

Carrie Mae Weems

American, born 1953

Untitled

1990 (negative); 2011 (print)

Gelatin silver print

From the *Kitchen Table Series*

Each image: 27 1/4 x 27 1/4 inches
(69.2 x 69.2 cm)

Gift of Marion Boulton Stroud, 2011-194-2a-c

Courtesy of the artist and
Jack Shainman Gallery, New York



Let's Look

What is happening in each of these photographs?

What changes from one image to the next? What could explain these changes?

What story do you think is taking place here?

Why do you think the artist leaves the story open to interpretation?

About the Photographs

These three photographs are a part of a series of twenty black-and-white images called the *Kitchen Table Series*. Staged in Carrie Mae Weems's home, at her own kitchen table, and featuring herself as the main character, they convey an open-ended narrative. The drama unfolds as various characters interact with the woman.

In the first picture, the woman and a man sit at a table under a bright light. The man reads the newspaper, and the woman seems occupied by her thoughts. She holds a cigarette in her hand, and glasses of water sit on the table. In the next image, she stands against the wall behind the man, who intently reads the paper. Next, the man and woman embrace. Time has elapsed, but how much? What words have been spoken?

As viewers, we can relate to the setting: the kitchen table is a familiar place where people gather for socializing, eating, working, or reading. In this way, Weems connects to our individual personal experiences, while raising questions about larger issues such as family dynamics, relationships, and power. As she stated, "This woman can stand in for me and for you; she can stand in for the audience, she leads you into history. She's a witness and a guide."⁸

About Carrie Mae Weems

At age fourteen, Carrie Mae Weems knew she would become an artist. After completing her studies in California, she began a career in documentary photography, but soon focused instead on staged images that explore issues of gender, race, class, and politics. As she explains, she has always “been interested in the idea of power; relationships are made and articulated through power.”⁸ Aware of the lack of images of African American women in popular culture or fine art, Weems seeks to counter that in her work. A socially engaged artist who considers herself a storyteller, she invites viewers into the worlds she constructs and challenges them to consider the issues she raises.



Photograph by Todd Gray

Curriculum Connections

Art

Artist as Subject (high school)

Compare and contrast Carrie Mae Weems’s photographs with those by Cindy Sherman. What is each artist communicating? What ideas about gender, power, and identity are in each? Why do you think these artists depict themselves in their work?

The Narrative in the Kitchen Table Series (high school)

Explore Weems’s entire *Kitchen Table Series* (see Resources, page 43). How does the narrative in these three images relate to the larger series? What new thoughts do you have?

Light and Shadow (middle and high school)

Compare and contrast the use of light and shadow in the photographs by Weems, Gordon Parks, and Lorna Simpson that are included in this resource.

Language Arts

Dialogue (high school)

Write a dialogue between the man and the woman, both during the scenes depicted, and in the time in between. As an alternate, write a caption for each image.

A Story in Three Photos (high school)

Using an app such as Snapchat, tell a story with three photos. What will change in each image? What will stay the same? Can you tell a story while leaving its meaning open-ended?

The Kitchen as Setting (high school)

In both Weems’s *Untitled* and Lorna Simpson’s *C-Ration* (see page 34), the artists place an African American woman in the context of a kitchen. Compare and contrast the messages in each picture. Why do you think the artists chose this setting? As an extension, research other works in which artists have explored this theme, such as Judy Chicago’s *Dinner Party*.

Social Studies

Images of African American Women (high school)

Weems has commented on the lack of images of African American women in popular culture and art. Explore the images you find online, in magazines and advertisements, on television, and in art museums. How are African American women shown? How often? What stereotypes exist? What do you think is the best way to counter these stereotypes?

A PowerPoint slideshow with all of the resource images can be found on the enclosed CD.

⁸ Dawoud Bey and Carrie Mae Weems, “Carrie Mae Weems,” *BOMB* no. 108 (summer 2009), 66, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40428266>.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 62.