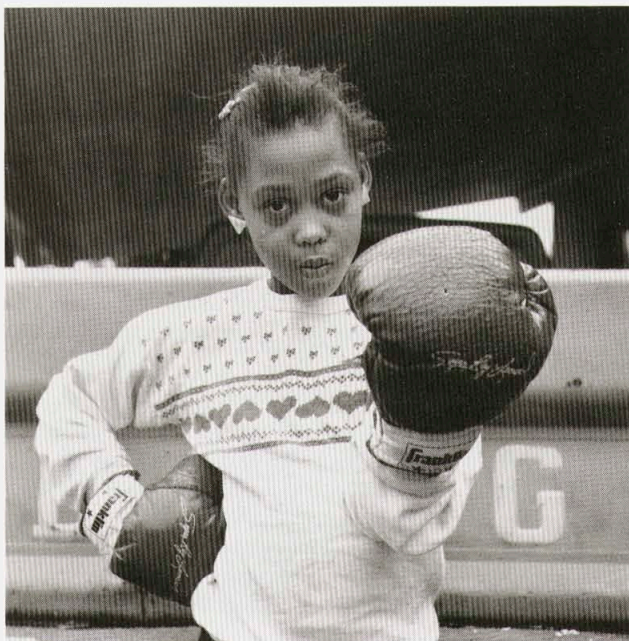


Wadsworth Atheneum
HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT

Carrie Mae Weems/MATRIX 115
April 21- July 7, 1991



**WHITE PATTY,
WHITE PATTY,
YOU DON'T SHINE,
MEET YOU AROUND THE CORNER,
AND BEAT YOUR BEHIND.**

From *Aln't Jokin'*, *WHITE PATTY*, 1987-88

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Carrie Mae Weems/MATRIX 115

Let me simply say that my primary concern in art, as in politics, is with the status and place of Afro-Americans in our country.

Carrie Mae Weems¹

Carrie Mae Weems's early training and artistic roots lie in documentary photography. In recent years many artists and critics, including Weems, have questioned whether it is even possible, despite all good intentions, to present facts objectively. In rethinking documentary photography, they have observed that however information is organized, it is inevitably an editorialized presentation (What is included? What is excluded?).

Weems now creates works which, though they no longer aim to be strictly documentary, vividly portray various aspects of the African-American experience in the United States. Although Weems's photographs continue to have a documentary look, for the last decade there is a very distinctive, particular voice coming from her work: the active, questioning, and challenging voice of Carrie Mae Weems herself. She explores how blacks have been represented -- both visually and verbally -- in our culture. Weems is a folklorist as well as a photographer. She combines her experience with these two professions into trenchant analyses of contemporary American culture from a female, African-American perspective.

Weems is perhaps best known for her bold exposure of the meanings of defamatory ethnic humor in a series titled **Ain't Jokin'**. This MATRIX exhibition focuses on three important bodies of work by Weems, intending to show the impressive range of her vision over the past decade. The installation includes **Family Pictures and Stories** (1978-84), selections from **Ain't Jokin'** (1986-87), and a recent series, **Colored People** (1990). Together they embody most of the key issues that preoccupy Weems: race, gender, class, and kinship.

Family Pictures and Stories is displayed in its own small room inside the MATRIX space. Encountering this piece is like walking into a family album, complete with spoken commentary. It features nearly four dozen photographs accompanied by an audiotape of Weems narrating stories of the Polk and Weems family migrations



HIGH

YELLA

From *Colored People*, *High Yella Girl*, 1989-90

from Mississippi to Portland, Oregon, where Weems grew up. She also recounts more recent vignettes about her siblings, parents, and friends.

In choosing her family as subject matter, Weems, then a graduate student, was "trying to get back home."² It also marks the beginning of her eager embrace of those things genuine and authentic to African-American culture, which she portrays with bodacious frankness and affection. Says Weems, "I like work that is not sanitized, work with an odor."³

Ain't Jokin' juxtaposes photographs of wholesome-looking, appealing individuals with the harsh, sadistic language of "jokes" that enforce racial stereotypes. These pairings of image and text present an emotional and ethical contradiction that pulls the viewer in two directions at once. Weems reminds those who object to her use of these images and texts that "talking about racism does not perpetuate it."⁴ Weems intends for these works to "raise questions . . . where does this stuff come from?"⁵

Understandably, most viewers are offended when first seeing these images. Outrage and self-righteous indignation are common initial responses. But Weems is presenting each viewer with a telling choice: Displace your distress onto the artist who is legitimately using visual and verbal images current in our own culture or confront the pathology



GIRL

of a society that continues to perpetuate racism. These works by Weems highlight the corrosive nature of such profound injustice.

The **Colored People** series is comprised mostly of triptychs consisting of thrice repeated portraits. Weems is interested in the rich diversity of skin colors in the African-American community and the meanings ascribed to these differences. This is a tender, endearing series in which tripartite texts -- *High Yella Girl*, *Red Bone Boy*, *Magenta Colored Girl* -- are complemented by images which are correspondingly hand-tinted with photographic dyes. (She herself was affectionately called "Red Bone" by her family.)

Colored People acknowledges the caste system based on skin colors that exists in the black community. Yet the gentle solicitousness of these works intends to counteract internalized racism. **Colored People** also celebrates the diversity of skin colors and, in particular, addresses what Weems sees as the need to support children in affirming themselves as people of color.

Strongly influenced by the life and writings of the African-American author-folklorist-anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston (1901-1960), Weems has found "something grand . . . in making a number of connections in my own personal history that have to do with being poor, black, working class, and a woman to boot." ⁶ In the face of a dominant

culture that might have it otherwise, she has found her way to an authentic and eloquent expression of her own. Said Weems recently, "I'm feeling extremely colored now days, and I'm happy about my 'conditions.' For much too long, I've placed great emphasis on being European and Western. Often at the expense of overlooking the value of Afro-American culture, I've used European aesthetics and standards as a starting point for creating my own work. So this notion of 'feeling colored' has to do with drawing upon Afro-American culture as a foundation for creating art." ⁷

Carrie Mae Weems was born in Portland, Oregon in 1953. She received a B. F. A. from the California Institute of the Arts in 1981 and an M. F. A. in photography from the University of California, San Diego in 1984. She is completing an M. A. at the University of California, Berkeley in African-American Folklore. She has been a Smithsonian Fellow, received grants from the California Arts Council, and has been an artist-in-residence at the Visual Studies workshop in Rochester, New York and Light Work in Syracuse, New York.

Andrea Miller-Keller
Curator of Contemporary Art

¹ Rosenthal, Mel. "Commentary," *Nueva Luz* p. 32.

² In conversation with AMK, August 10, 1990.

³ Ibid.

⁴ In conversation with AMK, December 19, 1990.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Weems, Carrie Mae. *Family Pictures and Stories: A Photographic Installation*, 1984.

⁷ Willis-Thomas, Deborah. *An Illustrated Bio-Bibliography of Black Photographers: 1940-1988*, p. 148.

PLEASE NOTE: Carrie Mae Weems will speak about her work in an informal MATRIX Lecture at 2:15 p.m. on Sunday, April 21. The event is free with museum admission.



BLACK WOMAN WITH CHICKEN

From *Ain't Jokin'*, *BLACK WOMAN WITH CHICKEN*, 1988

"Stereotypes can assume a life of their own, rooted not in reality but in the myth making made necessary by our need to control our world."

Sander L. Gilman

The photographs included here are taken from a series, *Ain't Jokin'*, which deals exclusively with the stereotyping of Afro-Americans by whites. Black or White, when dealing with the question of racism, we get ta itchin' under our skin, our temperatures rise, our lips quiver; still the major problem of the twentieth century is that of the color line. Personally I'm neurotic, a tad paranoid even, about this color business. We all are. When confronted, (that's what images do, confront), with questions of racism we sense our own integrity called into question. The fact is there are more racists disguised as non-racists than you can shake a stick at; so our integrity needs calling into question, if only to make sure we have any at all. Each of us carries around little packages of consumer racism in the form of little neat characteristics and qualities reserved for specific groups - unlike ourselves - we may encounter along this miserably short course in life. And the unfortunate part of the business is these stereotypes are not harmless expressions, but have real - devastatingly real effects on the material well-being of those singled out as objects of these expressions. It is the greatest irony that the same negative stereotypes used to keep Blacks rooted to work in the past, are the same ones which keep them out of work today.

Folklore taps right at the core of these ugly little prevailing attitudes and is for this reason an excellent socio-psychological barometer. This piece uses folkloric jokes, childhood verses, various mental associations to confront and/or challenge and/or undercut these vogue, but vulgar stereotypes of the Black. For immediacy, the stereotypes are presented photographically in broad exaggeration, and this way assists viewers through the process of self-reflection.

Carrie Mae Weems, 1987

Edict and Episode: Meaning and Image, 1988.

The Pop '60s notwithstanding, high art has seldom foregrounded the ethnically "impolite" or impolitic segments of our mass-reproduced culture. The continued and widespread existence of derogatory images of members of the world's majority cultures is a dirty little secret repressed by many fine artists who exploit pop culture references. During the late '60s and early '70s, however, when a newly emerged Black Consciousness movement enabled Americans of African descent to gaze unflinchingly at painful racial imagery, artists like Betye Saar, Murray DePillars, Joe Overstreet and Raymond Saunders raised the carpet and pointed at the pile of grinning mammy dolls and pancake queens beneath.

. . . Carrie Mae Weems take[s] on one of the deepest, most treacherous pools of stereotypes -- jokes. Laughter can be both a vicious weapon and a healing balm. Humor allows us to vent the subconscious' scandalous texts. But it can also veil aggression or mask feelings of vulnerability.

. . . Weems takes a more difficult tack. In a series uniform-sized photo/text panels, she contrasts particularly foul bits of verbage and material culture ridiculing Blacks with carefully printed, matter-of-fact-looking imagers of her subjects. The well-groomed, young Black family that stares back at us above the word "Coons" turns the label sour, shocking, impossible. A handsome youth in profile faces a gorilla who regards us with a scowl. Below, the riddle "What's the cross between a nigger and a monkey?" emits its psychic poison.

Weems has written that she aims for discomfort, that she hopes to jolt unwitting racists into awareness with these works. For this viewer, there is the added virtue that, by withholding commentary -- refusing to feed us a closed symbolic message . . . -- her pieces stay troubling long after we've assigned them an ideological import. Weems' deadpan presentational style leaves us with a profound sense of the strangeness of ethnic humor, its dependence upon such antithetical impulses as the need to boost one's own dignity by cancelling another's.

Judith Wilson

Assistant Professor of Art History, University of Virginia
 From "Stereotypes, Or A Picture Is Worth A Thousand Lies,"
Prisoners of Image: Ethnic and Gender Stereotypes, p.20.

Selected One-Person Exhibitions:

Alternative Space Gallery, San Diego, CA *Family Pictures and Stories: A Photographic Installation* '84; Hampshire College Art Gallery, Amherst, MA '87; Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, RI '89; CEPA Gallery, Buffalo, NY *Calling Out My Name* '90; P.P.O.W, NYC '90; The New Museum of Contemporary Art, NYC *And 22 Million Very Tired And Very Angry People* '91.



From *Family Pictures and Stories, Mom at Work*, 1979-80

Selected Group Exhibitions:

San Francisco State University, San Francisco, CA *Contemporary Black Photographers* '80; Los Angeles Women's Building, Los Angeles, CA *Women's Work* '80; Barnsdall Municipal Art Gallery, Los Angeles *Multicultural Focus* '81; Vanderbilt University Art Gallery, Nashville, TN *Four West Coast Photographers* '83; Eye Gallery, San Francisco *Analysis and Passion: Photography Engages Social and Political Issues* '85; The Grey Art Gallery and Study Center, New York University, NYC *America: Another Perspective* '86; Maryland Institute, College of Art, Baltimore, MD *Social Concerns* '86; The New Museum of Contemporary Art, NYC *Past, Present, Future* '86; Centro Cultural de la Raza, San Diego, CA *Visible Differences* '87;

documenta 8, Kassel, West Germany *The Castle* (installation by Group Material) '87; INSTALLATION, San Diego, CA *Edict and Episode: Image as Meaning* '87; The Houston Center for Photography, Houston TX *The Other* '88; Firehouse Gallery, Houston, TX *Herstory: Black Women Photographers* '88; Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, MA *Black Photographers Bear Witness: 100 Years of Social Protest* '89 (travelled extensively); Le Mois de la Photo à Montréal, Montreal, Canada *Black Women Photographers* '89; Alternative Museum, NYC *Prisoners of Image: Ethnic and Gender Stereotypes* '89; Randolph Street Gallery, Chicago, IL *Who Counts?* '90; Nexus Gallery, Atlanta, GA *Biological Factors* '90; Hayden Gallery, List Visual Arts Center, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA *Trouble in Paradise* '90 (also to Art Gallery, University of Maryland, College Park, MD); The Studio Museum in Harlem, NYC *Urban Home* '90; Marine Midland Bank in conjunction with The New Museum of Contemporary Art, NYC *Spent: Currency, Security, and Art on Deposit* '90; Real Art Ways, Hartford, CT *Presumed Identities* '90; San Francisco Camerawork, San Francisco, CA *Disputed Identities* '90; Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston MA *Currents* '91; Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC *1991 Biennial Exhibition* '91.

Selected Bibliography by Carrie Mae Weems:

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"Family Stories," in *Blasted Allegories: An Anthology of Writings by Contemporary Artists* (Brian Wallis, ed.), The New Museum of Contemporary Art (Cambridge: MIT Press), 1987, p. 33+.

Statement by Carrie Mae Weems in *Edict and Episode: Meaning and Image*, (exhibition brochure), INSTALLATION (San Diego, CA), 1988, unpaginated.

"Personal Perspectives on the Evolution of American Black Photography: A talk with Carrie Weems," *Obscura*, 1989, p. 9+.

Then What? Photographs and Folklore (artist book) CEPA Gallery (Buffalo, NY), 1990.

"Making Art, Making Money: 13 Artists Comment," *Art in America* vol. 78 no. 7 (July '90), p. 133+.

Selected Bibliography about Carrie Mae Weems:

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- Tamblyn, Christine. "Three Views of Families," *Artweek* October 26, 1985, p. 11.
- Ollman, Leah. "At The Galleries," *Los Angeles Times* October 16, 1987, p. 26B+.
- Hoone, Jeffrey. "Carrie Mae Weems," *Contact Sheet* no. 61, Light Work (Syracuse, NY), 1988, unpaginated.
- Mellor, Carl. "No Joke: Photographer Carrie Mae Weems blasts away stereotypes," *Syracuse New Times* August 31-September 7, 1988, p. 1+.
- Wallis, Brian "Questioning Documentary," *Aperture* no. 112 (Fall '88), p. 60+.
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- Rosenthal, Mel. "Commentary," *Nueva Luz* vol. 2 no. 4 (1989), p. 32+.
- Friis-Hansen, Dana. "What's Wrong With This Picture?" *Trouble in Paradise*, MIT List Visual Arts Center (Cambridge, MA), 1989.
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- Wilson, Judith. "Stereotypes, Or A Picture Is Worth A Thousand Lies," *Prisoners of Image: Ethnic and Gender Stereotypes*, (exhibition catalogue), Alternative Museum (New York City), 1989 p. 20+.
- Gibbs, Michael. "Critical Realism," *Perspektief* no. 39 (September '90), p. 38+.
- Sherlock, Maureen P. "A Dangerous Age: The Mid-Life Crisis of Postmodern Feminism," *Arts Magazine* vol. 65 no. 1 (September '90) p. 70+.
- Weil, Jenny. " 'Trouble in Paradise': visions of social distress," *The Prince George's Sentinel* October 18, 1990, p. 8.
- Jones, Kellie. "In Their Own Image," *Artforum* vol. 29 no. 3 (November '90), p. 133+.
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- Heartney, Eleanor. "Carrie Mae Weems," *ARTnews* vol. 90 no. 1 (January '91), p. 154+.
- Reid, Calvin. "Carrie Mae Weems," *Arts Magazine* vol. 65 no. 5 (January '91), p. 79.

Trippi, Laura. *And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People*, (exhibition brochure), The New Museum of Contemporary Art (New York City), 1991.

Works in MATRIX:

Family Pictures and Stories (1978-84), approximately 48 silver prints, from 14" x 17" to 30" x 40". Lent courtesy of the artist.

From *Ain't Jokin'* (1987-88), all works are silver prints, 16" x 20" each, and are lent by the artist, courtesy of P.P.O.W., New York City, unless otherwise noted:

THE LITTLE BLACK BOY, 1987; *COONS*, 1987; *WHAT ARE THREE THINGS YOU CANT GIVE A BLACK PERSON?*, 1987; *WHITE PATTY*, 1987-88; *MIRROR, MIRROR*, 1988, Courtesy of Michael Murray, Odenton, MD; *WHAT'S A CROSS BETWEEN A NIGGER AND AN APE?*, 1988, two panels, Courtesy of Mr. and Mrs. Frank Kolodny, Princeton, NJ; *HOW DO YOU GET NIGGER OUT OF A TREE?*, 1988, Courtesy of Mr. and Mrs. Frank Kolodny, Princeton, NJ; *BLACK MAN WITH A WATERMELON*, 1988; *BLACK WOMAN WITH CHICKEN*, 1988.

Colored People (1989-90), black and white toned silver prints, lent courtesy of the artist:

High Yella Girl, 30" x 30"; *Burnt Orange Girl*, 30" x 30"; *Honey Colored Boy* 30" x 30"; *Golden Yella Girl*, three panels, 16" x 16" each; *Violet Colored Girl*, three panels, 16" x 16" each; *Magenta Colored Girl*, three panels, 16" x 16" each; *Blue Black Boy*, three panels, 16" x 16" each; *Low Brown Boy*, three panels, 16" x 16" each; *Chocolate Brown Boy*, three panels, 16" x 16" each; *Chocolate Colored Man*, three panels, 16" x 16" each; *Moody Blue Girl*, three panels, 16" x 16" each; *Red Bone Boy*, three panels, 16" x 16" each.