



Carrie Mae Weems: A Silent Observer of a Changing Beacon

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by Susan Hodara

NYACK, NY - In the 13 photographs in "Carrie Mae Weems: Beacon," at the [Edward Hopper House](#) in Rockland County, [Weems](#) is a silent observer, poised before assorted sites in the city of [Beacon, NY](#). There she is: facing an abandoned factory; gazing at a bust of George Washington; standing at the entrance to the then brand new [Dia:Beacon](#); looking out over the Hudson River. In all but one of the pictures, her back is to the viewer.

The images, both color and black-and-white, are evocative and quiet. Posing in predominantly uninhabited settings, Weems is dressed entirely in black, her hair pulled into a single short braid. In most of the photographs, she stands, arms by her hips; in a few she is seated, leaning on a hand, legs to one side, regal. In one of the series' earliest pieces, the enigmatic *Artist Standing in Factory*, she confronts the camera, framed by an open window, her backlit face obscured.

For more than three decades, Weems has used text, audio, video and, especially, photography to address issues of race, gender, class and cultural identity. She arrived in Beacon in 2002, the first artist resident invited by the newly formed Beacon Cultural Foundation. It was a year before the opening of Dia:Beacon, and the city was on the verge of gentrification. The works on view at Edward Hopper House are among 32 photographs she made there over three years.



"Dia:Beacon" from "Beacon" by Carrie Mae Weems, 2003-05.
Archival pigment print, 33.25 x 29.25 x 1.25 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Weems's numerous prestigious honors include a 2013 [MacArthur Foundation](#) Fellowship, the [Congressional Black Caucus Foundation's](#) Lifetime Achievement Award and a 2014 retrospective at the [Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum](#). Her Edward Hopper House exhibition is an offshoot of her being named the first recipient of the [Edward Hopper Citation of Merit for Visual Artists](#), presented to her by Governor Andrew M. Cuomo earlier this year. Established as a tribute to [Edward Hopper](#), the award recognizes a groundbreaking New York State-based visual artist with an honorarium and two exhibitions in New York, one at Edward Hopper House, where Hopper was born and raised.

In a conversation at the show's opening on November 10, 2017, Edward Hopper House artistic

director and curator Carole Perry drew parallels between the artwork of Weems and Hopper: in their depictions of often-barren American landscapes, their fascination with architecture, their open-ended narratives and their reflections on human struggle. Perry cited two 2006 bodies of work by Weems, "Roaming" and "Museums," in which, again, the artist stands in different environments with her back to the camera. "We are the viewer," Perry said, "and we are also viewing her, and she is pointing us to what she is seeing."

Also at the opening was [David A. Ross](#), a Beacon resident who is chair of the MFA program in Art Practice at the [School of Visual Arts](#), former director of the [Whitney Museum of American Art](#) and a co-founder of the now-defunct Beacon Cultural Foundation. He explained that Weems's photographic series was one of two endeavors she undertook while she was in Beacon. The second was an oral history project: audio and video recordings of stories told by members of Beacon's African-American community. The recordings were made in an abandoned storefront that Weems dubbed "The Record Shop."

"Like many Hudson Valley towns, including Nyack, Beacon has an historically significant African-American community," Ross said. He spoke of freed slaves migrating north and finding work in factories and as stevedores. "The community has roots here," he said, "but it is a community that was pretty invisible, and is still more invisible than it should be."

"Carrie Mae Weems: Beacon" has inspired an effort to mitigate that. In homage to "The Record Shop," Edward Hopper House is participating in "[The Nyack Record Shop Project.](#)" Beginning on Martin Luther King Jr. Day, January 15, 2018, oral histories from members of Nyack's longstanding African-American community will be recorded in an actual record shop in downtown Nyack and later archived in the [Historical Society of the Nyacks](#).

For Ross, such social consciousness falls into the realm of contemporary art making. "When you consider what an artist's job is these days, it's not just to decorate our lives," he said. "It's to raise issues that compel us to think about what we can do as individuals to co-conspire to create real change in the cities and towns in which we live. That is what Carrie Mae Weems did in Beacon. It's one of the reasons she is so revered. She makes works of great beauty, but her practice is devoted to getting people to think."



"Artist, Seated (Yellow Painting)" from "Beacon" by Carrie Mae Weems, 2003-05. Archival pigment print, 33.25 x 29.25 x 1.25 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Ross shared recollections about the photographs in the show. He identified the row houses in *Company Housing* as once owned by Groverville Mills, and the derelict building in *Factory* as the one-time Mrs. Thompson's Hat Factory. He recognized the man sitting in a chair beside Weems while they contemplate minimalist paintings in *Artist, Seated (Yellow Painting)* as the Beacon-based

artist [Winston Roeth](#). He said that the [Sol LeWitt](#) installation in *LeWitt's Wall* is no longer there, but the statue in *George Washington's Bust* remains at the corner of Routes 9D and 52.



"Company Housing" from "Beacon" by Carrie Mae Weems, 2003-05. Archival pigment print, 33.25 x 29.25 x 1.25 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.



"Factory" from "Beacon" by Carrie Mae Weems, 2003-05. Archival pigment print, 33.25 x 29.25 x 1.25 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.



"LeWitt's Wall" from "Beacon" by Carrie Mae Weems, 2003-05. Archival pigment print, 31.25 x 27.5 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

These tidbits are not apparent in Weems's photographs. Nor, on first glance, are some of the details in the compositions: the tiny ducks swimming in the river in *On the Dock*, the distant worker in *Construction Site*, the "Closed" signing hanging on the door in *Rivers & Estuaries Center*. "Carrie Mae Weems: Beacon" is a show that asks visitors to look carefully and slowly, just as Weems is doing in each of her images. In the intimate and uncrowded galleries of the Edward Hopper House, a place imbued with its own history, they can do just that.

BASIC FACTS: "Carrie Mae Weems: Beacon" is on view through February 10, 2018, at Edward Hopper House, 82 N. Broadway, Nyack, NY 10960.

"The Nyack Record Shop Project" is scheduled for January 15 to 20, 2018 for three hours daily in the window of the Kiam Records Shop, 95 Main Street, Nyack, NY 10960.

A panel discussion on the African-American history of Nyack and Beacon and how it can be documented through art will take place February 3, from 2 to 3:30 p.m. at the Nyack Library, 59 S. Broadway, Nyack, NY 10960. www.edwardhopperhouse.org.

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