

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Emmanuel Iduma, "The 25 Photos That Defined the Modern Age," *T: New York Times Style Magazine*, June 3, 2024



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## The 25 Photos That Defined the Modern Age

A group of experts met to discuss the images that have best captured — and changed — the world since 1955.

By M.H. Miller, Brendan Embser, Emmanuel Iduma and Lucy McKeon

June 3, 2024

***This story contains graphic images of violence and death.***

Let's get this out of the way first: Of the dozens of photographers not represented here that a reasonable person might expect to have been included, the most conspicuous absentees include Berenice Abbott, Ansel Adams, Robert Adams, Richard Avedon, Dawoud Bey, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Imogen Cunningham, Roy DeCarava, William Eggleston, Walker Evans, Robert Mapplethorpe, Helmut Newton and Irving Penn. Putting together a list of the 25 most significant photographs since 1955 — both fine art photos and reportage — proved a difficult task for the panelists (even the chosen time frame was controversial). They were: the Canadian conceptual photographer Stan Douglas, 63; the Vietnamese American photographer An-My Lê, 64; the acting chief curator of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art, Roxana Marcoci, 66; the American documentary photographer Susan Meiselas, 75; the American photographer Shikeith, 35; and Nadia Vellam, 51, T's photo and video director. Each participant (including myself, the moderator, 36) submitted up to seven possible nominees for the list. We gathered at The New York Times Building on a morning last February (with Shikeith joining on video from a shoot in Los Angeles) to begin our deliberations.

We chose judges from the realms of both fine art and reportage because, increasingly, the line between the two has collapsed. The modern age has been defined by photographs — images that began their lives in newspapers or magazines are repurposed as art; art has become a vehicle for information. Therefore, it was important to us and our jurors that we not draw boundaries between what was created as journalism and what was created as art. What *was* important was that the photographs we chose changed, in some way, how we see the world.

The conversation naturally turned into a series of questions. Like how important was it for a photograph to have expanded the possibilities of the medium? And how much did it matter who took a photo and what their intentions were? The list that emerged is less concerned with a historical

chronology or an accepted canon than it is with a set of themes that have been linked indelibly to the photographic medium since its inception: labor and activism; war; the self and the family. Intriguingly, beyond an image by Wolfgang Tillmans from the '90s, fashion photography is largely absent. So, too, are many world historical events that have been captured in landmark photographs, including the assassination of JFK, the fall of the Berlin Wall and anything from the pandemic lockdown or the presidency of Donald Trump. There were just too many other photographs to consider.

The process of producing the final list was clearly not scientific. It was more of a debate among a certain group of people on a certain day and is best considered that way. At the end of nearly four hours, jittery from caffeine, the group stood before a pile of crumpled masterworks on the floor as we assembled our chosen 25 images on a conference table. Many of our questions weren't resolved (indeed, are unresolvable), but the results — which aren't ranked but rather presented in the order in which we discussed them — are nothing if not surprising. — *M.H. Miller*

*The conversation has been edited and condensed.*

**M.H. Miller:** I thought we should start by talking about the time frame we settled on, starting in 1955.

**Stan Douglas:** It's an agenda.

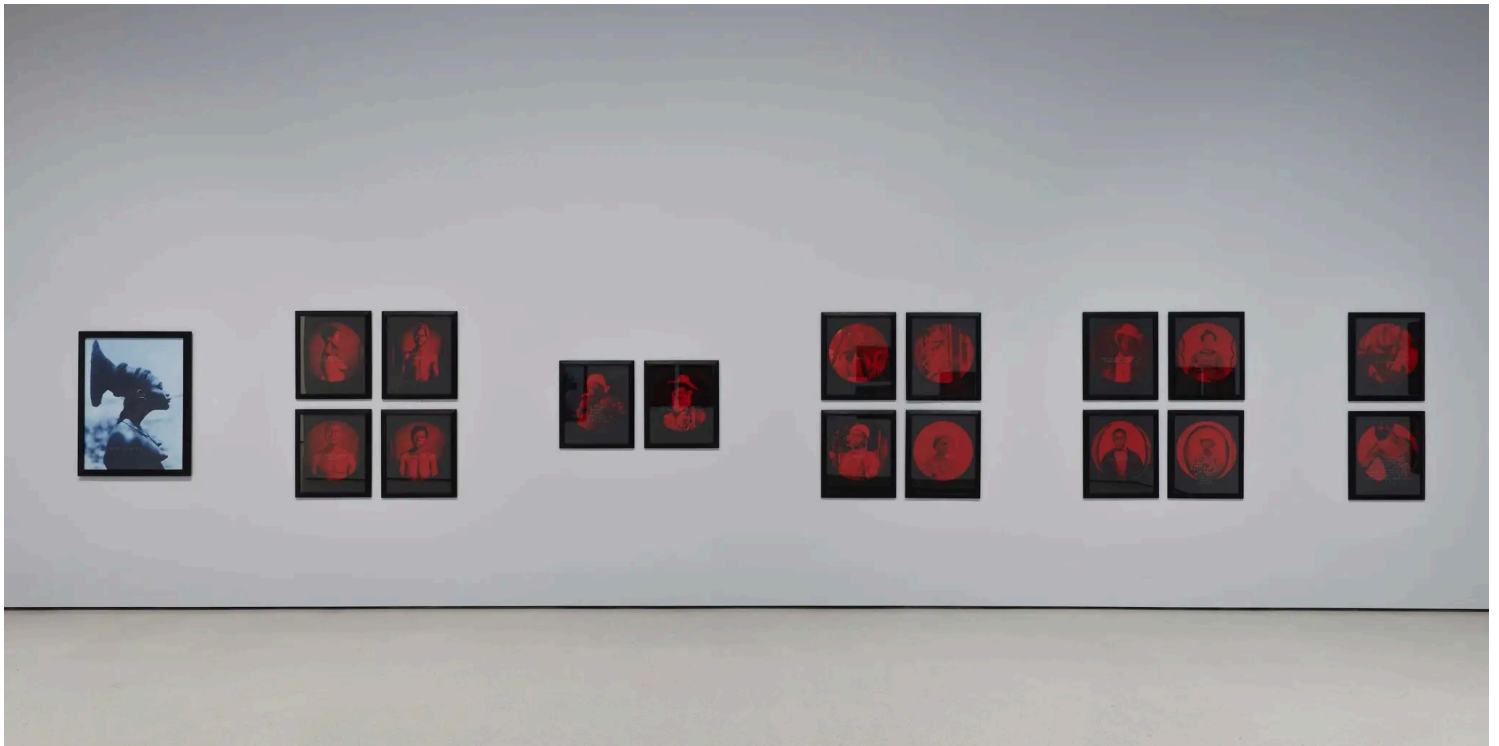
**Miller:** A little bit. It certainly shows an American bias, so I apologize to our Canadian representative — 1955 is really the beginning of the American civil rights movement, an era from which a number of us nominated photographs, and photography was so important in just making people aware of what was going on in the country. An-My, you chose Robert Frank's picture of a streetcar in New Orleans, taken that year.

## 23. Carrie Mae Weems, “From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried,” 1995-96



Images from Carrie Mae Weems's “From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried” (1995-96). © Carrie Mae Weems, courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York, Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco, and Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin

Carrie Mae Weems's "From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried" is a work of appropriation that brings together 34 photographs, many of them of Black Americans, dating from the mid-19th century to the late 1960s, which collectively form a lesson on the history of racism in America. At the heart of the work are four images of people who were enslaved in South Carolina — some of the earliest known images that exist of America's original sin — taken by the photographer Joseph T. Zealy and commissioned in 1850 by the Harvard University biologist Louis Agassiz. Originally intended to illustrate Agassiz's baseless phrenological theories of Black inferiority, the pictures were rescaled and reframed by Weems, who also tinted them blood-red, making explicit the violence that allowed for their creation. Stored in Harvard's archives for more than a century, Zealy's images fell into obscurity, only to be rediscovered in 1976. After Weems used them without permission, the school threatened her with a lawsuit. "I think that your suing me would be a really good thing," she told the university, as she later recalled to the art historian Deborah Willis. "You should, and we should have this conversation in court." Instead of proceeding with the suit, Harvard acquired the work, further complicating the idea of ownership that Weems investigates. — *E.I.*



An installation view of Carrie Mae Weems's "From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried" (1995-96). © the Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY. Photo: Denis Doorly

**Vellam:** We should talk about Carrie [Mae Weems].

**Meiselas:** We should definitely talk about Carrie. There are two very different options ["Kitchen Table Series," 1990, and "From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried."]

**Lê:** I chose the "Kitchen Table Series" [in which Weems poses as the matriarch in various domestic scenes she staged in a single room, containing little else but an overhead lamp and a table]. The kitchen table is symbolic — it's the intimacy of the home. In a way I always felt these pictures were about people being able to be themselves, being open and visible in a way that they maybe can't in public.

**Marcoci:** To me, the “Kitchen Table Series” is a true performance for the camera in a way that Cindy’s is in “Untitled Film Stills.” But “From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried” is an amazing work because it engages with race, with slavery, with colonialism, through an archive. The subjects here were really originally presented as specimens. But what Carrie does is give a voice back to these subjects, whose voices were completely muted. She enlarges the photographs. She tints them blood-red. The whole thing becomes a poem.

**Shikeith:** This particular work taught me how to use photographs to tell a story. And the fact that [Harvard threatened to sue her] introduces this whole other issue about who gets to tell what stories.