

Public Abstract

First Name: Susan

Middle Name: Meghan

Last Name: Wood

Adviser's First Name: Kristin

Adviser's Last Name: Schwain

Co-Adviser's First Name:

Co-Adviser's Last Name:

Graduation Term: WS 2007

Department: Art History & Archeology

Degree: MA

Title: Seeing Into the Mirror: The Reality of Fiction in the Work of Carrie Mae Weems

This thesis examines how the photograph, "Mirror Mirror," by Carrie Mae Weems, draws attention to and breaks down the prevailing notions of racial difference. In this work Weems juxtaposes a black and white photograph with an alternate version of a line from the story of Snow White. Through the repetition and reappropriation of certain tools of social power—photography, visual culture, folklore, and humor—the artist exposes their oppressive histories and disrupts their continued power. In a broader sense, this study demonstrates how images produced in American culture reflect ideologies about race and gender. An interdisciplinary approach was taken to studying Weems' work in order to uncover the ways in which she constructs her images. The artist acknowledges the way in which photography has been used as an anthropological tool in demonstrating the alleged inferiority of African Americans. The presence of the black woman in "Mirror, Mirror" references the way in which women, and more specifically black women, have served as sites for the male gaze in fine art and visual culture. Through the use of the Snow White fairy tale and its African American adaptation into a folkloric phrase Weems demonstrates the mass familiarity with such stories and the subtle, yet powerful, ways that folklore studies have confirmed the preexisting beliefs about the Other. Finally, in order to show humor's ability to disempower hierarchical structures, Weems' image makes allusions to the distinctive humor patterns such as language play and role reversal used by the literary figure of the Signifying Monkey.

The presence of these tools in "Mirror, Mirror" exposes the structures used to confirm Euro-American ways of seeing and interpreting themselves and the world around them. Weems' work focuses on relationships between whites and blacks in the United States, but expands further to apply to all races and genders. A greater understanding between groups is fostered through an understanding of how images, such as "Mirror, Mirror," work within society.