

# Art in America

June 2001

## REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS

### Carrie Mae Weems at the International Center of Photography, Uptown

The Hampton Institute in Virginia, founded in 1868, provided in-depth education to freed slaves and, later, displaced Native Americans. Photojournalist Frances Benjamin Johnston (1864-1952) took some photographs of the school in 1899 that are now well known. The school was considered almost utopian in its day. The photos show Hampton students stiffly posed in Victorian garb, demonstrating their lessons in science, liberal arts, physical education and vocational training. They work in a laboratory, repair a staircase, learn dressmaking, judge a dairy cow.

Now, of course, we take a different view of Hampton's turn-of-the-century style of forced assimilation, only too aware of what, in the process, was lost. Carrie Mae Weems's photo-based installation, commissioned by the Williams College Museum of Art and appearing at the ICP on its second stop in a national tour, was a response to both Johnston's documents and to the institute itself; Weems centered on uncomfortable issues involving race and

history.

A small ground-floor gallery in the ICP's 94th Street townhouse (the branch will close this fall) featured 27 framed platinum prints from the acclaimed series of 144 photographs that Johnston exhibited in Paris at the 1900 Universal Exposition. Upstairs was Weems's deconstructive critique, moody and poetic, the artist returning to an approach she has favored recently—vintage photos digitally printed on sheets of muslin hanging from the ceiling, creating a ghostly environment. In two rooms, parallel fabric elements hung nearly to the floor, making a labyrinth that forced the viewer to confront each enlarged sepia or gray image one by one. Some were by Johnston, others from the Hampton Institute's or Weems's own archives, but each could be seen as alluding to the erasure of cultural identity. In a carefully posed "history lesson," Hampton students peruse an Indian chief in traditional regalia as if he were a specimen tree. Large, striking photos include a mass frontier baptism of Native Americans and the hosing of demonstrators during Birmingham protests in the 1960s. There were 1950s yearbook shots of graduates

of the institute's present-day successor, Hampton College, the students looking antiseptically middle-class; nearby, in a time-weathered, Victorian-era image, an affluent-looking African-American family seated at dinner seems oddly forlorn. The translucent muslin allowed for different images to be seen simultaneously, giving the illusion of witnessing a transformation through time.

In a small hallway, a large canvas showed a digitally printed photo of institute founder Samuel Chapman Armstrong, a son of Hawaiian missionaries, standing on a porch presiding over his family. "With your missionary might," read quietly ironic superimposed text, "you extended the hand of grace reaching down & snatching me out of myself." On one side, a photo showed 10 Native Americans wrapped in blankets; on the other, almost unrecognizable, was a photo of the same group clad in Anglo-European suits, hair shorn, grasping hats.

Weems's voice reciting an impressionistic text echoed hypnotically through the wood-paneled rooms. Some predictable points were scored—how once-vital Native American cultures live on, trivialized, in the names of sports teams. Mostly, though, the artist's meditation was far more subtle, serenely narrating a process of transformation and loss. In one canvas, Weems herself, seen from behind, gazes at an image of buffaloes plunging over a cliff. Superimposed text reads: "From a great height I saw you falling Black & Indian alike and for you I played a sorrow song."

[Itinerary: High Museum, Atlanta, June 2-Sept. 6; Nelson-Atkins Museum, Kansas City, Mo., act. 20, 2001-Jan. 2, 2002; University Museum, California State University, Long Beach, Jan. 29-Apr. 27, 2002; Hood Museum, Dartmouth University, Hanover, N.H., Sept. 14-Dec. 1, 2002.]

—Carey Lovelace

Carrie Mae Weems: Installation view of *The Hampton Project*, 2001, digital photographs, printed with pigmented inks on muslin and canvas; at ICP Uptown.

