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The Black Female as a Subject, Not an Object

Throughout history, the traditional audience of a work of art has been the male. The term “male gaze” was invented to describe the anticipated viewer and how the work of art is created for the pleasure of the assumed male audience. The male gaze is a theory created by feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey. According to Mulvey the male gaze is an idea used “when women are substituted in male-controlled culture as a symbol for the male other, to fulfill his fantasies and obsessions...woman is seen as bearer of meaning not maker of meaning.”¹ My intent in this critical analysis is to show how Carrie Mae Weems contrasts the black female as a subject, not an object, through the exploration of her *Kitchen Table Series* (1990).

Carrie Mae Weems’s *Kitchen Table Series* was partially inspired by Laura Mulvey’s essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” which called attention to the absence of “nonobjectified representations of women in film and other cultural expressions.”² What Mulvey means here is that in film or other forms such as music, dance, art, or performances, women are typically represented as an object of visual pleasure or as a sexual object. Women have been viewed in male visual culture as an image and subjected to a controlling gaze. In Section III of her essay, Mulvey describes how women have been observed as the “image,” while men are seen as the “bearer of the look”:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly...women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with

their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. Woman displayed as sexual object is the leit-motif of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to strip-tease,...plays to and signifies male desire.³

In this passage, Mulvey explains how the male subject is more inclined to perform the action of looking or gazing, while the female is on display and being looked at in a sexual way. The male is placed in a role that controls the scene. This causes an imbalanced perception because the roles were never reversed so that the male could become the object to be viewed. The female is considered passive because she is submitting to this action without resistance; therefore she becomes a spectacle of the narrative in the male fantasy.

Just like Mulvey, Carrie Mae Weems has also noticed the lack of women being represented as a subject rather than an object in visual culture. As stated by Andrea Kirsh, “Weems discussed the fact that Mulvey’s analysis of women in film completely omits women of color.”⁴ Weems’s combination of various media has allowed her to create an array of documentary series and installation pieces. Each of her series has its own narrative. It is in her *Kitchen Table Series* (1990) that Weems challenges Mulvey’s omissions while exploring political activities pertaining to equality as it relates to race, gender, and class inside and outside of the home.

Weems’s *Kitchen Table Series* (1990) is a story of black womanhood, for the series “offers a valid portrait of an often overlooked subject, a modern black woman or as Weems quotes Jacques Lacan, ‘the other of the other.’”⁵ Weems uses her own image and a few actors in this series in order to question ideas about gender roles, the traditional family, relationships between men-women and mother-children, the female perspective of family relationships, and also the longing to be an involved member of her community. She becomes the protagonist in this body of work as she makes an appearance in each image. The subjects in each photo are predominantly black. This was done intentionally to challenge the usual routine of having white

subjects as the main stage for general subjects to be explored in visual culture. Bell hooks says in her book *Art on My Mind* that “by placing black subjects in these universally familiar situations Weems hopes to create an intimate connection between the subjects and the viewer that supersedes identifications of race and allows a non-white person to become the neutral figure for our reflection.”⁶

The story unfolds under a strong directional overhead light at a kitchen table. The camera is positioned in the same spot for each image, immobilizing not only the camera and photographer but the viewer as well. This is a technique to focus the viewer’s attention to the place the artist intends, while creating a sense of voyeurism or “the gaze.” The angle of the camera creates depth with the receding of the table. It has been noticed in film that the male gaze involves three types of gazes: that of the person behind the camera, that of the characters within the image, and that of the observer. Weems has clearly studied these attributes of the gaze and utilized them in her series of works.

Throughout history, the kitchen table has been an inviting place for open discussion. Many families sit down at their kitchen tables and discuss the highs and lows of their day at work or school. Weems’s setting choice for this series may have been due to the fact that she was born (1953) in America during the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement (1954). Being that the kitchen table was a place for discussion, her family, like many others, most likely discussed topics of the new movement.

There are a total of fourteen images in this series with fourteen corresponding text panels that communicate the narrative. In the introduction of her book *The Black Female Body in American Literature and Art: Performing Identity*, Caroline A. Brown references how “text and image have traditionally been organized to view, define, classify, and control the black (female) body, making it accessible and all too often insignificant and uncommon.”⁷ Weems uses image

and text to construct a history of the black woman that is often removed or ignored. According to Savanna College of Art and Design in the book *Constructing History: A Requiem to Mark the Moment*, Weems's use of text "evolved from narrative into a more revisionary tool that paralleled artists Barbara Kruger and Richard Prince's biting commentary and social critiques."⁸



Figures 1, 2, & 3: Carrie Mae Weems, *Kitchen Table Series*, 1990

The first few photos (Fig. 1, 2, & 3) and text panels describe the growing love between a man and a woman. The text recounts when and where they met, their likes and dislikes, and how they began to test the strength of their relationship. The images showcase their interactions with one another. In Figure 1, Weems is looking right out at the viewer with eyes of passion as her male counterpart seems to whispering words of affection in her ear. It looks as though she has on a robe, while he had on a suit jacket and a hat. It is as if she is preparing for bed and he is telling her goodnight before he steps out for a night on the town. Kathryn E. Delmez gives her interpretation of Figure 1 in her book *Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video*:

...the artist is sandwiched between the shadow of the man looming behind her and the vanity mirror in front of which she is making up. However, she looks away from it and out at the viewer, acknowledging his or her presence while simultaneously breaking the fourth wall of the rudimentary stage set she occupies even as she concedes the purposefulness and preparation behind her pose. On one level she is Everywoman putting on her face for Everyman. On another she is the epitome of a strong black woman getting ready for her desiring—and desirable—black man.⁹

Delmez's account causes the viewer to reexamine and reconsider their initial reaction to the photo.

In Figure 2, the male is puffing on a cigarette and each figure is holding a hand of playing cards. There is a plate of shelled peanuts and a bottle of liquor on the table that is about half gone. The male and female each have a glass in front of them that is near empty. The card value of the male's playing cards is visible to the viewer, while the female's card value is concealed. In contrast, her face is completely visible, whereas only the male's side profile is in view but by her facial expression, it is obvious that they are gazing into each other's eyes. To the viewer, this looks like the portrait of a loving relationship but upon further observation that image quickly crumbles.

There are images on the wall behind the woman. One of the images is a poster of Malcolm X, a Civil Rights Activist who voiced concepts of race, pride, and Black Nationalism in the 1950s and 1960s. The poster is surrounded by several smaller visual presentations of black actors. These posters are powerful visual aids to represent the African-American experience. They are also another way to revisit African-American history.

In an interview by Karin Andreasson, Weems defines the nature behind the storyline of Figure 3:

The woman, played by me, reaches out to the man who is ultimately only concerned with himself. He takes the lobster in the way that men often take. Women are often put in the position of being carers: men are socially contracted to take, while women are contracted to give. That relationship is played out subtly because her tenderness is the first thing you focus on. You don't become aware of her clenching her teeth until a bit later.¹⁰

Weems's words reflect the imbalanced relationship between man and woman, where the female is the common giver and the male is the common receiver. The male has the voice, while the female usually remains silent and submissive, having no voice. In order for a relationship to

prosper, both partners need to give and receive whole-heartedly and for the right reasons. Each participant must pay attention to one another's needs, wants or desires and adhere to them, careful not to overwhelm their partner. Each person should have a voice and be heard. Weems catered to the needs of her male counterpart but because he did not seem to care about her needs or desires, she becomes the overwhelmed party in the relationship.



Figure 4: Carrie Mae Weems, *Kitchen Table Series*, 1990

Just as love is quick to blossom, it can suddenly become lost. Figure 4, displayed as a triptych, demonstrate a hint of trouble in the couple's relationship. The woman did not appear to be happy as she was in a state of contemplation; whereas the male was consumed by the newspaper. The text that corresponds with this imagery reveals some of the issues in their relationship:

He said she was too domineering. He didn't mind a woman speaking her mind, but hey, she was taking it a tad too far...She insisted that what he called domineering was a jacket being forced on her because he couldn't stand the thought of the inevitable shift in the balance of power. She assured him that the object of her task was not to control him, but out of necessity—to control herself...She wasn't about to succumb to standards of tradition which denied her a rightful place or voice, period.¹¹



Figure 5: Carrie Mae Weems, *Kitchen Table Series*, 1990



Figure 6: Carrie Mae Weems, *Kitchen Table Series*, 1990

In a later photo, Figure 5, the woman seems to be in solitude but had the company of a wine bottle, glass, and cigarettes. The male's absence, her new company, and the fact that she is sitting in a chair in a cradled pose indicates that the issues in their relationship had gotten worse. Perhaps they were in a pretty bad argument and he left her. She seems hurt, sad, and alone as she buries her face in her knees.

There are two juxtaposed photos of the same image to be compared and contrasted. In the first the overhead light is not in view, whereas in the second photo the light hangs really low. The first photo has a candle displayed in the center of the table. The candle is lit symbolizing light in the darkness of the female's life. It is also a symbol of hope and love. However, in the second photo there is a telephone. The phone is on the hook and sits at the opposite end of the table, which brings forth the question, Is she waiting for her man to call her or has she given up?

She soon had the company of a couple female friends who seemed to be consoling her in another triptych (Fig. 6). They talked and shared a few laughs.

In another photo, (Fig.7), Weems looks very calm and relaxed with a cigarette in one hand and a glass of a dark substance in the other. She is getting her hair groomed by a woman who may be her mother. The woman seems to be consoling her. This assumption is drawn from an indication in the text that follows the image of the two women:



Figure 7: Carrie Mae Weems, *Kitchen Table Series*, 1990

Seeking clarity and purpose, she spoke about the problems with her momma who said, “There’s a difference between men and women. I can’t tell ya what to do. But I can tell you that I sided with men so long I forgot women had a side...Turning my back on friends for a piece of man. Oh sure, I’ve had a man or two...but like a good friend, hard to come by. But look, ya got a good man, man put up with mo a yo mess that the law allows. If he loves ya, ya best take yo behind home, drop them guns on the floor and work it out. Ya gotta give a little to get a little, that’s the story of life.”¹²

The narrative mode displayed here is that of a woman who is very much stressed. At her left hand are two boxes of cigarettes; one new box and one that has already been opened. Her mother assists in calming Weems’s nerves by giving her some sound advice. In a nutshell, her mother tells her that she has a good man and that she needs to go home to him.

There were a few images of the woman with her daughter. In Figure 8, they each had a mirror in front of them as they applied lipstick on their lips. Another set of photos (Figure 9) exhibits a child wanting more of her mother’s attention; the mother and daughter having a

serious face-to-face conversation, and finally the both of them at the table together (mother reading and daughter writing). These images seem like the typical relationship between a mother and child. The mother, being the care giver and at times the breadwinner (amongst everything else), has very little time to spend with their children. The children wait for a brief moment of their mother's time; for that moment when they gain her attention, love, and affection.



Figure 8: Carrie Mae Weems, *Kitchen Table Series*, 1990



Figure 9: Carrie Mae Weems, *Kitchen Table Series*, 1990

The texts that parallel these images show a different viewpoint of the images. They describe how the man wanted children but the woman, portrayed by Weems, did not. She in fact despised the idea... “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.”¹³ The text also reveals that

the Weems was working and the man was not. This is an added pressure to a woman who not only has to take care of her man, but also a child that she did not even want. In the end, Weems is left to care for the child on her own.

Throughout the series Weems uses personal objects such as playing cards, cigarettes, ashtrays, drinking glasses, newspapers, books, and even mirrors as props of modern emotional life. The objects create the calmness of a still-life. The items are placed on display and catch the viewer's attention; therefore becoming available for "the gaze." They add an important layer to the story that is being told because they make the storyline relatable to the spectator.

The images of this series resemble stills from a black and white film and the lighting "recalls the bare bulbs of interrogation rooms, yet here the illumination becomes a metaphor for the artist's examination of the woman's life."¹⁴ Interrogation rooms are intimidating and made to be uncomfortable in order to give the person being interviewed a sense of powerlessness. The rooms are often soundproof with empty walls creating an atmosphere of isolation. There is normally a long table, a couple of chairs, and a strong directional light, much like the scene in this series.

There are several images in this series in which Weems is staring out at the viewer, sometimes in a confrontational posture. For example, (Fig. 10) where she "stands alone, strong and independent, looking directly at the viewer, her arms directly planted on her kitchen table."¹⁵



Figure 10: Carrie Mae Weems, *Kitchen Table Series*, 1990

In these narratives Weems “takes control of her own space, refusing to be the compliant object of ‘the gaze.’”¹⁶ Weems’s pose is somewhat defensive, but her bold gaze at the viewer, while standing under the spot light indicates that she has nothing to hide. Traditionally in an interrogation, the person under the light is asked a series of questions. In Fig. 10, the viewer is drawn in and with the scene mimicking that of an interrogation room, Weems’s placement under the light places her in the position of the person leading the interview.

Susan Fisher Sterling examines Fig. 10 in a section of a book about the photographs and texts of Weems’s work:

We sense the potential for vulnerability. Yet, her direct, face to face confrontation across the table convinces us that she can make it on her own...Weems, as photographer, woman and catcher of souls, stares out into us. Through the eyes of the black female persona she has created, she lets us know that she will not, nor will her protagonist, be allowed to vanish or self-destruct under the withering effects of the male gaze or the lingering power of outdated patriarchal assumptions...Weems leaps over this convention of Postmodernism to assert photographic persona’s integrity, trying it directly to her own as photographer and creator. Weems thereby enables her female character to gaze directly back at the viewer as an equal, taking full possession of her sexuality and sense of self in the process.¹⁷

Weems knowingly produces images of comparable stories from various groups, transforming her into both interpreter and observer. She has been an eyewitness to the discrimination and racial stereotypes against blacks in America. Through her work she confronts African-American stereotypes and brings them to the forefront of the art world. Susan Fisher Sterling notes that “Weems’s main concern in art and politics is for African Americans status and place in the United States.”¹⁸ Sterling continues, “this is Carrie Mae Weems’s ambitious intention: to produce art that addresses formal and political issues surrounding African American culture, in the hope of creating new patterns for relating as equals across our human differences.”¹⁹



Figures 11, 12, & 13: Carrie Mae Weems, *Kitchen Table Series*, 1990

The last three images of this series Weems seems to be in solitude but she is not completely alone in either illustration. In Figure 11 Weems has the company of a bird in its cage. She appears to be feeding it with her right hand, while holding a cigarette in her left. The Malcolm X poster and other African-American imagery has been replaced by an obscured painting in a frame. Her facial expression is also obscured by the brightness of the light which hangs below the side of her head.

Weems is topless and looks to be fully nude in Figure 12. She straddles the chair as her back leans against the edge of the table; her right hand is passionately pulling her hair as her head rests on the table top. Her mouth is slightly open. Her eyes are closed. Her legs look as though they are wide open but only the tips of her knees are visible. Her left hand has disappeared from view, which gives the impression that she is pleasuring herself. The text that accompanies this visual description reveals that Weems did not have a problem with being alone.

In and of itself, being alone again naturally wasn't a problem. But some time had passed. At 38 she was beginning to feel the fullness of her woman self, wanted once again to share it all with a man who could deal with the multitude of her being. But that would have to come later. Presently she was in her solitude, so it wasn't nobody's business what she did. Sit there and count your fingers. What can you do? Oh, girl you're through. It's time you knew all you can ever count on are the rain drops that fall on little girl blue. *Step on a pin, the pin bends and that's the way the story ends.*²⁰

When examining Figure 13, I first noticed that the character, Weems, is playing a card game of *solitaire*. Solitaire is a card game that can be played by a single player. The term

solitaire is a French word meaning solitary or lonely. The card game adds another layer to a scene in which the character appears to be alone. Weems is focused and concentrating on her next move, with one playing card in her right hand and a cigarette in her left.

As in most of the other images in this series, a pack of cigarettes is on the table. There is also an ashtray with a few cigarette butts, perhaps a box of dark chocolates, and a glass of wine. The bird is no longer in its cage. The “caged bird” or “bird in a cage” is a metaphor for women in the 19th century. It is also a metaphor for the experience of oppressed people. The living of their lives is confined and shaped by unavoidable barriers. These barriers are set in place to immobilize them. The construct of this image may be Weems’s way to confront the cold truth of the oppression of African-Americans throughout history. It may also be her way to showcase her freedom. She is the dealer of this card game and the viewer is her opponent.

In the past, society has depended on mass media to offer highlights that appear to determine our image and absence of voice. Much like silent films, we are often left viewing images without words. Carrie Mae Weems speaks out with her images and texts, breaking the silence that hinders the history of African-American women. Her *Kitchen Table Series* gives African-American women a voice and recounts their history which has been swept under the rug or in this logic, under the table.

Weems positions the viewer at the head of the table. As stated earlier, this method forces the viewer to look in the direction that the artist intends. It gives the viewer an invitation to rethink and perhaps learn about the experiences of a black woman. It also inserts the observer into the picture plane allowing them to apply the scene to their own background. The images have the influence to bridge the gap between racial groups and provide meaning to all women. Weems’s desire is for “the personal to become universal and for the black figure to represent humanity as a whole.”²¹

For many years women have been viewed as objects in visual culture. Although Laura Mulvey caused people to notice the absence of non-objectified demonstrations of women in film, she failed to acknowledge women of color in her investigation. Through her *Kitchen Table Series* (1990), Carrie Mae Weems addresses this issue and conveys her concern about the exclusion of pictures of the black community from general media, as well as equality. Weems controls the narrative as the photographer and subject, not object. She uses herself as a substitute for all women who are calm, confident and in control of their own feelings or actions. She becomes the unheard voice in a silent narrative and of the black woman.

Endnotes

1. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," (New York: Oxford UP, 1999), accessed September 18, 2014, 7. <http://screen.oxfordjournals.org/>
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10. Karen Andreasson, "Carrie Mae Weems' best photograph: lobster dinner at the kitchen table," (Theguardian.com., October 30, 2014). accessed April 20, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/oct/30/carrie-mae-weems-best-photograph>
11. Kathryn E. Delmez, *Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video*, (New Haven and London: Frist Center for the Visual Arts in association with Yale University Press, 2012), 84-85.
12. Ibid, 90.
13. Ibid, 95.
14. Andrea Kirsh, *Carrie Mae Weems*, (Washington, D.C.: The National Museum of Women in Arts, 1994. c1993), 14.
15. Kathryn E. Delmez, *Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video*, (New Haven and London: Frist Center for the Visual Arts in association with Yale University Press, 2012), 76.

16. Andrea Kirsh, *Carrie Mae Weems*, (Washington, D.C.: The National Museum of Women in Arts, 1994. c1993), 15.
17. Susan Fisher Sterling, *Carrie Mae Weems*, (Washington, D.C.: The National Museum of Women in Arts, 1994. c1993), 28.
18. Ibid, 19.
19. Ibid, 19.
20. Kathryn E. Delmez, *Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video*, (New Haven and London: Frist Center for the Visual Arts in association with Yale University Press, 2012), 76.
21. Ibid, 2.

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