

Carrie Mae Weems
The Evidence of Things Not Seen

Wall texts

In her exhibition *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, the American artist Carrie Mae Weems invites us to join her for an exploration of blind spots of (contemporary) history. For nearly four decades, she has investigated dominant historical narratives, pointing up how they are produced and reproduced by politics, scholarship, art, mass media, photography, and architecture. Visiting significant sites or meticulously reenacting historic situations, she uncovers the stories of marginalized groups and makes art that introduces us to the narratives that do not make it into the history books. These blanks in the collective consciousness, to which the exhibition's title alludes, reflect prevailing power structures, social distinctions and inequities—or outright racism. The latter figures centrally in Weems's extensive photographic projects, series, and installations. In unfurling the long history of violence against people of color, however, she does not lose sight of the no less long history of resistance, analyzing both—as two sides of the same coin—with a view to their implications for our society today.

The Louisiana Project. Missing Link, 2003

Missing Link is based on Mardi Gras, the carnival tradition brought to New Orleans by Catholics of French ancestry. The 1873 Mardi Gras featured a racist parade section titled “The Missing Links to Darwin’s Origin of Species,” with costumes that lampooned the alleged evolutionary otherness and inferiority of people of color, a direct attack on the growing social mobility of Black people in the American South.

The series shows Weems with animal masks, all drawn from the historic Missing Links parade’s visual program. The various costumes are associated with terms like despair (ape), liberty (donkey), or happiness (zebra). In keeping with carnival traditions, the artist turns the source material on its head; her gestures and disguises expose the racist masquerade’s hollowness.

Constructing History, 2008

Weems worked with students and other local communities in Atlanta to scrutinize key historic instances of political violence, ranging from the nuclear bombardment of Hiroshima in 1945 to the political assassinations of the American 1960s—President John F. Kennedy (1963), the civil rights activist Medgar Evers (1963), Malcolm X (1965), and

Martin Luther King (1968)—and on to the murder of the Pakistani opposition politician Benazir Bhutto (2007). They approached the events by reenacting iconic images and footage, in particular of moments of public grief, which Weems regards as a form of resistance. The frankly staged photographs—with film-set constructions, camera tracks, and artificial lighting—remind us how memory itself is a construct.

Lincoln, Lonnie, And Me. A Story in Five Parts, 2012

In this work, Weems reprises an optical illusion technique from the nineteenth century known as “Pepper’s ghost,” after John Henry Pepper. The artist uses a contemporary variant of this phantasmagoria, which, despite the modern technology, has lost none of its ghostly quality, to embark on a revue-like musical voyage in five acts through American history.

The show opens with a dancer performing as the song “Dark Was the Night, Cold Was the Ground” plays. Then Weems reads Lincoln’s 1863 Gettysburg Address, which invokes the dead of the American Civil War to summon the citizenry to liberty. A hundred years later, John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King would refer to the speech in their own oratory. King emphasized that Black people in the U.S. were still excluded from the American ideas of freedom and democracy. The third act brings archival imagery related to the so-called busing protests in the U.S. in the 1960s, when white middle-class citizens wanted to prevent Black students from attending the same schools as their children. We hear the voice of the artist and activist Lonnie Graham, a close friend of Weems’s. His observations pinpoint the constant challenges that confront efforts to realize Lincoln’s democratic vision even today. Weems herself appears in a variety of guises throughout the piece, first as a con artist, then in a Playboy bunny costume.

And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People, 1991

In this work, Weems captures the first beginnings of organized resistance in quiet and inconspicuous yet emblematic shots. The notes accompanying the photographs transform everyday implements into political tools. Taken together, the pictures and their brief captions constitute a kind of ABC of revolution. A rolling pin illustrates the phrase “By Any Means Necessary,” which has been attributed to Frantz Fanon, a pioneering thinker of decolonization, and was broadly popularized by the civil rights activist Malcolm X. Both demanded justice no matter the price. “A Hammer” and “A Sickle” refer to communist movements; “A Bell to Ring” is reminiscent of the Liberty Bell, a symbol of American independence. Other works highlight periods of conflict and unrest in history: “A Hot Spot in a Corrupt World” singles out the slave routes of the triangular trade; the musket and uniform in “An Armed Man” commemorate the American Civil War in the 1860s, while “A Veiled Woman” alludes to the Algerian War of Independence from France (1954–62).

Ain't Jokin', 1987–88

The series *Ain't Jokin'* consists of photographic portraits of African Americans combined with racist jokes or connotations in the captions. Weems deftly uses irony as a method to draw attention to the racism that underlies Western mainstream culture, subjecting turns of phrase and idiomatic expressions to scrutiny that perpetuate racism in everyday life. Her pictures reproduce stereotypes and prejudices that are deeply embedded in our culture to deconstruct just such narratives.

All the Boys (2016)

This work, which combines anonymized portraits of young Black men with wanted bulletins, responds to the unending series of acts of often lethal violence visited on young African-American men by police in the U.S. By subjecting the people in the images to controlled blurring, Weems distorts the stereotypical representation of people who are often branded as “usual suspects” and thus exposed to the real danger of becoming innocent victims. The combination of the photographs, from which identifying information has been effaced, with basic information on unarmed Black victims of police violence highlights the systemic nature of racism.

Painting the Town, 2021

Weems took these photographs during the protests in her native Portland after George Floyd was murdered by a policeman in May 2020. During the demonstrations, which went on for several months, the boarded-up buildings were repeatedly repainted to efface the protesters' messages. Meticulous lighting and carefully selected fields of view turn the façades into flat color fields. Perched on the threshold between abstraction and representation, *Painting the Town* engages with the art history of abstract expressionism. Black painters like Norman Lewis and Sam Gilliam were part of the scene from the start, but historians typically overlooked their contributions. In Weems's series, abstraction as a form of expression grows organically out of the protests.

The Push, the Call, the Scream, the Dream, 2020

In this installation, for which she combined several of her own earlier works with images drawn from various archives, Weems points up the historical dimensions of contemporary manifestations of racist violence. She enlarged the pictures, tinted some with blue or pink filters, and arranged them across the entire wall. The historic photographs by Charles Moore show children and teenagers during the 1963 protests in Birmingham, Ala., where the police deployed water cannons and other heavy equipment against the demonstrators. Nearby are a blurry portrait of gospel singer Mahalia Jackson

and pictures from the burial, also in 1963, of Medgar Evers, who was killed only hours after John F. Kennedy's groundbreaking address on civil rights. These and other events prompted activists to plan the March of Washington, where Martin Luther King, after a performance by Jackson, began his speech with the legendary phrase "I have a dream." The work also commemorates U.S. Representative John Lewis, who helped organize the enormous rally. By combining these pictures, Weems elicits multifaceted reflections on a watershed year in American history and its lasting consequences, touching on various moments of protest, collective mourning, and political action.

Land of Broken Dreams: A Case Study, 2021–

Land of Broken Dreams: A Case Study establishes a situation between private and public space and gestures to the resistance of African-Americans during many centuries of racism. Weems conceived the installation as a space for encounters and a tribute to the activists of the Black Power movement of the 1960s. Photographs of leaders like Angela Davis and Bobby Seale appear together with copies of LIFE Magazine and the iconic portrait of Huey P. Newton, cofounder of the Black Panther Party. The objects on the shelves remind us of how the political found its way into people's private lives. Key pieces include Weems's encyclopedic *History of Violence*, consisting of book covers wrapped around the volumes of an existing encyclopedia to give them new titles, like "The Prison Industrial Complex", "The Battle for Representation", or "The Plague of Corruption". The setting moreover encompasses various limited-edition objects such as the commemorative plate made by the artist for all Black men who have lived to the age of twenty-one, plus additional plate editions by the contemporary artist Kehinde Wiley. He is also the author of the object *After La Nègresse 1872*, which blends a nineteenth-century bust of an enslaved woman with the figure of a contemporary male basketball player. Weems's complex installation illustrates that the centuries-old violence against people of color is intimately interwoven with the history of capitalism and its origins in colonialism. Visitors are invited to take a seat and read the historical issues of LIFE Magazine on the table or view Weems' compilation of archival photographs with the optical viewfinders.

The Kitchen Table Series, 1990

This series of photographs and accompanying text panels transforms a kitchen table into the stage for a multitude of constructed scenes. Weems uses her own body to enact the various private female roles, including those of mother, lover, friend, and caretaker as well as the object of her ministrations. The kitchen table, which emblemizes the traditionally feminine private sphere, becomes the public platform for a woman's self-dramatization in her diverse social contexts and the parts she plays in them. Abstaining from all heroization, the pictures introduce us to a confident and emancipated individual

who represents self-empowerment and vulnerability, joy and loneliness, love and rebellion in equal measure. The texts on the panels primarily revolve around the battle of the sexes and turn out to resonate with a multiplicity of voices. They pick up on popular and demotic expressions and slang phrases, allude to films, TV shows, and, above all, to numerous gospel, jazz, and rock songs. The alternating image and text series are loosely interwoven.

Untitled (Colored People), 2019

In this work, Weems charts the rich diversity of skin colors that are lumped together under the label Black, while also subjecting the hierarchies that emerged within the African-American community with the differentiation of skin tones and became codified in categories like “yella” or “red bone.” The updated version of the work is based on portraits of African-American children and teenagers that were manipulated with various color filters. Weems takes the existing categories at their word and exaggerates them. Besides the portraits, the series, presented in a grid pattern, includes different shade cards of the sort used by photographers for color balance, an allusion to the normative structures at work in appraisals of skin tones.

Dreaming in Cuba, 2002

In the extensive series *Dreaming in Cuba*, Weems explores the Caribbean island by following the traces and lingering effects of colonialism and the “golden era” of the sugarcane, coffee, and tobacco plantations. The work bears witness to the island’s eventful history, from the exploitation of tens of thousands of enslaved people in the sixteenth century to the establishment of one of the world’s longest-standing communist states and its utopia of permanent revolution. The series was created ten years after Cuba opened its economy to private enterprises and international tourism. The scenes Weems visited included sugarcane plantations, public buildings, and private homes. Her photographs always tease out the intimate relationships between these places and the people who appear in them.

Africa Series, Africa Plates & Slave Coast, 1993

In 1993, Weems first traveled to the African continent. The trip produced two series composed of black-and-white photographs and text panels, *Africa Series* and *Slave Coast*, which survey the architectural legacy of slavery and indigenous cultures. The artist visited examples of Dogon architecture in Mali and the infrastructure of enslavement such as the “Point of No Return” on the island of Gorée in Dakar, Senegal. Weems’s series reflect her quest to uncover traces of the fateful past of these places and the kinds of stories that books or documentary films do not relate.

The photographs in *Africa Series* were taken in one of West Africa's oldest cities, Djenné in Mali. At its center stands the famous adobe architecture in the Sudanese style, whose sexual morphology Weems underscores. The images are accompanied by a series of poetic texts that extricate the story of Adam and Eve from its Christian context. The three-part works bearing the subtitles "She Had Her Keys to the Kingdom" and "He Had His Throne" feature a female and a male African sculpture. Inspired by Africa as the fabled Garden of Eden and, as scientists have demonstrated, cradle of humankind, Weems reenvisions the creation myth with Eve as a strong female figure.

In *Slave Coast*, the camera's lens is trained on the architecture of three key sites of the Western trade in humans and colonial goods: Elmina, Cape Coast (Ghana), and Gorée (Senegal). The fortification and prison structures were erected between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries and operated by various colonial powers in the course of their histories. Enslaved humans were held captive inside the dungeons, sometimes for months, before being shipped off. They are now UNESCO World Heritage Sites, and the museum that has opened inside the "Maison des Esclaves" in Gorée attracts tourists from all over the world. Weems's photographs illustrate their architecture as a rigid technology of surveillance and powerful symbol of brutal domination and force.

Sea Islands, 1992

Weems traveled to the Sea Islands off the coast of the Southeastern United States to take these pictures. The area's majority African-American population is descended from enslaved ancestors who were shipped there, primarily from Sierra Leone, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and forced to work on rice plantations. After the American Civil War (1861–1865), they settled in the area in communities of freedmen and formed a distinctive Creole culture called Gullah or Geechee that remains vibrant today. In *Sea Islands*, Weems investigates characteristic practices of this culture such as the custom of hanging metal spring cores or hubcaps to ward off evil spirits. A view of a park overgrown with trees is paired with an 1851 score of a song that once served to warn fugitive enslaved people of the patrols hunting for them. Weems's rendering of a bleak yet poetic landscape invokes the traces and material witnesses of slavery and the memories bound up with it.

The Hampton Project, 2000

This sprawling installation is based on imagery that Weems found in the archive of the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute, established by the abolitionist Samuel Chapman Armstrong on the grounds of a former plantation in Virginia in 1868. The Hampton Institute, now known as Hampton University, was one of the first educational institutions in the U.S. to serve African and Indigenous Americans. Weems's critical examination of its history focuses on the photographs of Frances Benjamin Johnston, which document the education, life, and work at the Hampton Institute and were

commissioned for the “Exhibit of American Negroes” organized as part of the 1900 World’s Fair in Paris. The artist’s critique of the Hampton Institute’s methods and goals, as reflected in these photographic representations, concerns the single-minded focus with which the values, knowledge, worldview, and class hierarchy of the white dominant society were inculcated in the students of the post-Civil War era. The effort to remedy through education the injustices that the formerly enslaved people and Indigenous communities had suffered effectively perpetuated the violence against them in other forms of oppression. Weems points up the paternalistic attitude that underlay the institution’s humanist intentions. Two photographs that show the same group of Indigenous students before and after their forced transformation illustrate this to striking effect. The artist has drastically enlarged the visual documents she selected from the Hampton Institute’s and other archives and had them printed on sheer fabrics that are suspended from the ceiling in three-dimensional arrangements. The hanging includes sometimes deliberately provocative contrasts such as the one between a historic photograph showing an Indigenous American being baptized as a Christian and the picture of protesters struck by the powerful jet from a water cannon in Birmingham, Ala., in 1963. An audio installation with text by the artist enlarges the work’s critical framework.

Slow Fade to Black

In the series *Slow Fade to Black*, Weems investigates the lost and fragmentary legacy of African-American women entertainers of the twentieth century, including singers, dancers, and actresses, by playfully using the cinematic technique of the slow fade. The camera’s lens is deliberately out of focus, making it impossible to say whether these pictures were taken during moments of fade-in or fade-out. The photographs show a number of formerly celebrated African-American artists like Katherine Dunham and Lena Horne who have faded from collective memory. Their indistinct likenesses serve as a metaphor for the of African-American entertainers to stay visible and relevant.

Scenes & Takes

For *Scenes and Takes*, Weems visited the empty locations and sets of popular American TV shows such as the musical drama “Empire” (2015–2020), the political thriller “Scandal” (2012–2018), and the legal drama “How to Get Away with Murder” (2014–2020). The artist selected productions that represent a sea change in the American entertainment industry: not only were Black stars including Viola Davis, Kerry Washington, and Gabourey Sidibe cast in the lead roles, the series were also conceived by Black screenwriters and/or producers like Shonda Rhimes and Lee Daniels. The deserted locations and scenarios have the aura of still lifes, with Weems herself, dressed in black, arriving at the crime scene to bear witness. The photographs are paired with writings, whose titles and content, however, make only indirect reference to the series

represented in the pictures. The plots mostly revolve around the sexist and racist power structures in the film industry.

Queen B, 2018–19

Queen B is part of an extensive series of pictures about the R&B icon and actress Mary J. Blige that Weems created in 2017 for a special issue of the fashion magazine “W.” The photograph reprises Weems’s own *The Kitchen Table Series*, but the sobriety of those earlier pictures contrasts with the opulent panel in *Queen B*, which recalls the still lifes of the Dutch and Flemish Baroque: the so-called “golden age” of European culture, whose riches were based on the exploitation of colonies and enslaved people. People of color appear in the paintings of that era only as servants or slaves. *Queen B* also looks back to Weems’s *Slow Fade to Black*, a tribute to Black women musicians and creative artists of the twentieth century such as Katherine Dunham, Lena Horne, and Josephine Baker.

Not Manet’s Type, 2010

In *Not Manet’s Type*, Weems addresses the role that women and women artists play in the history of classic modern art with both critical acumen and wit. On the visual plane, she stages herself as a female nude. The mirror is an allegory of the gaze with which male artists behold the female body, the passive object of desire and contemplation. She represents the woman who, in the era of modernism, is seen only as a muse, her own agency unrecognized. In the texts, Weems disrupts this division of duties, taking charge of the narrative. She claims her own place in art history and offers her views on its male heroes such as the French avant-garde painters Édouard Manet (1832 – 1883) and Pablo Picasso (1881 – 1973) and the American abstract painter Willem de Kooning (1904–1997), who would never have acknowledged her, a Black woman and artist, as their equal: a fate that Weems shares with the Mexican painter Frida Kahlo (1907–1954)—and that she is determined to defy.

Museums Series, 2006–, and Roaming, 2006

Many of Weems’s pictures feature the artist herself as a witness and companion who guides us to selected settings. In *Museums Series*, *Roaming*, and other works, she wears a black dress. Including herself in the pictures in this manner enables Weems to be both subject and object, both director and performer, both present and absent in her works. She invariably turns her back to us as she approaches historic sites, using her body to probe the interrelations between architecture, urban planning, and power. In the ongoing *Museums Series*, a selection from which is on display here, Weems stands in front of European and American museums. The modern public museum was born during the French Revolution and is associated with its ideas of democracy, civic

engagement, and humanism. Yet despite the emancipatory processes it has catalyzed, the institution has rested on the exclusion, oppression, and exploitation of people who were not accorded the status of citizens or even humans at the time. The consequences are recognizable to this day in the collections and structures of Western museums, which have been slow to open themselves to change. When Weems began work on the series, her solo exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, the first ever by a female African-American artist, was still eight years off. In the photographs, the Black woman approaches various museums from outside, yet without crossing their proverbial thresholds. As an artist, she long found her access to these institutions hampered by twofold discrimination on account of her gender and her skin color. Still, Weems's alter ego remains poised at these barriers like a revenant demanding justice. Her insistent body, which looks rather diminutive relative to the representative buildings, draws attention to how their architecture demonstrates power and to its physical as well as psychological effects: see, for example, the Zwinger in Dresden, completed in the nineteenth century by Gottfried Semper, or Frank O. Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, which opened its doors in the 1990s.

In the series *Roaming*, created when Weems was staying in Rome on a fellowship from the American Academy, the artist explores various sites in the city steeped in history with her body. From the ruins of ancient Rome to the Jewish quarter, from the urban planning of the Mussolini era to the pyramid of Cestius, the series reflects on how the state used architecture in the past to demonstrate its might. Among the places Weems takes us to are the EUR (Esposizione Universale di Roma) district, built on occasion of the world's fair planned for 1942 to show off the accomplishments of Italian fascism; its intended function thwarted by the Second World War, it was completed under different premises beginning in the 1950s. Weems takes possession of the space between two iconic buildings in the neighborhood, only parts of which are visible in the pictures: the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana (originally del Lavoro) and the Palazzo dei Congressi, whose architectures blend neoclassicism with Italian rationalism. A central picture in the series bears a subtitle (*When and Where I Enter*) that refers to a passage in "A Voice from the South," a book published by the African-American activist and writer Anna Julia Cooper in 1892. The photograph shows Weems in a film studio outfitted with mock ruined columns, ascending the stairs toward the threshold, framed by a curtain, of what appears to be a grand balcony looking out toward the clouds.