

## Art Agency, Partners

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## Coming into Focus

### Market Spotlight: Carrie Mae Weems



Carrie Mae Weems, *I Looked and Looked but Failed to See What so Terrified You* (Louisiana Project series) (2003). Collection of the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. © Carrie Mae Weems

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More US museums have acquired work by [Carrie Mae Weems](#) over the past ten years than almost any other African American artist, according to [a data study](#) *In Other Words* produced last summer in collaboration with [artnet News](#). "We've had a constant stream of museum acquisitions for her," says Elisabeth Sann, Director of the [Jack Shainman Gallery](#) in New York, which has been representing Weems since 2008.

There have been more acquisitions and gifts to museums since 2014 than the years prior—suggesting that some institutions

have been playing catch-up. “I think some museums are realizing there is a lack of diversity in their collections and that the work they have is not a full representation of the contemporary art scene,” Sann adds.

This broader attention follows public recognition of Weems’s work in 2013 when she was the recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship and then, the following year, when she became the first African American female artist to be the subject of a retrospective at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York (“[Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video](#)”).

### **I didn’t know that art could transform you that way**

The increased focus is meaningful: Weems has spent more than 30 years dealing with the representation of black people in art—whether in the realms of the domestic and the political or within art institutions—and her work has real impact. For instance, it was a chance encounter with an exhibition of Weems’s “[The Kitchen Table Series](#)” (1990) which convinced Mickalene Thomas that she should change career from law to art. “I didn’t know that art could transform you that way,” Thomas says, adding that she understood every aspect of the work, from the woman standing to the little girl in pigtails or the man on the side. “I understand it, I can smell it, I can see it. To me, that familiarity with the image was very powerful at that particular moment in my life,” Thomas said in a [recent \*In Other Words\* podcast](#).

Born in Portland, Oregon in 1953, Weems became interested in the arts early on, participating in street theatre and dance (known best as a photographer now, it was not until her 20s that she was given her first camera). Nowadays, Weems can be considered “a contemporary artist who uses photography as her main medium”, Sann says, adding: “Her practice is a lot wider than photography—she’s a performance artist, she makes video, she puts together installations.”



Carrie Mae Weems during her performance at The Theater at Ace Hotel. Courtesy CAP UCLA

Nonetheless, the market has consistently focused on her photographs, and there has been steady demand over the past decade. Each of her top ten auction sales have taken place since 2008, with five of those since 2017. The record was set in November 2011 when a work composed of 34 chromogenic color prints from the 1995-1996 series “From Here I Saw What

"Happened and I Cried" sold in a Christie's New York Post-War and Contemporary Day sale for \$206,500 (est. \$80,000-\$120,000) (works on the primary market range from \$30,000 to \$200,000, Sann says). As most of Weems's works are photographic, this category makes up the majority of her sales on the primary market but museums are collecting her video and installation works, such as *People of a Darker Hue* (2016) and *Lincoln, Lonnie and Me* (2012), says Sann.

Of the 146 works to have appeared at auction, demand has been focused around three series from the late 1980s to mid-1990s, "[Colored People](#)" (1987-1997), "The Kitchen Table Series" (1990) and "[From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried](#)" (1995-1996). Each of her top ten works but one, ([Scenes & Take \(Great Expectations\)](#) (2016), are from those series, which remain the most sought after because "they're so universally appealing", Sann says. "Carrie doesn't think of her series as closed and finished—she constantly refers back to them and they become the building blocks that her current practice is based on."

### **She has always felt a sense of urgency**

Weems makes art with a point, using whatever media makes most sense. She was, for example, inspired by President Barack Obama's eulogy for the nine people murdered by a white supremacist during service at Charleston's Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in 2015. "When Obama stepped forward and sang *Amazing Grace* in eulogy for the nine whose lives were taken by this madness, the world took notice," Weems said in [an interview](#) with *The Art Newspaper*. "The generosity of that response was more powerful and galvanized more influence than the incredible act of violence ever will."

The grace of the gesture led Weems to create a performance in homage and she would go on to conclude a year-long residency at the Park Avenue Armory with "[The Shape of Things](#)" a day-long convention of artists, writers, poets, musicians and social theorists that critiqued today's political and social climate. Weems has "always felt a sense of urgency to get certain messages across", Sann says.

Ever busy, there are more projects in the works. The film-maker Spike Lee hinted at a future collaboration in a recent Instagram [post](#), after Weems photographed him for the cover of *Time* magazine. There is a rumored group show in London this summer, as well as a large-scale solo exhibition that will feature new collaborative and performance works. Weems's sense of urgency continues: just now, more people are paying attention.