

# GLADSTONE

Carrie Mae Weems

*The Shape of Things*

September 14 – November 9, 2024

Opening Reception: September 14, 3pm – 6pm

530 West 21st Street

New York, NY 10011

Carrie Mae Weems' *Cyclorama: The Shape of Things* (2021) is a culminating work in an ongoing, four-decade-long career dedicated to probing the jagged history of racial injustice in the United States and the world at large. On view almost continuously in different museum venues since its acclaimed premiere at the Park Avenue Armory in New York, *The Shape of Things* will return to the city in a special, free-to-the public, presentation at Gladstone, which coincides with the 2024 presidential election and to mark the artist's inaugural exhibition with the gallery. At this moment of grave political precarity, with democracy itself on the ballot, Weems' video installation immerses the viewer in a moving visual and sonic evocation of resistance, resilience, and redemption. Projected within a cylindrical structure, *The Shape of Things* draws its panoramic imagery from the 19th-century cyclorama, a popular form of entertainment comprising a 360° history painting often depicting epic battles and military conquests, frequently, and not unironically here, those from the Civil War. These circular murals and the structures that housed them would travel from city to city across the country, like the circus—another potent source for Weems in her quest to convey the convoluted spirit of our times, when tragedy and absurdity conspire together but cannot, despite all apparent efforts, drown out hope.

*The Shape of Things* comprises a 40-minute video in seven parts; projected in the round, its syncopated visual rhythm and narrated soundtrack offer a host of experiences, combining found, documentary footage, choreographed sequences, and excerpts from earlier examples of Weems' own video work. The loop begins with a view of the sky, a murmuration of birds twisting and turning in on itself like the knotted history invoked by the work. A lone woman—choreographer Okwui Okpokwasili filmed in Weems' signature black and white palette—sits silently in a chair while sheets of paper fall around her. Weems' sonorous voice speaks about the "landscape of memory," asking how one confronts the past and the future. In Part 1, which includes news footage from Weems' two-channel video installation *Cornered* (2016) showing both pro- and anti-segregation riots simultaneously, she invokes the fact that the demographics in the U.S. are inexorably shifting from an all-white majority to one that is decisively Black and brown. Her concern is the racism and violence this historical transformation continues to engender, as she witnessed during the Obama administration, when the rate of police killings of Black men dramatically increased. Part 2 collages scenes of female dancers holding globes above their heads with vintage footage of circus acts, news clips from the violent January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection at the Capital, documentary recordings of migrants and refugees attempting to enter the country, and the solitary woman from Part 1 bearing witness to this recent, bloody chapter in American history. In Part 3, Weems incorporates video from her *The Louisiana Project* (2003), showing two plantation-owning women in silhouette, laughing over tea. The soundtrack is the recording of white New Yorker, Amy Cooper's infamous call to the police reporting what she incorrectly thought to be a threat by a Black man in Central Park, who was merely a birder asking her to leash her dog. Part 4 contemplates the horrors of state-sanctioned police brutality against people of color, a recurring offense that haunts with its ubiquity. As blue-tinted images of Black men in hoodies appear and reappear across the screens, Weems avows "Imagine the worst of the worst and know it is always happening." The mood shifts in Part 5 as four women and one man, depicted larger-than-life, stand rapturously under falling water and then snow as vocal music swells around them. Weems asks how to measure a life in a soliloquy that contemplates the dialectic at the core of being human, with equal parts loss and gain, defects and assets, pain and joy. Part 6 shows a changing cast of seemingly random individuals floating in and out of view; they are intoned by a male voice urging them to consider conscious agency, to "inhabit your intellect," to "dismiss what insults your own soul." It asks more than once "What is your proposition and remedy?" For Weems, that remedy takes the form of art, one that dares to center pleasure and embrace informed and resonant entertainment in the face of despair at the state of the world. She ends *The Shape of Things* in Part 7 with footage of herself on a swing, bedecked in sequins as if out of a Busby Berkeley musical. Jimmy Durante croons the classic song "Make

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Someone Happy" as she smiles and laughs before the cycle starts again. Weems' cyclorama is accompanied in the exhibition by a selection of powerful, large-scale photographs from her series *Painting the Town* (2021) created after a visit to her native city of Portland, Oregon where, in response to the Black Lives Matter protests against the murder of George Floyd, the local authorities covered up anti-racist graffiti on boarded-up windows with broad swathes of paint. An act of erasure over an already eclipsed view, the painted surfaces read as obdurate blocks of color, abstract paintings with tragic undertones.

Described by art historian, Sarah Elizabeth Lewis as "a 21st-century oracle," Weems is indeed a prophet of our fraught times. She has been incredibly prescient in addressing issues of race and the lack of equity in the U.S. (and the world at large) for decades in her art. This is a defining moment, and Weems' *The Shape of Things*, with its montage of dreams and harsh realities, the circus and politics, past and present, is most relevant and resonant.

Carrie Mae Weems (b. 1953, Portland, Oregon) lives and works in Syracuse, New York. Weems received her BFA from the California Institute of the Arts, Valencia in 1981, and her MFA from the University of California, San Diego in 1984. In 1987, Weems also completed a Graduate Program in Folklore at the University of California, Berkeley. Recent prominent solo exhibitions include: *Remember to Dream*, Hessel Museum of Art, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY (2024); *Looking Forward, Looking Back*, Smithsonian Art Museum, Washington, D.C. (2023); *The Shape of Things*, LUMA, Arles, France (2023); *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart, Germany (2022), traveled to Kunstmuseum Basel, Switzerland (2023); *Varying Shades of Brown*, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island (2023); *Reflections for Now*, Barbican Centre, London, United Kingdom (2023); *Lincoln, Lonnie and Me*, MACBA, Barcelona, Spain (2022); *A Great Turn In The Possible*, kBR Mapfre Foto Colectania, and MACBA, Barcelona, Spain (2022); and *The Shape of Things*, Park Avenue Armory, New York (2021). Weems' work is in major public collections including the Brooklyn Museum, New York; Guggenheim Museum, New York; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, California; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, California; Smithsonian Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C.; Tate Modern, London, among many others.

Carrie Mae Weems has been the recipient of many awards and fellowships including the Hasselblad Award (2023); National Artist Honoree, Anderson Ranch Arts Center, Aspen, (2016); WEB Dubois Award from Harvard University (2015); MacArthur Foundation Award (2013); Lifetime Achievement Award in the Fine Arts, Congressional Black Caucus Foundation (2013); and U.S. Department of State Inaugural Medal of Arts (2012); Weems has a longstanding commitment to education, having taught at numerous colleges and universities, and has received honorary doctorates from the University of the Arts, Philadelphia, PA (2022) and Smith College, North Hampton, MA (2011) alongside honorary degrees from Bowdoin College, California College of the Arts, Colgate University, the School of Visual Art, and Syracuse University.

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