

# CARRIE MAE WEEMS

## BEACON

Carrie Mae Weems is a powerful visual storyteller and socially motivated artist whose films, photography, and texts engage with issues of gender, race, and class. In 2002, the Beacon Cultural Foundation invited Weems to document the changing economic and cultural status of their city. Once prosperous, Beacon suffered an economic downturn in the 1970s followed by revitalization in the early 2000s as artists moved to the area and a new art center opened. For the Beacon project, Weems chronicled this transformation over a three-year period by conducting oral histories of residents and photographing the city's landscapes and architecture.

Usually standing with her back to the viewer, Weems is both subject and observer in the *Beacon* photographs, "Bearing witness, confronting something, [serving] as a guide to the viewer standing with me, [we are] witnessing something together though our experience of it might not be the same." Her early background in dance provided her with an understanding of how one's body can be used as an expressive tool. For most of her career, she has turned the camera on herself, using her body as a performative element, with each series eliciting a different meaning depending on the viewer and context.

Weems tells her story through the lens of the African American woman whose image—she feels—has not been adequately represented in popular media. But, she says of her work, "Black experience is not really the main point; rather, complex, dimensional, human experience and social inclusion...is the real point."

*Carrie Mae Weems is the 2017 recipient of the Edward Hopper Citation of Merit for Visual Artists, presented by Governor Andrew M. Cuomo and the New York State Council on the Arts in recognition of her significant artistic contributions to the state of New York. This exhibition is presented at the Edward Hopper House to commemorate that honor.*

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**Council on  
the Arts**

## THE EDWARD HOPPER CITATION OF MERIT IN THE VISUAL ARTS, EDWARD HOPPER, AND CARRIE MAE WEEMS

The Edward Hopper Citation of Merit in the Visual Arts was initiated and sponsored by NY State Assembly member Ellen Jaffee to honor the enormous impact Edward Hopper has had on the arts in the state and around the world. A panel of art professionals chosen by the New York State Council on the Arts selected Carrie Mae Weems as the first recipient of this award, acknowledging her groundbreaking work in addressing social issues in various media.



Edward Hopper, *Little Boy Looking at the Sea*, n.d., Ink on paper, 4.5 x 3.5 in., The Arthayer R. Sanborn Hopper Collection Trust

The panel also recognized parallels between the art of Hopper and that of Weems. Both depict views of ordinary American life as they experienced it. Their subjects are often part of enigmatic, open-ended narratives, the meaning of which is left to the viewer to decipher. Somber and even threatening possibilities appear in certain pictures by Hopper and Weems, while others seem almost tranquil. In the series on view here, Weems surveys her world as we implicitly watch her. Likewise, in Hopper's childhood

drawing, *Little Boy Looking at the Sea* (currently on view in the Sanborn Gallery), the artist takes on the role of the observer and the observed, contemplating and knowing.

Weems's subjects are usually African American and her story is told from a distinctly African American perspective, yet she aims to present universal truths in the human struggles she addresses. Perhaps less explicit, Edward Hopper's American worldview is revered not just in this country but also throughout the world as he obliquely reflects the human condition across cultural divides. In this exhibition, we encourage a dialogue about the power of art and image to effect social change, and draw attention to the dramatic impact—direct or indirect—that Edward Hopper has had on the artists who followed him.

Carole Perry, Curator