

**CARRIE  
MAE  
WEEMS  
LOOKING  
FORWARD  
LOOKING  
BACK**

*“Through the act of performance . . . we are allowed to experience and connect the historical past to the present—to the now, to the moment. By inhabiting the moment, we live the experience . . . and come to know firsthand what is often only imagined, lost, forgotten.”*

— Carrie Mae Weems

How can we inhabit history? How do we remember what was before our time? How does the past act in and on the present? These are some of the questions that have driven Weems’s artistic practice over forty years. Best known for poetic and politically profound black-and-white photographs, she is also celebrated for her video, installation, performance, and public art. An activist and an optimist, Weems emphasizes beauty even when framing injustice, encouraging us to join her in imagining other ways of being and relating.

This focused exhibition, featuring all new acquisitions to SAAM, pairs two projects in which Weems invites others to literally step back in time. *Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me—A Story in 5 Parts* (2012) is a multimedia installation that transforms the gallery into a nineteenth-century illusionistic theater. On stage, episodes from the American Civil War to the present play out, accompanied by a soundtrack that evokes the constitutional promise of equality, along with projections of recurring racial and gender difference that make achieving it so elusive. In her series *Constructing History* (2008), Weems worked with college students to restage iconic photographs from World War II to the civil rights era and beyond. Taking on these poses, a new generation simultaneously enacts and witnesses past moments of strength, pain, and progress in the present.

The relationship of memory to history, and of memory as it is mediated—whether in performance, photography, film, or video—is central to these works and Weems’s practice overall. As you enter these spaces, you become the next generation, the newest witness, the further mediating force in this process. Welcome.

**Please note:** The video installation to the left includes strong language and nude models. To see the photographs only, use the entrance opposite this one.

This exhibition received federal support from the Smithsonian American Women’s History Initiative Pool, administered by the Smithsonian American Women’s History Museum.



Smithsonian  
*American Women’s History Museum*



**Carrie Mae Weems**  
born 1953, Portland, OR

***Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me—A Story in 5 Parts***

2012

video installation and mixed media; 18:29 mins.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the American Women's History Initiative Acquisitions Pool, administered by the Smithsonian American Women's History Initiative, 2023.9A-G

***Constructing History***

2008

archival pigment print

As a visiting professor at the Savannah College of Art and Design in 2008, Carrie Mae Weems marked the fortieth anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s death by producing this photographic series with her students. Together, they reconstructed key moments of the 1960s, as well as images and events related to the broad subjects of civil and human rights.

The photographs are constructions, literally and metaphorically. The ever-present mechanism of their staging speaks to the constructed nature of all photographs, reminding viewers that seemingly neutral elements such as lighting and framing are, in fact, never neutral. In several, Weems and her students restaged iconic images from the canon of photojournalism, recalling the image-saturated news coverage of events like the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King.

They also used compositional tropes from Western art history. For instance, *Mourning*, a restaging of Moneta Sleet Jr.'s photograph of Coretta Scott King and Bernice King at Martin Luther King's funeral, was staged as a Pietà, in Christian art a representation of the Virgin Mary holding the body of her deceased son. Images of traumatic events like Sleet's may wound viewers at first, but their impact is blunted by time and repetition. Weems's reenactments reopen the wounds of history. They do so as a means of processing, reflecting, and laying those wounds to rest. They enact a kind of reconciliation, with and through images.



**Carrie Mae Weems**  
born 1953, Portland, OR

***A Woman Observes, from the series Constructing History***

2008

archival pigment print

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 2022.48.1



**Carrie Mae Weems**

born 1953, Portland, OR

***The Tragedy of Hiroshima, from the series Constructing History***

2008

archival pigment print

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 2022.48.2



**Carrie Mae Weems**

born 1953, Portland, OR

***The First Major Blow, from the series Constructing History***

2008

archival pigment print

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 2022.48.3



**Carrie Mae Weems**

born 1953, Portland, OR

***Mourning, from the series Constructing History***

2008

archival pigment print

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 2022.48.4



**Carrie Mae Weems**

born 1953, Portland, OR

*Suspended Belief*, from the series *Constructing History*

2008

archival pigment print

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 2022.48.5



**Carrie Mae Weems**

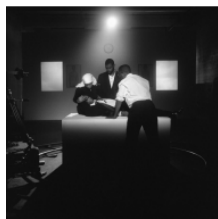
born 1953, Portland, OR

*Assassin's Bullet*, from the series *Constructing History*

2008

archival pigment print

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 2022.48.7



**Carrie Mae Weems**

born 1953, Portland, OR

***The Assassination of Medgar, Malcolm, and Martin, from the series *Constructing History****

2008

archival pigment print

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 2022.48.8



**Carrie Mae Weems**

born 1953, Portland, OR

***A Class Ponders the Future, from the series *Constructing History****

2008

archival pigment print

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 2022.48.6