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Confronting the Gaze: Reconfiguring Spectatorship in *Untitled (Kitchen Table Series)* by Carrie Mae Weems

In her career as a photographer, the artist Carrie Mae Weems has used the medium to create narratives which bring marginalized people into the center of focus. Often using her own body as the subject of her photographs, Weems works to reconfigure the historically determined power structures which have objectified or erased the experiences of African American women. In this way, Weems mobilizes herself as artist and as subject in order to engage with issues much larger than herself. Her work *Untitled (Kitchen Table Series)* (1990) offers a powerful study of the way in which photography, self-portraiture, and self-presentation provide paths for subverting and confusing dominant cultural narratives. The series presents us with scenes from a woman's life-- images of love, loss, loneliness, friendship, motherhood-- all centered around the kitchen table. These images are beautiful and inviting, giving us an intimate view into a space we normally do not have access to. They are deceptively simple in their representations of familiar domestic scenes, yet the power of these images comes from the interplay between the complex themes her work addresses and the simple forms they take. As Elaine King posits, "Weems's desired effect is to construct a subjective pictorial fable through her cinematic grouping of photographs for the purpose of exploring significant issues about identity."¹ In conjunction with panels of text written by Weems, her images create a narrative that asserts personal domestic experiences as being deeply connected to our larger historical and cultural realities. One of the main ways in which cultural hegemony is enforced on the individual is through visual

¹ Elaine King, "Black and White: Two Portrait Series." *Journal of American Culture* 31,1 (2008): 74.

representations of different groups which work to establish larger cultural narratives, narratives which the individual understands themselves in relation to. In America, representations of marginalized groups work to reinforce the authority of those in dominant positions. As bell hooks explains, “There is a direct and abiding connection between the maintenance of white supremacist patriarchy in this society and the institutionalization via mass media of specific images, representations of race, of blackness that support and maintain the oppression, exploitation, and overall domination of black people.”² Weems interrupts modes of spectatorship which normally allow these representations to go unquestioned by inviting intimacy between the viewer and the subjects of the photographs while simultaneously creating spectatorial distance through an emphasis on the constructedness cultural narratives. This structure forces the viewer to situate themselves as subject and perpetrator of such narratives, and thus works to reconfigure racist and sexist modes of spectatorship.

Weems’s project is a continuation of and reaction to the long and tense relationship between photography and marginalized groups. Photography has often been used to objectify and eroticize women and people of color, a function of white patriarchal power which silences these groups by forcing certain narratives on them. Weems’s photographs, critic Fatima Tobing Rony asserts, “are characterized by a deep consciousness of the historical legacy of the uses and abuses of photography, and of the power of the photographic image to bear witness to time. The images here rework history and memory, traversing the political and personal landscapes of race, class, and gender throughout photographic images and text.”³ Rony describes this as “The capacity of photography to delimit and define people of color, all the while keeping them at a

² bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 2.

³ Fatimah Tobing Rony, “We Must First See Ourselves: Documentary Subversions in Contemporary African-American Women’s Photography” in *Personal Narratives: Women Photographers of Color* ed. Jeff Flemming (Winston-Salem: Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art), 11.

distance.”⁴ Weems’s clearly wants to break down this distance. She invites the viewer into her own home and, by staring right in the camera, acknowledges the viewer’s presence while forcing them to acknowledge her own. We see this in the first image, “Untitled (Man and mirror),” which shows Weems at the table in front of the mirror, apparently getting ready to go out with a man, who stands behind her, his face completely obscured by a hat. Despite the task at hand, we the spectators are the sole focus of her attention. Weems’s gaze contains such subversive potential because of the way this configuration of looking acts against the historical legacy of photography and thereby questions the social factors which have allowed the medium to be used and abused for the benefit of dominant powers. The series must also be understood as a reaction to Laura Mulvey’s seminal essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,”⁵ which defined the dominant model of spectatorship as that of male scopophilia in which the woman is positioned only as the object of male sexual pleasure. Weems seeks to reconfigure this model of viewing in which women, and by extension other marginalized groups, can only function as objects.

The primary way in which Weems counteracts this dominant model of spectatorship is through the use of herself as creator and subject of these images. As I suggested before, Weems’s conscious acknowledgement of the viewers functions to reconfigure the dominant voyeuristic mode of viewing subjects in photography. From the first image, Weems gives us this little wink of acknowledgement-- she watches us watching her. Weems allows the viewer a hyper-voyeuristic position, yet at the same time, she interrupts this process by confronting the viewer and thus not allowing them to be the voyeur. In doing so she calls out and interrupts the problematic elements of photography which allow for alienating objectification. In the last image of the series, “Untitled (Woman playing solitaire),” she refuses to return our gaze as she plays a

⁴ Tobing Rony, “We Must First See Ourselves,” 11.

⁵ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 17.3 (1975): 6-18.

game of cards, she is content to be alone. Weems uses her authority as artist to limit what we can see of the subject, and thus challenges the traditional power dynamics between viewer and subject in which the photographic object is in effect powerless against the gaze of the spectator. Instead, by interrupting this scopophilic model of spectatorship, Weems moreover defies the gaze which objectifies and dehumanizes.

Weems's experience as a woman and as an African American clearly have informed her artistic focus, but it is crucial to recognize that one of her central goals is to move away from these limited identity categories. In an interview with bell hooks, Weems explained that an impetus for this project was the lack of representation of black subjects in media. She says,

“Well, you know, one of the things that I was thinking about was whether it might be possible to use black subjects to represent universal concerns. When we watch Hollywood movies, usually with white subjects, those images create a cultural terrain that we watch and walk on and move through. I wanted to create that same kind of experience using my subjects. Yet when I do that, it's not understood in that way. Folks refuse to identify with the concerns black people express which takes us beyond race into previously undocumented emotional realms. Black images can only stand for themselves and nothing more.”⁶

Thus, central for this analysis is an understanding of intersectionality, a recognition of the way different systems of oppression-- racism, sexism, homophobia-- are interconnected and act in conjunction with one another on individuals in the social realm. Weems clearly recognizes that being black and being a woman have affected her experience, but to isolate her work as only standing for one thing is a means to silence it and take away its power. Weems's work to resituate modes of representation is vital because, as bell hooks tells us “Representation is a crucial location of struggle for any exploited and oppressed people asserting subjectivity and

⁶ Carrie Mae Weems, “Talking Art with Carrie Mae Weems,” by bell hooks. *Art On My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: The New Press), 76.

decolonization of the mind.”⁷ hooks locates the effectiveness of Weems’s work in achieving this new figuration of representation in the artist’s anticolonialist use of narrative which, “create a cartography of experience wherein race, gender, and class identity converge, fuse, and mix so as to disrupt and deconstruct simple notions of subjectivity.”⁸ As hooks suggests, Weems’s work enacts a intervention into dominant modes of representation as well as of spectatorship by asserting the primacy of her own choice in what she will show us.

Although her work may not be autobiographical, her position as creator and actor in the work is central to its subversive power. In resistance to the hegemonic forces which silence women and African Americans, Weems refuses to relinquish any authority in creating her own narrative. Accompanying the images are several panels of text which illuminate some aspects of the scenes while simultaneously diverging from the photographic narrative. Together, Weems’s self-conscious, and entirely self-produced, series works to assert her own voice as the central force in the art. Yet, as cultural critic Marianne Hirsch describes, Weems creates a disjunction between the written text, with its “familiar phrases, blues songs, folk tales, colloquial expressions, clichés,” and her photographs, which are “mostly staged, formal, and static.”⁹ This interaction between the texts and images is able to produce multiple meanings and ambiguities which add to the political force of the work. The highly stylized writing reminds us that this narrative, as well as all the cultural narratives we have been taught, are constructed and only reveal a kernel of truth. For example, the image “Untitled (Woman and daughter with makeup),” depicts a mother and daughter sitting at the table putting on makeup together is paired with a text

⁷ hooks, *Black Looks*, 3.

⁸ bell hooks, “Carrie Mae Weems: Diasporic Landscapes of Longing,” in *Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art*, ed. M. Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996), 174.

⁹ Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 142.

in which the woman discusses her previous hesitancy towards motherhood and her overall ambivalence to it now that she is a mother. The text reads:

He wanted children. She didn't. At the height of their love a child was born. Her sisters thought the world of their children. Noting their little feats as they stumbled, teetered and stood. When her kid finally stood and walked, she watched with a distant eye, thinking, 'Thank God! I won't have to carry her much longer!!' Oh yeah, she loved the kid, she was responsible, but took no deep pleasure in motherhood, it caused deflection from her own immediate desires, which pissed her off. Ha. A woman's duty! Ha! A punishment for Eve's sin was more like it. Ha.

All the more powerful because of the domestic setting, Weems fights against any notion of what a woman 'should be.' This portrays a reality of motherhood that is not usually expressed in our cultural discourse, and asserts that a woman's personhood is not dependent on their role as wife and mother. Weems further complicates a woman's cultural role by showing visual parallels that demonstrate the ways relationships can replicate, coexist and intersect with each other. This can be seen by looking at of the two triptychs side by side, "Untitled (Man reading newspaper)" and "Untitled (Woman with daughter)." Four of the six images in particular represent the relationship between husband and wife in the same way show mother and daughter. In one image we see the man sitting at the table reading a newspaper as Weems stands behind him in the shadows, watching him but not engaging him. In the parallel image from "Untitled (Woman with daughter)," the woman sits in the same position where the man once was, reading a book as her daughter stands behind her, watching her mother just as intently and silently as Weems once watched the man. In the next pair of images, the man in "Untitled (Man reading newspaper)" is once again reading the newspaper, his hand on his face as he intently concentrates on reading. Weems sits next to him smoking a cigarette, her eyes closed, seemingly lost in her own thoughts. The corresponding image shows Weems and her daughter at the table each deeply focused on their reading and writing. Weems rests her hand on her forehead, a gesture which

mirrors that of her partner in the previous triptychs, while the daughter's pencil clutched in her hand recalls the cigarette that her mother held in the earlier scene. By creating these visual mirrorings across the timeline of the narrative, Weems points to the complexities of relationships and identities, and complicates any singular notion or narrative we have of "mother" "wife" or "woman."

The relationships she portrays in the series find even more visual power in the domestic setting of the photographs. By opening up the private domestic space for public viewing she suggests that social and political realities have a deep impact on individuals and families in their private lives as well. In an interview with Art21, she said that one thing she wanted the work to do was to "beg the question of how do we begin to alter the domestic space, the social living arrangement, the social contract, how does that change?"¹⁰ Weems suggests, and her photographs emphasize this as well, that the ways society views women and people of color reflects larger configurations of power, and these factors play out in the lived experiences and conditions of individuals. The series is able to create a sense of intimate specificity of experience of the people in the photographs while also showing a kind of universal experience of love, friendship, and family. In this, we can see how Weems is trying to open up her representations in a way that acknowledges how social factors influence experience while simultaneously striving for a portrait that transcends identity categories. Weem's goal necessitates a reconfiguration of dominant notions of race and representation. As bell hook explains, "Making a space for the transgressive image, the outlaw rebel vision, is essential to any effort to create a context for transformation. And even then little progress is made if we transform images without shifting

¹⁰ Carrie Mae Weems, "Carrie Mae Weems: 'The Kitchen Table Series' Exclusive," by Catherine Tatge, *Art 21*, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pPDInpNoO50>

paradigms, changing perspectives, ways of looking.”¹¹ Following hooks’s model, we can understand that to shift ways of looking which marginalize certain people requires that identities such as blackness and womanhood be taken up and allowed to represent a greater range of experiences than simply their own. This is deeply connected to Weems’s stated goal to develop strategies of representation which allow black subjects to stand for “universal concerns.”¹²

Weems further uses the domestic setting to reconfigure modes of viewing by portraying these scenes in a square photographic format. Marianne Hirsch sees it as creating a feeling of claustrophobia for the viewer, which frustrates us because we want to see more than Weems is showing us.¹³ While Hirsch is frustrated by this, in my mind it makes the images all the more powerful. Weems creates this close intimate space for us, but she lets us know that we’ll only see as much as she wants us to. This, along with the cliched narrative and props remind us that, although this is a version of black female experience that is authored by someone in that subject position, it is still ultimately staged. As viewers, we cannot trust this representation just as we cannot trust our own perceptions of race and gender. Weems further questions our understandings of race and gender through the *mise-en-scene* of the photographs. The objects which surround the characters function as props which mark their character and their relationship to each other. At various times throughout the series, the kitchen table is littered with mirrors, makeup, cups of whiskey and wine, beer cans, decks of cards and plates of food. On the wall behind the table we see a changing array of decorations: a photograph of Malcolm X, a birdcage, paintings of flowers, and often a blank wall. According to Hirsch, these cultural props “enable the characters to perform not only masculinity and femininity but blackness.”¹⁴ They moreover

¹¹ hooks, *Black Looks*, 4.

¹² Weems, “Talking Art with Carrie Mae Weems,” 76.

¹³ Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 149.

¹⁴ Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 144.

function to remind us that despite the intimacy Weems creates, the images are consciously staged to invoke those historically constructed identity markers. Certain props are repeated and made ambiguous in such a way that asks us to question the reliability of these markers and determine how much can we really know about the people in the photographs from these objects that surround them.

In addition to props, another thing that reminds us of the limitedness of perception and spectatorship is the single light source hanging over the kitchen table. On one hand, it illuminates the entire scene. It is the only light source we can see as well as the only light Weems used to take the pictures. Simultaneously, the position of the lamp and lack of any other sources of light puts the top half of the photographs into shadow. For the most part, this serves only to obscure the items decorating the walls. In the triptych “Untitled (Man reading newspaper),” however, this set up works to put Weems completely in the dark. It portrays a more complex emotional dynamic between the couple. While some of the photographs call upon traditional domestic images, such as “Untitled (Woman with daughter),” which shows the mother helping the daughter with homework, and, “Untitled (Eating lobster),” where we see the couple staring at each other lovingly, others disrupt these narratives by showing the tensions that are hidden in the shadows of all relationships. Images such as “Untitled (Man reading newspaper),” and “Untitled (Woman brushing hair),” in which a sad and exhausted looking Weems has her hair brushed by a female friend who stands in the shadows, demonstrate relations wrought with emotion and intensity. Instead of simply calling upon stereotypes about black people and black couples, the series moreover complicates dominant cultural representations of domesticity.

In her assertion of black women as subjects, producers, makers of art and of their own representation, Weems denies the reductive fiction of women as sexual objects that is

perpetuated through masculinist structures of viewing. In this way, her work is an attempt to represent a more complex and realistic representation of black womanhood. Yet, at the same time Weems's form intentionally reveals the limited nature of a photograph. We are allowed into the intimate domestic space of her kitchen, but we are constantly reminded that this is a stage and we are viewing a performance that at once plays into and rejects stereotypes. In this way, Weems's work is moreover a commentary on the medium of photography itself through the way it plays with the intrinsic tension in representation between reality and illusions. We want to believe photographs are showing reality because they are supposed to be documenting something in the world, but photographs are not subjective because their meanings informed by the perspectives of the photographer and viewer alike. Weems uncovers this tension between appearance and illusion by defying traditional photographic practices and questioning the accuracy of an image. She accomplishes this by calling on stereotypes and widely recognized cultural signifiers in conjunction with highly intimate scenes to draw the viewer in, all the while reminding us that we are watching a play on a stage. Weems's work asserts that it is not enough to complicate stereotypes, because they are still constructed accounts. She demonstrates this through the fact that although many of the images, "Untitled (Woman brushing hair)," seem to be very candid, the constructedness of every scene is foregrounded by the first image of the series, wherein Weems stares directly at the camera and acknowledges us viewing her. In this way, her photographs assert that in order to make real change to racist and sexist structures, the narratives as well as modes of representation and viewing need to be deconstructed and reconfigured.

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