

GLADSTONE

Stephen Mooallem, "Carrie Mae Weems Has Faith in the Future," *Harper's Bazaar*, November 1, 2024

BAZAAR

CULTURE

Carrie Mae Weems Has Faith in the Future

In an age of anxiety and uncertainty, the artist wants to be a beacon of hope and possibility



*This article is part of Harper's Bazaar's **Great Motivators** package, highlighting the essential voices that are keeping us inspired in 2024.*

When times are at their toughest, when our faith and resolve are most strenuously tested, when the world feels like it's about to spin off its axis—that's when Carrie Mae Weems gets to work.

"I think it really comes out of my background," Weems tells me. "My grandfather was a union organizer. My father and brothers and uncles were in unions, so I think it really comes out of my family background—and of course just paying attention to what's going on," she explains. "It's an urgency in me that I'm always thinking about.... I know that many other people feel the same way, but they don't necessarily have the tools or the platform to get their voices heard. And I do."



AUDOIN DESFORGES

Carrie Mae Weems

It's late October, and Weems has just returned to her Syracuse, New York, studio following a brief trip to Washington, D.C., where she was presented by President Joe Biden with a National Medal of Arts. It's an honor bestowed on individuals and groups whose "curiosity, creativity, hard work, and dedication have inspired and touched so many in our country and around the globe"—which is also perhaps an apt description of Weems's oeuvre.



CARRIE MAE WEEMS

Carrie Mae Weems's billboard design for the Artists for Democracy campaign. A Carrie Mae Weems Project paid for by People for the American Way.

For more than four decades, Weems has been making art that somehow manages to both challenge and consume us, expanding and re-shaping the way we think about subjects like race, gender, and identity. Her work has included photography, performance, and multimedia installations and projects, as well as what she sometimes refers to as "convenings," which bring together a range of other artists, activists, and thinkers.

And when it all hits the fan, Weems also knows how to spring into action. So it's almost fitting that amid the astronomically high stakes and complete and utter strangeness of this political season, she has been at her busiest.

"It's an URGENCY in me that I'm ALWAYS thinking ABOUT."

Shortly after Vice President Kamala Harris replaced Biden atop the Democratic ticket to face off against Republican nominee Donald Trump in this year's presidential race, Weems created a billboard featuring Harris for advocacy group People for the American Way's Artists for Democracy campaign. Weems had photographed Harris in September 2023 during a visit to the vice president's residence in Washington, D.C. When Weems was asked to create the billboard, she immediately returned to those images.



CARRIE MAE WEEMS

One of Weems's "monuments" billboards, which were installed around Richmond, Virginia, in early October

“We’ve been looking at the opposition [Trump] for quite a while now—over the last eight years, really—and what we hear consistently is complaint, something about *his* problems,” Weems says. “And literally the moment that I learned that she had become the presumptive candidate, I just immediately whipped out those pictures and thought, ‘Okay, here is somebody who is leading with compassion, not complaint, who is speaking to us in a deeper way,’” she explains. “She’s expressive, she’s compassionate, and you see that in the images, so the images really gave me the language to lead with as well.”

On October 2, Weems organized one of her convenings in Richmond, Virginia. The gathering, titled *Contested Sites of Memory*, consisted of an evening of discussions and presentations around the subjects of racial justice and healing, with performances by Nona Hendryx, Jawwaad Taylor, Craig Harris, Carl Hancock Rux, and Esther Armah, along with local choir Destiny One.



CARRIE MAE WEEMS

Another “monuments” billboard

“I often focus on the art of creating meaningful dialogues and pay a great deal of attention to their structure and flow,” Weems explains. “Because of this, they take me many months of planning to create a gathering or convening. In this way, creating a convening is similar to creating a performance or an installation.”

“What kind of CONTAINER can HOLD our deepest BELIEFS?”

Contested Sites of Memory was also accompanied by a series of billboards Weems had installed around Richmond depicting different monuments and overlaid with text that questions how we choose to memorialize the past and what that says about who we are or want to be. “There is a kind of immediacy to the work that I think is really important in the larger social landscape, whether it’s for a political campaign or even about looking at monuments,” Weems says. “What kind of container can hold our deepest beliefs?”

It’s a concept Weems explores in a very different way in *Cyclorama: The Shape of Things*, currently on view through November 9 at the West 21st Street outpost of Gladstone gallery in New York, a 360-degree panoramic video installation based on old cyclorama paintings, which were popular in the 19th century.” Weems’s cyclorama is made up of new, found, and documentary footage and her own video work that ruminates on the nature and impact of racial violence, with space for visitors to sit and take it all in from the center.

“The cyclorama provides an immersive level of viewing that is also very intimate because you are so situated inside of the work,” Weems says. “In some way, you become a part of the work; you become a part of the experience.”



REMEMBER TO DREAM

CARRIE MAE WEEMS

Part of the “monuments” series

Creating space for intimate reflection remains an important part of Weems’s practice. “I think that I do that when I’m making something like the cyclorama [*The Cyclorama: The Shape of Things*, 2021] or the Pepper’s Ghost in *Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me* [2012] or *Leave! Leave Now!* [2022] or even the *Kitchen Table Series* [1990],” she says. “We’re able to sit with those works. They require time—duration—and your ability to confront not only the work but also yourself in relationship to the questions raised in the work.”

*“We will be STEPPING in and out of the
DRAMAS of HISTORY for as long as we’re
ALIVE.”*

So how does Weems maintain her optimism? “We have no choice,” she says. “We have to in order to keep working. I think that it is the driving force of the work for me. It’s the motivating factor—that there’s a level of possibility, a future. It’s not just optimism. It’s really about the ability to embrace a moment that is beyond the now. And that’s critical, that ability to think about the future, knowing that the arc of history is long and that we will be stepping in and out of the dramas of history for as long as we’re alive.”

“Whatever happens, we know that things will not remain the same,” Weems continues. “They will continue to change. They will continue to evolve. Your response to those changes is really the thing that matters—that you cannot give up hope. Because it’s in hopelessness that there is this sort of sense of doom and failure and belief in the inability for things to change. But we know that change is really the only constant, so you embrace that energy and embrace what change means and use it as a vehicle for all your hopes and ideas and aspirations and the things that you want to see happen.”

“I know that change is coming,” Weems says, “and that I’m a part of it.”