

Carrie Mae Weems *Heave*

May 4 – July 27, 2019

This is a story within a story, how to enter this history, what to show, what to say, what to feel. It is a creation myth—how things came to be as they are.

—Carrie Mae Weems, *Constructing History* (2008)

Carrie Mae Weems testifies, without equivocation, to how violence is an ongoing history that pulses through our present. With a sensibility honed to the rhythms and workings of power, she points to a tidal pull of oppressions, inextricably linked, recurrent and indelible. Sounding a sustained alarm that echoes throughout the exhibition, she implores: *How did we get to this point?*



Carrie Mae Weems, *Constructing History: A Requiem to Mark the Moment*, 2008. Video still. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, NY.



Carrie Mae Weems, *Heave*. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, NY.

In answer, she offers a fulsome history lesson, firmly rooted in the upheaval of the 1960s—an era punctuated by loss, harm done, ritual discrimination and assassinations. Each of the rooms forming the exhibition invokes a familiar interior—the classroom, the living room, and the entertainment complex—with its attendant rhetoric, tempo, and laws. Violence lurks in each of these sites and with the devotion of an archivist, Weems catalogues the exercise of power and full toll of human cruelty.

Constructing History: A Requiem to Mark the Moment (2008) is a body of work that Weems created in concert with students from the Savannah College of Art and Design, who she enlisted to re-enact key moments of past political violence. Dramatic tableaux posed by the students revisit the most publicized and archetypal of political assassinations, including those of John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, and later, Benazir Bhutto. In the unfinished hostilities of these moments, Weems exposes the underpinnings of today's extremism, hate crimes, and demagoguery.

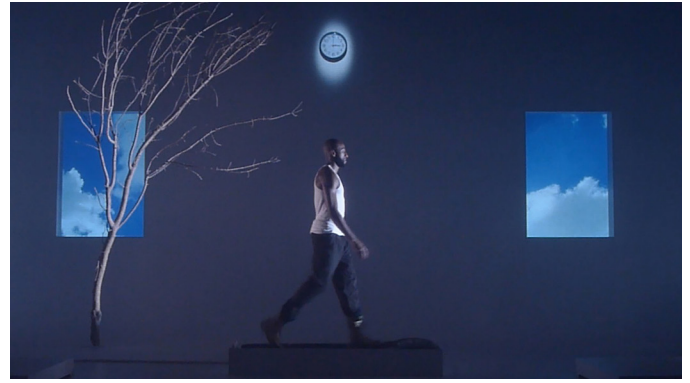
In Heave: Part I – A Case Study (A Quiet Place) (2018), a constructed domestic space contains an array of signs and found ephemera, including broadcasts, revolutionary icons, popular music, magazines, and games. These everyday furnishings of American life denote both personal experience and structural violence. On a commanding mid-century modern desk,



Carrie Mae Weems, *A Class Ponders the Future*, 2008. Photograph. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, NY.

Weems places a set of bound books bearing the titles *The Prison Industrial Complex*, *The Battle for Representation*, *The Skin in the Game*, *The Corporate State*, and *Spies, Surveillance, and Cyber Attacks*. Together with a video compilation by the artist that weaves between historic newsreels and a contemporary choreography, these artifacts suggest the landscape of her own lived history. In an interview, Weems states: “I don’t deal with the history of violence constantly because I want to, but really because I am compelled to. My background, my culture, my concerns, along with my skin, the way in which I have been marked by time forces me in some ways to do so.”

In *Heave: Part II* (2018), a theatrical space is adorned by red stanchions, illuminated only by the light of a projected stream of videos. The installation is a detailed reckoning with the roots of violence in America, revealing a culture that consumes violence as daily entertainment. Among the most poignant material included is *People of A Darker Hue* (2016), which records the too palpable evidence of white supremacy at work and what it means to live day to day under constant fear of death for merely being in the world.



Carrie Mae Weems, *People of a Darker Hue*, 2016. Video still. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, NY.

In the title *Heave*, Weems invokes the cadence of breathing. Under threat, we gasp for air, we retch, we convulse. So too does the social body in crisis—starved, abused, agitated, pulled apart, it heaves. In a surge of hatred, she sees a latent ailment propelled to the surface, brought into irrepressible visibility. Amid this violence, her melodious voice raises in an incantation to lament, to mourn, to howl.

Curated by Barbara Fischer and Sarah Robayo Sheridan

Part of CONTACT’s Spotlight on Weems

Organized by the Art Museum at the University of Toronto and co-presented with Scotiabank CONTACT Photography Festival

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