

Deborah Willis

In her project *While Sitting upon the Ruins of Your Remains, I Pondered the Course of History* (2016–17; pp. 329–92, this vol.), the conceptual artist Carrie Mae Weems employs a number of strategies. Some of the images are new, and some have been pulled from earlier bodies of work. An artist concerned with history and the present, with iconicity and the creation of icons, Weems photographs and restages the past through the public memory of the archive of slavery and Reconstruction. This series questions and looks at Joseph T. Zealy's posed and constructed daguerreotypes as well as other photographs of the black presence in Southern history and material culture. Weems creates new imagery by drawing on a multitude of depictions in order to establish a place for black women throughout history. She studied dance, photography, and folklore, and these disciplines implicitly broaden and inform her artworks, from the *Sea Islands Series* (1991–92) to *The Louisiana Project* (2003). By reimagining the landscape of the South, Weems, a passionate and skillful artist, reinterprets the past through a contemporary lens, both challenging and drawing from the politics and the economy of slavery.

Black women's stories have a prominent place in her art, and Weems often uses her own body to locate the social imaginary found in history. She evokes the past through architectural settings, lighting, fashion, and gesture. Through photographic studies and constructed portraits, Weems guides the viewer's experience, ultimately heightening our senses to the collective memory of slavery. I believe it is her intention to prompt viewers to rethink and question their understanding of American history with a heightened depth and precision, a pursuit enabled by her own thorough and exhaustive exploration of the subjects at hand. The richness found in her photographs of the South and the memories revealed in this interview convey a consciousness found in early photography. Weems responds and contributes to the revisualization of American history as she explores the physical beauty, humanity, and power of these photographic moments.

DEBORAH WILLIS: *Let's begin by discussing the series From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried [1995–96]. How and why was it conceived?*

CARRIE MAE WEEMS: In 1994, I received a commission from the J. Paul Getty Museum. The Getty organized an exhibition entitled *Hidden Witness: African Americans in Early Photography* in 1995, which focused on a collection of photographs acquired by the lawyer Jackie Napoleon Wilson. Wilson had amassed an extraordinarily rare and therefore significant collection of daguerreotypes and other early photographs of African American subjects, and the Getty, being the Getty, wanted them. So they commissioned me to respond artistically. My response was to create *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*. However, the Getty titled the exhibition of that work *Carrie Mae Weems Reacts to "Hidden Witness"* [1995].

I'm fairly certain that the Getty had hoped to acquire Wilson's collection; indeed, it hoped that Wilson would eventually donate the photographs. I'm not sure if this happened, but it undoubtedly was a major impetus for both exhibitions. I believe I'm the first living artist ever to receive a commission from the Getty Museum.

DW: *That was indeed an amazing exhibition. I recall that Wilson had a wide range of portraits and other photographs in his collection on early black American life. What made you decide to include the images from the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology's collection in your project?*

CMW: I saw the Joseph T. Zealy/Louis Agassiz daguerreotypes in a publication for the first time around 1985. I'd *never* seen photographs quite like them. I was knocked out! Bowled over! Amazed! Profoundly painful photographs that are yet hauntingly beautiful. I've been looking at and working with four of these photographs—of Renty, Renty's daughter Delia, Jack, and Jack's daughter Drana—for twenty-five to thirty years, and every time I see them there's a pain in my heart. Powerful photographs.

DW: *That's the most striking aspect about the daguerreotypes; they are beautiful in the ways that the daguerreotype brings out skin tone and in how they quietly reveal the humanity of their subjects and their disembodied experience of posing. They sparked my interest when I first saw them in a New York Times article about their discovery in the attic at Harvard University in the mid-1970s. I like the fact that you saw them the way that I initially viewed them—through the experience of family. That's fascinating. When did you decide to colorize the daguerreotypes with a red tint and add the text? What, in terms of Wilson's collection, did you want*

to establish as distinctive between the images at the Getty and those from the Peabody Museum? I recall that both the Getty and Wilson's collection had photographs of free black Americans as well as portraits of people who were enslaved.

CMW: In their anthropological way, most of these photographs were meant to strip the subjects of their humanity. But if you look closely, what you see is the evidence of a contest of wills over contested territory, contested terrain—contested by the owner of the black body and the photographer's attempt to conquer it vis-à-vis the camera. A contest of wills and the wrestling between the subject and the photographer. And what's remarkable is the evidence that the subjects refused. Said "No"! Talk about the power of the gaze—the power of looking back! With all their might, the subjects held on to their dignity in the face of their humiliation. It's also clear that the subjects understood the power of the camera to objectify—and still they refused. Damning the entire enterprise. From their point of view, Zealy and Agassiz thought that they had made good on their promise to reveal and mark blackness as difference, but they failed. It's for this reason that these photographs are remarkable images of remarkable people.

*From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* is a set of appropriated images, for which any number of entities have threatened to sue me over the years, including Harvard—a wild story for another time. But throughout the making of the project, I continually asked myself how I might intervene, how I might pull the subjects in these photographs forward and provide them with voices.

The use of cropping, color, text, and narrative helped to resolve the problem. With appropriated work, I often use color as a way of marking the difference between the original and my appropriation of the original. In this way, I make the material my own. In terms of color, I find myself time and again using blue and red: red implying a history of violence, and blue for the history of the blues.

Meanwhile, the text allows for nuance, play, and voice and was an intriguing way to explore history. One of the things that's intriguing about *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* is that it collapses photographic history and *American* history into a single entity. Through the work, we can clearly see how black people were subjected over time, from the earliest daguerreotypes to works by photographers like Walker Evans, Robert Frank, and Garry Winogrand. It wasn't a conscious attempt, but rather the unintended consequence of a particular way of seeing the world.

DW: That's what's so inspiring about your work for this new project in this book. It has a sense of photographic history rooted in performance art. I see

*echoes of the Sea Islands Series in this project. What first inspired you to visit the Sea Islands to make and reimagine the free and bonded laborers who lived in homes and worked the fields there?*

CMW: When I was a child, my father, who was a wonderful storyteller, told me about the Geechee people of South Carolina—we now use the word *Gullah*—but I didn't believe him. I couldn't imagine black people in America living down South, speaking some strange blended Afro-English patois. I just thought it was another one of his stories. But of course it was true, and at some point, I decided to go see for myself.

Thanks to Alice Walker, I began reading the works of Zora Neale Hurston, which in turn inspired my formal study of folklore at the University of California, Berkeley, with the renowned folklorist Alan Dundes. My primary interests—then and now—were in material culture and specifically how people articulate their cultural values, desires, and beliefs through the arrangement of everyday objects, things, architecture, language, song, dance, and dress—a way of creating worlds within worlds, which Hurston wrote about so eloquently.

So my father's stories, coupled with Hurston's studies from the 1930s and 1940s, jump-started my thinking about the Sea Islands and my desire to understand the shape of things and the uniqueness of this place within the American context. I began traveling to the Sea Islands in the early 1990s—I had a wonderful time, and I made a few very good pictures, too. But life has changed there, so it wasn't always easy finding the "folk signs of folklore," as my fellow folklorist James Robinson would say.

DW: *I recall seeing an exhibition of the Sea Islands Series in Atlanta, Georgia, in the early 1990s. It was empowering for me, as I had grown up with family stories about the Geechees of South Carolina and I photographed there in the mid-1970s. I used a 35 mm camera, but I was intrigued and impressed by how you successfully used the medium-format camera. I think that was what made many of us interested in the way you work.*

CMW: Well, of course we all had Leicas—that was the camera to have—right? It showed that you were serious about the business of making pictures. But I prefer working with my old 2 ¼ Rolleiflex, which I got in college—someone traded their camera for my car! Crazy. The car lasted maybe another two or three months, while the camera has lasted two or three decades! I still use it! I love the way the lens gathers light—it's perfect for architecture, and given my interest in material culture, it's the perfect camera for me. With only

twelve frames per roll, it forces me to slow down, to pay attention to the details, to arrange things just so, to double-check the exposure and the f-stop, to mentally prepare—to be very slow, very Zen. But the digital thing has upset the applecart . . . so . . .

But I must say, I'm not a documentary photographer; most of my photographs are staged. I'm a conceptual artist using references to documentary photography to explore various aspects of life and culture.

DW: *Can you tell us about Emory Campbell, who was then the director of the Penn Center?*

CMW: Oh, Emory—what a lovely man. He was the director of the Penn Center on St. Helena Island in South Carolina. I have a lovely photograph of him lying in a field of tall grass. Though, for the most part, I rarely photograph other people unless they ask me to. My reticence has to do with the long and questionable tradition of documentary photography. I was never particularly interested in “capturing” others on film. I need permission—consent to photograph people—and if I don't have it, I usually don't take the picture.

Again, the power of unintended consequences. By way of this “lack of consent,” I earnestly began photographing myself and discovered myself to be both subject and maker, participant and observer. A subject/maker/maker who could stand in the historical moment and could bear witness to the past, the present, and the public/private memories that have given shape to our black lives here in America. I discovered that I was the reference point, and the point of view, pointing the viewer toward the likes of me in history. Later, I understood this photographic self to be a muse and a guide into the unknown. Miraculously, the muse evolved out of my resistance to photographing people without permission, and in the process, I discovered an entirely new way of working and indeed discovered myself. Praise God.

DW: *It's a fascinating concept because you guide us, your viewers, through the land, through your photographs.*

CMW: Yes, *the muse* guides *me* as well into the larger world of design, material culture, and architecture; while she is the subject, her presence helps us to understand social space and how people operate within the social landscape.

DW: *Nostalgia and romanticism are both intriguing aspects of your images for this project. All of these images focus beautifully on race, beauty, class,*

*sexuality, fashion, the land, and architecture. You guide us through plantation life: roads to and from the fields, the Zealy photographic studio, the homes of the enslaved. By doing so, we, the viewers, reflect on the images by Zealy and imagine the life experiences of Renty, Drana, Delia, and Jack.*

*I see your work bringing back the experiential and empathy in the photographic image through the luscious and haunting narrative of the land and through fashion, dress. While you say that she offers a reference point to space and place, I would also add time. The clothing you wear—your dress in these images, the floral patterns, the cotton—gives meaning to the past, especially in the photograph where you are dancing freely in a large living room.*

CMW: [Laughs.] Isn't that a great photograph?

DW: *Yes, I love the way the petticoat flows beautifully through the photographic moment. She inhabits the space when no one's around, and that's that sense of freedom I imagine Delia and Drana had as they moved in the rooms they worked in on the Taylor plantation—a fleeting moment of freedom. What's so powerful and beautiful about that image is that it reimagines those beings who inhabited the space.*

CMW: That's interesting to hear. The piece opens with a scene along the Mississippi River where a black woman sits in an antebellum house, gazing out the window. "While sitting upon the ruins of your remains." The idea of dancing in that plantation house was an act of resistance. I couldn't resist acting out and claiming the space for myself, for you, my people and my audience. I gave myself permission to be myself in a place where historically I was only meant to serve.

Some of our most beautiful cities are in the Southern states—New Orleans, Savannah, Charleston. They are beautiful cities and towns but are utterly haunted by an unimaginable past that any number of white folk would prefer to bury—the unspeakable. In fact, Charleston, because of its rich architectural heritage, is being considered for a World Heritage site.

DW: *Interesting, I was unaware of this effort.*

CMW: Yes, but the problem is that certain white folk refuse to acknowledge Charleston's slavery legacy! Crazy, right? Yet another attempt to obliterate history, but even more destructive is the obliteration of their own unique heritage and culture, circumstance, and complex past. Anyway . . .

The South and all that it implies would not have been possible without a source of cheap labor, slave labor. And one of the reasons I

began photographing in the South was to take the time to look slowly and carefully at the world built by slaves, to stand in that world made under difficult circumstances and acknowledge its complicated, tragically sad *beauty*.

DW: *So, in a sense, you are preserving on film their monuments of slavery. And you find new monuments—different from the marble and stone public monuments of Confederate soldiers that we see often in the South—like the columns, the decorative ironwork, and the brick spirit houses that were molded and forged and made by black enslaved laborers. The narrative of slavery and freedom is central to your landscapes.*

CMW: I don't know if I'm creating new monuments, but I certainly have a way of using photography to explore the world as it is constructed, as well as some of the people who made it possible. For instance, there's a wonderful rich tradition of black ironworkers. One of the most famous was Philip Simmons, who came from a long line of ironworkers. Much of his work can be found throughout the city of Charleston. My photographs of the ironwork frame his history; I photographed traces of the worlds built by black workers and slaves—homes, yards, outbuildings, objects, landscapes, fields, the dust tracks on the road.

DW: *Your shadow portraits reference complex memories, including art history through early French silhouette drawings, fashion history, and sex, with a hint of romance and intrigue. Can we talk about how you merged these different moments?*

CMW: It really just comes out of play—playing with form and feeling. You know, I have been making silhouettes since 1975—long before Kara Walker. I produced a set of silhouettes for the series *The Louisiana Project*: photographs, works on canvas, as well as the video *Meaning and Landscape*—a work that explores the relationship between men and women in Louisiana, a place loaded with mystery, mayhem, and sexual intrigue.

In 2002 and 2003, Tulane University commissioned me to create a new piece for the Newcomb Art Gallery commemorating the centennial of the Louisiana Purchase—the perfect kind of project for someone with my varied interests. With the commission, I was finally able to explore the significance of Mardi Gras along with its relationship to carnival and to the octoroon balls of the eighteenth century. Fascinating stuff. James Gill's *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans* [1997] is one of the best books I've read on the subject—it's a terrific read.

Louisiana developed several unique systems that were essentially French and African. Of particular interest is the *plaçage* system established by free women of color for the benefit of their daughters—basically arranged meetings and marriages between free black women and French men. Like other cotillion balls, the octoroon balls introduced young women into society and the world of men. Through these arrangements, French men often found their mistresses, and it was not uncommon for men to have both a white wife and a black mistress. But the octoroon balls ended once white women began coming en masse to the territory.

Mardi Gras—a Latin-based festival with an Afro tinge—from a distance looks like fun and games but is ultimately the way a small group of powerful men, along with their families, manipulate and maintain their seats of power. Every year, under the guise of carnival, the keys to the city are passed between the two most powerful New Orleans krewes: Comus and Rex masked men in secret societies. The grand balls and opulent parties that take place during Mardi Gras are the formal settings of the exchange. Because it's such a fascinating history, I thought that it would be useful to explore some of these relationships. So I played with fashion, costume, design, and silhouettes, which is a beautiful suggestion of form, manner, and gesture.

Essentially, *The Louisiana Project* explores the many tensions that existed between blacks and whites in general, and between black women and white men in particular. It is driven by the strains between play and power, manner and gesture, black and white, sex and desire. Much of this is explored in the video *Meaning and Landscape*.

DW: *Your aesthetic is informed by the histories of African Americans and imaging, and, in my view, it is enriched by your extensive research. How do you decide on how to redress these complex stories through these incredible photographs?*

CMW: Really, I'm just a curious person who has an interest in how things came to be as they are. I never feel like I have a strong grasp, which is why I spend a lot of time in the same place—worrying the line. I'm always struggling to get a handle on things.

I can remember being a young girl, maybe about thirteen, reading the first book that had a real impact on my thinking: *The Population Bomb* by Paul R. Ehrlich [1968]. It was about the swelling of the population, what this would mean to the world, and what impact it would have on food and land. And, of course, as we think about the environment, we're all haunted by global warming, the potential decimation of the planet, and food shortages.



I suppose that when all is said and done, the focus of my work investigates power and our relationship to it. My question is: How does one bend power toward social justice? And I return to this question again and again in both my life and my work, always searching for a new point of entry. The question is answered in my work by foregrounding the lives of women, people of color, and African Americans. I try to create equity in my art by exploring the complexity of who we are within the larger frame of culture. And, of course, I hope to do this subtly, poetically, beautifully, in a manner that allows the audience to get closer to the subject.

In a lot of ways, I'm a formalist. I absolutely care about the appearance of things. I've never been able to unblinkingly stare at tragedy—to see people hurt, suffering, in pain—I can't do it. My immediate response is to help or, at the very least, to figure out ways of lifting the subject or altering the circumstances. This doesn't mean that I'm interested in creating "positive" images of black people but, rather, nuanced images of blackness. This, to me, is the imperative and a path to deeper truth. Social justice stems from examining the complexity of lived lives.

So if we go back again to the daguerreotypes, Zealy and Agassiz tried to dehumanize their subjects. But the power of the humanity of their subjects shone through, because they didn't give it up. Their heads are not bent; they are looking into the camera lens with perplexity and defiance, asking the photographer, "Why are you doing this!?" Again, they understood something about the power of the camera and the role of the photographer, and given the time, a time when photographs were relatively unknown, their grasp of the situation in which they found themselves as subject and subjected people is truly remarkable.

DW: *There are a few that include babies, and there's one image of a young black girl holding a white baby—I believe that was in the Getty exhibition.*

CMW: Ah, yes. That's from Wilson's collection.

DW: *And there's another one that's so powerful. A woman is looking directly into the lens and understanding her job was to be a human brace, to hold the child still while being photographed, but she appears to look in the lens understanding the complexity of her identity within the frame.*

CMW: You mean the one of an older black woman who's holding a baby. Her look is incredibly telling and revealing; it's a remarkable image. That photograph comes out of the Charleston Museum, if I'm not mistaken.

DW: *I have always been interested in the way in which you map and locate beauty in your photographs. In your earlier work, you used words and poetic text. How were you able to understand the healing powers of the land and the objects preserved in the material culture of the South—wire box springs hanging in trees, grave sites, pots and pans, chairs, dried flowers, and hand mirrors? Let's go back to the statement that you can't look at tragedy.*

CMW: Maybe I should say that I can't look at tragedy without trying to do something about it.

DW: *Yes, right. And what you find is beauty—from cemeteries, to the fabric of a dress that you're wearing, to the cotton petticoat. And we know these come from the cotton fields of the area. There's something meaningful about how your images reflect grace and beauty and at the same time the way you edit and frame your work to tell a story. That's why, in my view, it's important that your work is part of the Peabody Museum project, as it is a reflection on the entire Zealy/Agassiz collection—it metaphorically brings to life the imagined South, the everyday, the plantation life, the loss of family life. It's really significant.*

CMW: Yes, I don't know exactly what to say. Thank you, Deborah, thank you. These images have been around for a long time, and often we've been the ones to redress this particular history.

DW: *Who's the "we"?*

CMW: In this case, I mean you and me, along with other contemporary black artists. We've been tasked with cleaning up the mess, a mess often left behind by white people. And I'm tired of it. I'll admit, some of this has been fine with me. Like okay, let me see what I can make of this mess. But much of it is bullshit; it keeps us locked in a futile struggle for power and ultimately has serious implications—the burden is a hindrance to a broader practice. So here we are in the twenty-first century, cleaning up a mess that whites willingly or otherwise refuse to even accept as possible.

Blacks and whites have a shared history, and the fact is white folks know more about systemic racism than I will ever know. They either put it in place, maintain it, or are privileged by it—and won't admit it even to themselves. This is not an absolute, but you get my meaning. Meanwhile, I'm here fussing, fighting, cleaning up the messes, and hoping that this book and similar projects will help to alleviate some of the pressure. Do you understand what I'm saying?

DW: *Yes, I do. And with the range of the retelling of the images and Zealy's and Agassiz's stories, your intervention as an artist has helped to shape and bring a totally new dimension to the publication. It's great.*

CMW: Well, thank you so much, Deborah. Thank you for this opportunity to speak with you. Thank you for these beautiful, meaningful, and useful questions.