>

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