

## Carrie Mae Weems: *Coming Up for Air*

January 23 – April 5, 2023

Carrie Mae Weems's feature-length video *Coming Up for Air* is composed of seven vignettes that weave appropriated archival and cinema footage with staged scenes of family quarrels and reconciliation, poetic reflections on parental loss, and socially pointed moments examining the role of race and gender in power relationships past and present. The intimacy of the video, as interior thoughts are revealed through spoken narratives, becomes tactile through consistently close-up shots of faces, and is sustained by a subtle slow-motion pace, stretching time to let us enter the work's layered psychological spaces.

Elegance, labor, power, and desire are themes running through the first two parts of the video. The first part, *Meaning and Landscape*, opens with archival footage of the Rex Ball, a white-tie conclusion to New Orleans's Mardi Gras Carnival as the festival's Queen is escorted to meet the King. We are then taken back in time to silhouetted scenes of the antebellum South. We see a servant process across the screen, gestures of laughter between the seated women to whom she serves tea, and a critical examination of power, race, and gender in scenes of sexual domination and submission. All of this is set to an ethereal solo piano work by John Cage. In the second part, *Make Someone Happy*, we hear vaudevillian entertainer of Broadway and Hollywood Jimmy Durante cheerfully singing while we view appropriated footage from Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) showing weary workers trudging to their underground labor, as well as shots of contemporary silhouetted men in hoodies. Those shots are starkly contrasted with the glamour of a top-hatted showman in silhouette and the artist herself playing a gleefully swinging pageant queen.

The third and fifth parts *A Woman on a Journey* and *In Love, In Trouble and Out of Time*—linked stylistically as well as by the same contemplative muted trumpet of jazz artist Hugh Ragin—continue themes of power and desire but are now set in the private spaces of bedrooms and living rooms. The measured words of a woman tell of past romance and burgeoning self-actualization in the former, and in the latter of four sisters who cannot stop quarreling despite admonishments by the speaker, who is one of the sisters, that time is short. In both parts, shifts in color saturation indicate that we are moving back and forth between scenes from a heated past and those of cold, regretful isolation in the present. Between these two parts, the fourth part, *May Days Long Forgotten*, depicts in joyous color three girls with flower-adorned hair dancing around a May Pole under blue skies. The title "May Day" subtly references themes of labor from *Make Someone Happy* while the video nostalgically celebrates the confidence of the girls whose faces fill the screen as they meet our gaze.

The last two parts, *An Ode to My Father* and *Before the Loss of You*, delve into themes of death and loss of innocence forewarned in *In Love, In Trouble and Out of Time*, but do so by crucially retaining that innate joy in *May Days Long Forgotten*. *Ode to My Father* stages the conclusion of a traditional New Orleans jazz funeral in which, returning from the cemetery, a procession of jubilant dancers spinning umbrellas and a brass band celebrate the life of the loved one. In *Before the Loss of You* we see the smiling faces of a young couple in love and bathed in the warm light of an open landscape. Their tender affections are interspersed with archival scenes of violence and repression against Black protesters in South Africa—Sharpeville (1960) and Soweto (1976)—as the narrator reflects nostalgically on a period before that outer reality affected their lives.

With stylistic echoes of Maya Deren's and Federico Fellini's films, Weems's early foray into video—a medium which is now a mainstay within her oeuvre—was in the artist's words a "way of extending the vocabulary" of the photographic work for which she was already renowned. Viewers familiar with Weems's oeuvre will recognize

some of the video's components from earlier photographic and installation projects, such as *The Louisiana Project* (2003) or *May Days Long Forgotten* (2002). While not forfeiting the historical depth of those earlier projects, the recontextualization of the videos alongside new videos in *Coming Up for Air* draws out the threads of power and intimacy that run throughout the breadth of Weems's work.

— Robert R. Shane, PhD, Associate Curator

## **About the artist**

Carrie Mae Weems (b. 1953 Portland, OR; lives and works in Syracuse, NY) is one of the most influential contemporary American artists. Her body of work spans photography, text, fabric, audio, digital images, installation, and video. Weems's work has been presented in solo and group exhibitions around the world held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the Frist Art Museum, Nashville, Tennessee; the Solomon Guggenheim Museum, New York; and the Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo, Seville, Spain. She has received numerous awards, grants, and fellowships, including the prestigious Prix de Rome, and a Visual Artist Grant from The National Endowment of the Arts. In 2012 Weems was presented with one of the first United States Department of State's Medals of Arts in recognition of her commitment to the department's Art in Embassies program. In 2013 Weems received a MacArthur "Genius" grant as well as the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation's Lifetime Achievement Award. Her work is held in public and private collections around the world, including the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; and Tate Modern, London.

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