

GLADSTONE

Daniel Cassady, "Carrie Mae Weems Offers a Respite at Gladstone Gallery Before an Anxiety-Inducing Election," *ARTnews*, November 4, 2024

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Carrie Mae Weems Offers a Respite at Gladstone Gallery Before an Anxiety-Inducing Election

BY DANIEL CASSADY
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Trombonist Craig Harris, backed by a string quintet, accompany Carrie Mae Weems's work *The Shape of Things* Saturday night at Gladstone Gallery
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Carrie Mae Weems's film *Cyclorama: The Shape of Things* (2021) isn't specific to the upcoming Presidential election, although it certainly does refer to the fallout of the last one, with video of the January 6 insurrection intercut with images of migrants crossing oceans and deserts. Still, this 40-minute work about this nation's fractured state speaks well to our current moment, and that may explain why, when it screened this past Saturday at **Gladstone Gallery** in New York, a small crowd assembled outside the gallery before it even started.

"It's like history has come up to meet Carrie," **Gavin Brown**, a partner at Gladstone, said, speaking by phone before the screening. "This election has produced a kind of torque in the work that we predicted, but as we are all getting closer to November 5th. It's gotten so intense. I feel things are ratcheting so tight I can barely move my neck."

Cyclorama: The Shape of Things contains a wide spread of imagery: footage on both pro- and anti-segregation riots, recordings from antiquated circus acts featuring a dancing elephant, silhouettes of what appear to be Southern belles in hoop skirts that laugh over tea. Toward the end, Weems shows four women and one man standing tall, separately and together, while rain and snow fall on them around the blackness that surrounds them, filling the 15-foot-tall circular screen onto which this film is projected.

There's hardly any esoteric metaphors to be found in this far-reaching work. American politics is a circus and most candidates today are more performative than they are policy-driven. Brown said that in light of the current election cycle, the piece is really about where we're going next: "It's less about voting and who you vote for than it is about where we are heading and where we've been."

That said, the election was on people's minds. "I'll admit am a little worried," said Kwesi Jones, a filmmaker and photographer who came by on Saturday. "As we've seen in previous elections, it's not particularly easy to see the who the winner is going to be. If Kamala wins, I'm curious to see what Trump's tactics will be. He's already tried to usurp democracy once."

The viewing took place in a massive, blue-curtained makeshift theater inside the gallery. Guests quickly filled the two rows of folding chairs that lined the perimeter inside. Others chose to sit large white ottomans closer to the center. At the far end were four folding chairs, music stands, a double bass laid down on its side, signs that a string quintet would part of the evening's performance, and a long, ornately carved didgeridoo, one of the two instruments that jazzman, trombonist, composer, and band leader Craig Harris would use during the evening to accompany the film.

After a short introduction from Weems, the music began. Harris's cheeks puffed in and out rhythmically, drawing a meditative drone from the didgeridoo while the strings scraped out a sad melody just this side of Ornette Coleman or Rahsaan Roland Kirk. Trills, angular licks, and chromatic riffs washed over the 100 or so gathered people.

At the end of seventh part of the cycle, Weems joined the musicians, mic in hand, to tell the audience what amounts to her origin story. At the commencement address for her boyfriend, 45 years ago, the then president of Bank of America told the graduates that by sometime in the 2020s the United States would be a minority-majority country. That speech, that theme, was the flicker that sparked perhaps all of Weems's work. "I started looking into this, researching, and thinking about those ideas," she said. "It became at gets me up in the morning. It's my mantra. That and a four-four beat. Remember, if you work in a four-four beat, you will always be on time."

Weems then read a spoken word piece, backed by a beautiful melancholic string arrangement. As she read one part of which stood out among the grim situation just a few days away. "If you look on the horizon here and there you'll see sightings of hope, of dreams, of memories," she said. "And if you look closely through the corridors of time, even within the horror, even in the rise of Trump, one can see the fluttering wings of doves. Wings like time batting out beats of hope."

Despite the grim visuals, hope seems always to be on Weems's mind. While the election's outcome is uncertain to an unfathomable degree, Weems is not passively waiting. On Tuesday, along with her compatriot Precious Okoyoman, she will be hosting a full day of readings, live music, and food at Gladstone's 21st street location. The event will be free and open to the public from 3pm to midnight. **Vincent Katz**, **Brian Degraw**, **Rirkrit Tiravanija**, and **Joan Jonas** are just some of the more than 24 artists and poets sharing what the gallery calls a "a refuge, an oasis, a temporary autonomous zone in the spirit of Hakim Bey" while the world watches and wonders what the future of America might look like on Wednesday.

As the band played the evening out, Weems, who had returned to her seat behind the musicians, stood up and started swaying her arms. She moved to the music, which drew her out in front of the band and into the audience. She plucked one of them up from an ottoman, and he danced with her. Soon, more people joined, including Okoyomon, who organized the Saturday artist convening at Gladstone leading up to the election, of which this evening was one. Within minutes, most of the room had joined in. Where once there was stern, pensive faces, now there were smiles, heads tilted back. A group moving in time together.

"Well, that wasn't planned. But I think it worked out really well," Weems said afterward.