

# GLADSTONE

Tony Bravo, "Photographer Carrie Mae Weems confronts the 'changing same' in new work," *Datebook*,  
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## Photographer Carrie Mae Weems confronts the 'changing same' in new work



Carrie Mae Weems, "Painting the Town #4," 2021.

Photo: © Carrie Mae Weems/Gladstone Gallery, New York; Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco; Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin

Stepping into Fraenkel Gallery to see "Painting the Town," the new photo series by Carrie Mae Weems, I had a moment of confusion. Was I looking at an abstract expressionist painting by Mark Rothko instead of photography by the MacArthur fellow and Rome Prize winner?

The vivid images before me were indeed Weems' 2020 photos taken following the murder of George Floyd in May of that year, showing boarded and painted storefronts in her hometown of Portland, Ore. The close-up views of all but one of the images have a way of making the viewer question what medium they're seeing.

At the time, Weems, 71, was hired by National Geographic to document the social climate in the U.S. after Floyd's death.

"I couldn't believe what I was seeing, I immediately knew that it was of profound importance," Weems told the Chronicle of traveling to Portland. "I started photographing with the aim of developing a body of work that would come out of looking at what it meant to the city, to the nation and to me personally as an artist."



Carrie Mae Weems, "Painting the Town #1," 2021

Photo: © Carrie Mae Weems/Gladstone Gallery, New York; Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco; Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin

"It starts to give you another sense of what the abstract expressionists themselves were after in the '40s and the '50s," Weems said of seeing the boarded-up storefronts, with slashes of bold paint censoring anti-racist messages left by protesters.

"It's also trying to articulate a form of rupture, not only in terms of the art, but it had ramifications outside of the paintings," a comparison Weems could apply to 2020.

The new series felt like the perfect connecting point to Weems' larger body of work represented at Fraenkel.

Weems is one of the most significant contemporary American artists, working primarily in photography but also video installation, audio and digital forms, among others. The first Black artist to get a solo exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in New York (in 2014), her work asks powerful questions about the Black American experience, sexism, cultural representation and other pressing issues. In addition to her show at Fraenkel Gallery, which runs through Feb. 22, Weems also presented an excerpt from the video "Cyclorama — The Shape of Things, A Video in 7 Parts," (2021) and participated in a talk with the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art Director Christopher Bedford at the Fog Design + Art fair on Saturday, Jan. 25, which attracted a standing-room only crowd of 300 people.

The progression from "Painting the Town" in the first room takes us to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and '60s in the second room, with Weems' two-channel video "Cornered" using historical footage from Boston in 1965 showing angry marchers for and against desegregation. In "Blues and Pinks," she tinted archival photographs by Charles Moore from the 1963 Children's Crusade in Birmingham, Ala., and from the funerals of Medgar Evers and



Carrie Mae Weems, "Blues and Pinks 3," 2020.

Photo: © Carrie Mae Weems/Gladstone Gallery, New York; Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco; Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin

“Artists have certain kinds of responsibilities, and I’m in one of those positions where my work is being embraced, acknowledged in a profound way, and I have a responsibility to step up and to speak in a very particular way,” Weems said in a phone interview while in San Francisco. “It’s not just for me, but for others who don’t necessarily have the same voice and/or the same platform from which to speak.”

*This interview has been edited for length and clarity.*

**Q: How do you feel about San Francisco Art Week coinciding with the first week of the second Trump presidency?**

**A:** I hope the work that’s at Fraenkel challenges and encourages us to think profoundly about the moment. That moment is an extended one that has been going on for years. How we crystallize it is the thing I think about most in terms of my own work and my practice.



Photographer Carrie Mae Weems speaks to an audience as she discusses her work at the Fog Design + Art fair at Fort Mason in San Francisco on Saturday, Jan. 25.

Photo: Yalonda M. James/The Chronicle

**Q: The work in “Painting the Town” feels like part of this extended moment you’re talking about from 2020 to 2025.**

**A:** Yes, and 1960. Even as circumstances appear to change on the surface, the structural issues are so deeply embedded in American culture that it’s pretty difficult to escape. It’s a part of the system of things that America is shaped by – violence and by notions of a very specific kind of white male privilege.

**Q: How much were you involved with the sequence of the show?**

We worked very closely trying to make sure there was a kind of echo and a reverberation from piece to piece and from room to room so that everything is building on the next thing. What you’re dealing with are levels of a history of violence, but it’s presented in such a way that it allows you to enter the work without fear or trepidation.



Carrie Mae Weems, "The Legion of Honor," 2006-present.

Photo: © Carrie Mae Weems/Gladstone Gallery, New York; Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco; Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin

**Q: Can you talk about the figure you portray in your 'Museum Series?'**

A: She functions not only as the witness, but as the narrator and as the participant and observer. She has a dual function, she stands in for the viewer, and she assists you in unpacking the meaning of museums. She allows you to look beyond her, to see yourself in that position. She allows for a certain set of curiosities to emerge to the act of history and the role of architecture, in laying bare the roles of history in relationship to museums and patterns of ideas about who is excluded and who is included.

**Q: Did the Legion of Honor know you were taking these new photos?**

I've never had permission from any institution. They knew nothing about it. I always arrive really early in the morning, usually before institutions open. At the Legion of Honor, the guard came out and asked me if I could move, said that I couldn't have my cameras there. I said, "just one more photo and I promise I'll leave." I've always disdained bureaucracy in any form. I think that the work is beyond permission and in part, that's what the work is about.