Landscapes of Repair: the Role of Photography and Film in Documenting the Legacy of Modern and Contemporary Architecture and Public Spaces

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Plywood Publics: Thin Politics in Carrie Mae Weems's Painting the Town

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Abstract

Carrie Mae Weems's *Painting the Town* documents the traces of a politically charged moment in the recent history of Portland, Oregon where protests in the name of Black lives in the summer of 2020 quickly became a nightly ritual as buildings, authorities, and demonstrators alike armored themselves for gradual escalation. These photographs of boarded-up storefronts with plywood painted to cover the liberatory messages once carried by graffiti stage a confrontation with the material reality of erasure. Unlike much of her photographic work, Weems's series here is largely evacuated of space and human figures, and is presented in large scale and in full color. This paper considers this shift in light of Weems's previous interrogations of architecture and urban space in series such as *The Louisiana Project*, *Roaming,* and *Museums* and in conversation with related developments in new art photography from artists such as Thomas Demand and Thomas Ruff, who have been positioned as protagonists of confrontational and surface-oriented work in "the tableau form." Critically, the approach of Weems's work in *Painting the Town* also supports both a formal and a political turn away from a theater of inclusion to a demand for justice, solidarity, and a resistance to erasure. Reading the photographs alongside recent theoretical work from Ruha Benjamin and Xine Yao advocating a renewed attention to the "thin description" of surfaces and to the liberatory potential of antisocial affect among marginalized communities suggests how survival necessitates a move beyond the reparative.

Keywords: Photography, Abstraction, Public Space, Race, Justice

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In the summer of 2020, the city of Portland, Oregon was the site of some of the most intense and sustained popular demonstrations in support of the Black Lives Matter movement following the murder of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police. For months, demonstrators gathered downtown in front of the Multnomah County Justice Center and the Hatfield Federal Courthouse for nightly clashes with police and with the buildings themselves, which quickly resulted in a proliferation of makeshift defensive architectures constructed by governmental authorities and local property owners. From perimeter fences to plywood board window coverings, these constructions kettled demonstrations onto narrow sidewalks where loitering and camping were formally discouraged in the name of pedestrian use—itself a product of the increasing criminalization of homelessness that had long rendered the sidewalks as contested spaces. These defensive architectures also rendered the city into a series of surfaces, at once evacuating the interior life of the city from public view while also collapsing public life and protests over systemic injustice into layered confrontations—projectiles to the glass of a storefront window, paint to plywood, riot shields to their homemade doubles, COVID-19 to fabric masks, and tear gas to those same masks, later upgraded to respirators with full face protection.

Portland-born artist Carrie Mae Weems returned to the city that summer to photograph this interplay, focusing specifically on the BLM slogans and other provocative missives applied to plywood surfaces around town following their erasure by way of crudely applied swaths of paint. In her *Painting the Town* series from 2021, Weems produces pictures of deceptive and haunting calmness with subtle agitations emerging from the misalignments across building form and material, plywood coverings, and various fields and colors of paint. Further, the pictures are printed large (149.9 x 223.5 cm) and the views are mostly frontal, often with an almost suffocating absence of space. And, even in those few images with perspectival views, the building forms project outward toward the viewer—ejecting them from the space—or they again utilize a tight crop that minimizes contextual cues from the city and limits the visible space to that of the sidewalk in a manner that mirrors the mechanics of crowd control deployed throughout Portland's "summer of rage."

Two of the works (numbers 1 and 4) were recently exhibited in the *Policing Justice* (2024) show at the Portland Institute of Contemporary Art. [Fig. 1] There, with an uncanny abstraction often associated with the work of someone like Thomas Demand, the photographs stood out among the more exuberant interpretive, data-driven documentary, and activist work on display for its relative bluntness about the political charge of surfaces in everyday life. This unrelenting directness also recalls transdisciplinary scholar Ruha Benjamin's recent theoretical work on the analytical value of "thinness" in engaging with systems of racial oppression and socio-economic injustice—where, too, political questions emerge through the medium of photography,

as with exposure standards for film stock that biased against darker-skinned persons.[1] And, as exhibit co-curator Cleo Davis describes, the photographs also speak to another loaded period in Portland's history of racial oppression where plywood was the ubiquitous visual marker of Black-owned properties deemed by authorities as blighted. This paper will examine the surface abstraction of Weems's recent work, its relation to contemporary developments in new art photography, and the political implications of the thinning these works register in public space, suggesting a need to move beyond repair to reconstruction.

Picturing power

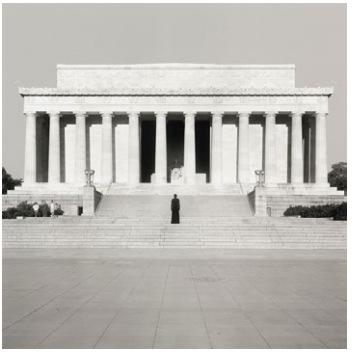
Art critic Carolina Miranda, opening a recent essay on architectural photography in the *New York Review of Architecture* writes:

> When I worked at the *Los Angeles Times*, a photographer colleague once told me that the assignment he dreaded most was shooting "building mugs." This consisted of photographing the exterior of a building—often the headquarters of some international corporation—as a way of illustrating a story in which the human subjects were unwilling or unable to stand before the camera. Think of the myriad images of Purdue Pharma's Stamford, Connecticut, headquarters that have been used to illustrate reports about the OxyContin scandal.[2]

1 Ruha Benjamin. 2019. *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*. Polity Press.
2 Carolina A. Miranda. 2024. "Baan Voyage," *New York Review of Architecture*, No. 43/44.

[Fig. 1]
Carrie Mae Weems. 2020. Painting the Town #4.

Here, the absence of a human figure in the photograph is a form of indictment by omission, with architectural abstraction serving as both the symbol and vehicle for an injury that is then described in the accompanying story. The photographic strategy is effectively a political gamble since it eschews illustration and defers human connection or narrative content to the supporting text. The picturing of abstraction in these "building mugs," then, speaks to a specific context and an actual building or urban environment while also evoking a more generic or portable sense of horror with the capacity to emerge at any real site of trauma. In effect, there is a political depth to the surface of these works that both exceeds and requires their immediate sites and their histories.



A recurring thread in Carrie Mae Weems's practice is her critical engagement with the subject of architecture and urban space. Developed during her residency at the American Academy in Rome in 2006, the *Roaming* series sees Weems staging scenes for the camera in which she becomes a spectral, black-clad figure in the middle ground of a host of monumental urban environments and shoreline landscapes. Among the sites she interrogates are Mussolini's EUR district [Fig. 2], Rome's Jewish ghetto, and the Piazza del Popolo. Similarly staged photographs that year include works sited at the Louvre, Guggenheim Bilbao, and The Philadelphia Museum of Art as part of her *Museums* series which implicitly critiques both the longstanding institutional exclusion of Black artists from major museums along with the imposing and perhaps hostile presence of the museum structures themselves. And, the practice has continued in works such as *Echoes for Marian* (2014) [Fig. 3] where the Weems figure stands on the staircase before the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., recalling and inverting the performance of Black opera singer Marian Anderson on those same steps in 1939 after she had been barred from performing for an integrated audience in Constitution Hall by the Daughters of the American Revolution.

[Fig. 2]
Carrie Mae Weems. 2006. Palazzo Dei Congressi, Mussolini Rome.

[Fig. 3]
Carrie Mae Weems. 2014. Echoes for Marian.

What is notable about the later photographic works above is the dress and address of the figure who performs for the camera by turning her back to the viewer, always facing toward the scene. Further, the figure's black dress here is itself a kind of temporal abstraction, as it does not refer to a specific historical moment or vary to correspond changes in setting. The figure's garments and mode of address adapt the approach of some of the more quietly confrontational photographs included in Weems's 2003 series, *The Louisiana Project*. [Fig. 4 and 5] While this series marked the appearance of Weems's haunting proxy who would appear in *Roaming*, here, the figure who performs for the camera is clothed in antebellum period dress as she moves and occasionally dances through a range of Southern landscapes and interiors, and encounters the colonnaded exteriors of imposing manor homes that were once the anchors of American slavery. The works in this series are generally more animated and their frames more varied, as though Weems here was surrounding her subject in search of a thickened pictorial description of historical trauma.

[Fig. 4]
Carrie Mae Weems. 2003. Excerpt from A Single's Waltz in Time from The Louisiana Project.

[Fig. 5]
Carrie Mae Weems. 2003. Approaching Time from The Louisiana Project.

The *Roaming* series and the works that follow in that vein focus more precisely on the confrontation between person and monument in a literal face-off. In these black and white images, the figure invites the viewer to see the scene through her while also rebuffing the viewer's ability to fully enter and inhabit the space of the work. Weems herself calls this figure her "muse" and her "alter ego," as well as a "witness and a guide." Weems continues, "Carrying a tremendous burden, she is a Black woman leading me through the trauma of history....an engaged persona pointing toward the history of power. She's the unintended consequence of the Western imagination." Weems ends her description by adding, "It's essential that I do this work and it's essential that I do it with my body."

As Kimberly Juanita Brown argues in her reading of Weems's photographic persona, the figure "perform[s] a kind of covert exposure" in an attempt to answer the question of how "can one envision the totality of slavery's traumatic legacy without leaving the collective body in pieces? How can one be seen without violence? Turn one's back? Refuse and include?"[3] The overall effect is the unnerving one of a figure out-of-time standing amidst living ruins. The scenes are both magisterial and intimate, but always on the verge of being oppressive as a viewer is never permitted unfettered access either to the guide or the site. This ambivalence sustains the work, as does the alluring refinement of its presentation.

On the question of her work's seductive qualities, Weems has argued for its strategic function. "If there is a beauty and elegance that allows my self and the viewer to be engaged," she notes, "then I have a sense that you'll be more willing to enter the terrain and ask the difficult questions."[4] Increasingly, however, another access point here in the case of *Roaming* and the *Museums* series are the escalating physical size of the prints themselves. By way of example, the first digital inkjet printing of *When and Where I Enter the British Museum* from 2006 measured approximately 76.2 x 50.8 cm, while a more recent print edition from 2023 measures 182.9 x 152.4 cm (sheet and mount). This scalar shift amplifies both the viewer's bodily relationship to the work as well as the suffocating monumentality of the scene itself as the staging reaches a kind of immersive breaking point.

3 Kimberly Juanita Brown. 2015. "Photographic Incantations of the Visual" in *Carrie Mae Weems*, October Files 25, eds. Sarah Elizabeth Lewis and Christine Garnier. 2021. Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

4 Carrie Mae Weems. 2018. qtd. by Robin Lydenberg, "Carrie Mae Weems: Strategies of Engagement," in *Strategies of Engagement*, eds. Robin Lydenberg and Ash Anderson (McMullen Museum of Art, Boston College.

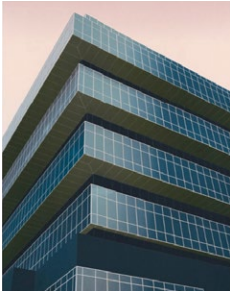
The tableau form

Following Jean-Francois Chevrier, art theorist Michael Fried has insisted on the critical importance of "the tableau form"[5] in contemporary art photography, as evident in the work of artists such as Jeff Wall, Thomas Ruff, Candida Höfer, and Thomas Demand. While Fried goes to great lengths to connect this development to the anti-theatrical tradition he first championed in response to minimalist or "literalist" art of the late 1960s, what is crucial here in this theorization of new art photographic practice is first, the size of the prints—namely, that they are intended to be exhibited on a gallery wall rather than viewed in a publication—second, quoting Chevier, "the importance of 'the confrontational experience'," supported by "an enforced distance between work and viewer, without which the mutual facing off of the two that underlies the notion of confrontation would not be possible,"[6] and lastly, a renewed attention to surfaces themselves, be they human faces or architectural interiors. Fried develops this last point by way of the early work of Thomas Ruff whose frontal, passport-like portrait photographs of friends [Fig. 6] were initially printed at 24 x 18 cm before later being enlarged to 210 x 165 cm. While these pictures were of very real people, Ruff's impersonal staging of the works was intended to elude a viewer's capacity to identify or empathize with the represented figures. "They tell no stories, no anecdotes." Fried here quotes an essay by Régis Durand attempting to account for the seeming indifference or impersonal qualities of Ruff's work, adding that his photographs "do not stage a brief moment of the world's theater....They are perfectly and massively 'realistic' and precisely because of this realism they undercut any attempt to look for clues that would allow one to go beyond them." There is, in effect, something suffocating about the works and their unrelenting, but thoroughly stylized realism. While a human face would typically provide the viewer with a means to ground their experience, here the photographic approach and scale of the prints reinforces the surface of things, heightening "the confrontational experience" above all else.

5 Michael Fried. 2008. *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*. Yale University Press.
6 Ibid., 144.

[Fig. 6]
Thomas Ruff. 1988. Pörtrat. P. Stadtbaumer.

Thinking with Carolina Miranda and her invocation of the photography of "building mugs" above, it's not difficult to make the leap that Fried does from Ruff's portrait photography to the photographic practice of Thomas Demand who eschews human figures entirely in favor of uncanny, but matter-of-fact pictures of fastidiously constructed architectural models that are themselves often extracted and abstracted from documentary photographs. And, while the content of Demand's photos varies, many of the scenes he re-stages in paper for the camera are interior spaces of trauma or criminal activity where the violence itself is rarely shown except in traces—disturbed objects, windows broken, doors ajar. Further, the violence Demand tracks is often structural or systemic and made known through the smallest of backroom bureaucratic machinations at one end or in physical devastation at the receiving end. If an architectural model or a work of sculpture would usually suggest an invitation to maneuver around or inhabit the constructed space, Demand's photographs reject this mode of address, first by photographing the models and then by destroying them once they have fulfilled their function. As Demand notes: "You can walk around a sculpture as often as you like, and with photographs—mine are very large so that, as with the sculptures, you can also walk around them—you have a [single, forever fixed] moment and my particular angle of vision. My tyrannical condition, as it were, is that I prescribe your vision."[7] Further, as Fried argues, many of the photographs Demand stages are framed—as in the many documentary and news images he references—so that the viewer feels safely excluded.[8] As the scenes are rarely ones that a viewer would want to inhabit by virtue of their seemingly indifferent abstraction, unnatural lighting, and haunting subject matter, they also force a kind of confrontation with the idea of structural violence itself.



7 Qtd. in Fried, 271.
8 Fried, 266.

[Fig. 7]
Thomas Demand. 2024. One Stamford Forum from the Portals series, published by Gemini G.E.L.

To return to Miranda's building mug example, the Purdue Pharma headquarters in Stamford, Connecticut, it's interesting that Demand himself also landed upon the imposing gridded glass curtain wall façade of this inverted ziggurat of a building as the subject for a photograph in a recent series published by Gemini G.E.L.. In *Portals* from 2024, Demand presents a series of exteriors of notorious structures ranging from the U.S. government's recent Mexico border wall prototype to the balconies of the *Diamond Princess* cruise ship that was quarantined for nearly a month in Yokohama, Japan in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. While the relatively small size of these lithographs (83.19 x 71.12 cm) feels like a conceptual misfire, the series retains many of the critical qualities of Demand's earlier work. In that company, *One Stamford* Forum [Fig. 7] is another view onto an opaque emblem of systemic corruption and violence implicated in hundreds of thousands of opioid-related deaths that would eventually result in January 2025 in a $7.4 billion USD settlement between Purdue Pharma, its Sackler family owners, and legal representatives of thousands of victims and the governments of several U.S. states and localities. Again, though, the photographic image itself does not illustrate or narrate these matters, but rather serves as an alluring affront to the viewer who is unable to ascertain where they stand in relation to this deceptively straightforward document of power hiding in plain sight. Translating a familiar, yet inaccessible object like the Purdue Pharma building into an accessible medium like photography while amplifying the strangeness of the referent's prominence in light of all the harm it has given shape to is the political charge of Demand's work here. Isolated by Demand's staging from the city and skyline in which it sits, the Purdue Pharma building is, like Thomas Ruff's portraits, a face that can only be confronted, not engaged in conversation or a relational exchange.

Antisocial aesthetics

Where scholarship on artists such as Ruff and Demand has tended to highlight matters of surface and form, enlisting them in longstanding Modernist aesthetic debates, critical responses to Carrie Mae Weems's work have often adopted a different tenor. As Huey Copeland writes, her work has been "all too often flattened into a caricature of its reparative content," arguing instead that it, in fact, "always cuts deep into the space of representation, asking us to look hard into the image, even when it is patently two-dimensional."[9] Indeed, much of Weems's work engages cinema, theater, and performance—all vehicles for narrative communication and storytelling that would not tidily fit within a critical framework like Fried's. At the same time, however, there is a great deal still to unpack in those "patently two-dimensional" works, particularly as they begin to relate in scale to other tableau form works and in form to an increasing preoccupation with inaccessible surfaces. If, as noted earlier,

9 Huey Copeland. 2023. "Specters of History" (2014) in *Carrie Mae Weems: The Shape of Things*. MW Editions and Luma Arles.

Weems has long found it "essential" to "point to the history of power" with her body[10]—as a persona, witness, or guide—then what necessitated the shift away from this bodily mediation in the unpopulated photographs of boarded up Portland buildings in 2020? Evacuating both body and representational space from these works, Weems at first appears to be taking a detour with the photographs in the *Painting the Town* series. Yet, seen as an evolution of the work that began with *The Louisiana Project* and *Roaming*, the Portland photographs begin to mark a transformation where confrontation is no longer illustrated with the use of a body, but rather *embodied* in the formal structure of the work. Whereas before there was a guide who seemingly held a viewer's hand through a series of difficult encounters even while her back was turned, now even this cautious or indifferent sociality is dispensed with. That these images are rendered in full, saturated color adds to the shock of these scenes that have collapsed into surfaces.

From across a gallery, these works appear as color field paintings capable of anesthetizing a viewer through their warm, all-over embrace. [Fig. 8] To view them closer, however, is to face a suffocating set of armored surfaces—layers of plywood defensiveness and painted erasures of anti-racist insurgency. The authorship of these makeshift fitted barriers and crudely applied patches of paint here becomes almost immaterial given the ubiquity of their production. The violence they both represent and physically effect, on the other hand, is incredibly precise and instantly recognizable. It is a deep structural violence known through its material confrontations

10 Weems, "Mutual Beliefs," 30.

[Fig. 8]
Painting the Town #1 and #4 at the opening of *Policing Justice*, Portland Institute of Contemporary Art, curated by Nina Amstutz and Cleo Davis. 2024. Photo by the author.

across surfaces both built and bodily. The specifics of the encounters vary, but the place from which they emerge is seemingly omnipresent and its history inescapable. As the "Woman in Black" narrator of Weems's theatrical work, *Grace Notes*, describes:

> Imagine you are out for an evening stroll....From the corner of your eye, you see a police car speeding by, red strobes flashing. For reasons unknown, imagine that police car comes to a full stop right in front of you, and the officer, for reasons unknown, gets out, and for no apparent reason, demands your ID. You've heard the news, you know the story, and because recent circumstances have taught you a thing or two about the limits of these fatal encounters, your fingers are crossed. Fearing the possibility of becoming yet another statistic, you wholeheartedly comply....Imagine you or your child living in a state of constant fear, under constant pressure, constant suspicion, troubled by this unrelenting history of violence, where time and time again, an encounter with those who are meant to serve ends with your death.[11]

Because you "know the story" you fear becoming "yet another statistic." What here would be gained by telling another version of this story or recapitulating the statistics? In many respects, this is the political question at the heart of Ruha Benjamin's, *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (2019), and it's worth reading Weems's Portland photographs in the light of Benjamin's methodological framing to define a field of "race critical code studies." Focusing on the intertwined concerns of technology, visual culture, and racial injustice, Benjamin proposes a mode of transdisciplinary analysis where "the point is not just to look beneath the surface in order to find connections between the categories, but to pay closer attention to the surfaces themselves." She continues, "Here I draw upon the idea of thin description as a method for reading surfaces—such as screens and skin—especially since a key feature of being racialized is 'to be encountered as a surface'."[12] In effect, this approach is a critique of the longstanding embrace of "thick description" in anthropological circles which aims for ever more complete pictures and stories obtained either through overreach or extraction, always at the risk of replicating colonial violence by other means. Benjamin instead argues for an approach that is at once more "humble"[13] and more direct—respecting the boundaries of marginalized individuals and communities who veil aspects of themselves in response to the persistent threat of violence, while also clearly naming instances of that violence when they erupt and assigning blame to the perpetrators. Here, too, as voiced by the narrator in Weems's *Grace Notes*, when people are murdered based on the color of their skin it is politically insufficient for art to continue to build complexity into that familiar story or simply add another data point. Thickness, in this case, is beside the point if it doesn't stop the violence.

11 Carrie Mae Weems. 2023. *Grace Notes* (2016), qtd. in "Histories of Violence," *Reflections for Now*. Hatje Cantz Verlag.
12 Benjamin, 45.
13 Ibid., 45.

One of Benjamin's primary concerns here is the tendency in "design thinking" practices to substitute *empathy* for either *justice* or *solidarity*. Thinking through this dynamic by way of the growing popularity of virtual reality "empathy machine[s]"[14] Benjamin notes how easy it is now to see the world through another's eyes, yet the content placed before those eyes can function to re-traumatize marginalized persons as potentially more privileged viewers replay their life experiences and "consume human anguish."[15] As Benjamin argues, "By simply changing what (as opposed to how) we see, do we really leave behind all our assumptions and prior experiences as we journey into virtual reality? Perhaps we overestimate how much our literal sight dictates our understanding of race and inequity more broadly?"[16] Here, a more nominally "inclusive" form of aesthetics might in fact serve as an impediment to justice.

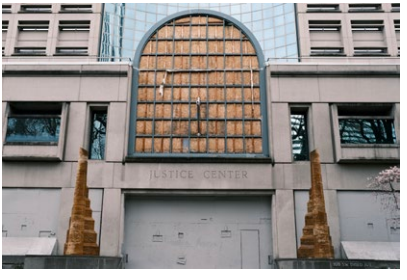
This, too, is among the arguments advanced by literary scholar Xine Yao in her book, *Disaffected*, which explores practices of "unfeeling" among marginalized persons "that fall outside of or are not legible using dominant regimes of expression."[17] The terms Yao associates with these practices include: "withholding, disregard, growing a thick skin, refusing to care, opacity, numbness, disassociation, inscrutability, frigidity, insensibility, obduracy, flatness, insensitivity, disinterest, coldness, heartlessness, fatigue, desensitization, and emotional unavailability."[18] And, while many of the descriptors above have been used in praise of the works of artists such as Ruff and Demand, they could just as easily be deployed critically against artists from communities long othered by the art world and by culture at large. Disaffection, then, as the right to defy social expectations of access and availability, is both the domain of privilege and that of insurgency.

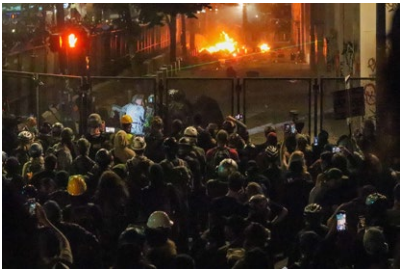
In many cases, this form of antisocial refusal is a common "defensive tactic of everyday psychic survival"[19] in oppressive environments where affective exposure in the performance of respectability poses a risk of exploitation or exhaustion. Yet, as Yao argues, to leave it there is to ignore the critical potential of these practices, as "we may consider disaffection to be the unfeeling rupture that enables new structures of feeling to arise....[those] alternate forms of sociality made possible by feeling otherwise."[20] Further, it is a means for surveilled communities to strategically obscure themselves, or rather, to maintain a level of autonomy in when, where, and what they choose to present of their lives and work. Such an approach is less a play for privacy than a performance of self-determination long denied—producing spaces where collective work might thrive.

14 Ibid., 169
15 Ibid., 169
16 Ibid., 171.
17 Xine Yao. 2021. *Disaffected: The Cultural Politics of Unfeeling in Nineteenth-Century America*. Duke University Press.
18 Yao, 11.
19 Ibid., 15.
20 Ibid., 6.

Confronting Portland

Documentary accounts of the nightly Black Lives Matter demonstrations in Portland's Chapman and Lownsdale Squares and Terry Schrunk Plaza from the summer of 2020 include countless images and videos of masked individuals facing off against the boarded-up and fenced-off Multnomah County Justice Center. [Fig. 9] Designed in 1983 by ZGF Architects, the symmetrical elevation fronting the square boasts an open colonnade that converges at entry doors on center capped by a barrel-vaulted arcade of gridded glass. The inset plywood coverings fitted to this façade removed its public sidewalk beneath the colonnade and made for a perverse spectacle of articulated blankness. A carceral monument under siege, the building gained both new layers of fortification and new messages and scars with each successive confrontation. Each night as the demonstrations would escalate, authorities would poke out from behind closed doors at the Justice Center or the neighboring Hatfield Federal Courthouse [Fig. 10] and launch tear gas into the crowd before finally emerging in full force and riot gear to disperse or kettle the remaining demonstrators using more gas along with "less than lethal" munitions designed to maim bodies if not outright disable them.[21]





21 See Forensic Architecture, *'Tear Gas Tuesday' in Downtown Portland* (April 2023): https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/tear-gas-tuesday-in-downtown-portland on tear gas use and news story on munitions; and Conrad Wilson, "Portland protester disabled by 2020 incident with US Marshal gets $7.65 million," *OPB*, February 14, 2025: https://www.opb.org/article/2025/02/14/portland-oregon-donavan-labella-head-wound-disabled-2020-less-lethal/

[Fig. 9]
Multnomah County Justice Center. Photo by the author.

[Fig. 10]
Tear gas from the Border Patrol Tactical Unit and fires at the Mark O. Hatfield United States Courthouse during the 2020 protests in Portland (July 22, 2020). Photo by Tedder.

In Portland, the sumptuous staging of a lone woman quietly interrogating a monumental structure as in Weems's photographs was supplanted by more physically charged encounters as communities already exhausted by political complacency and armored against COVID-19 turned up both the volume and the protective gear, while also developing collective networks of mutual aid and communication—or "counterintimacies" as Xine Yao might describe them. Immersed in this evening theater were any number of hosts, guides, and interlocutors along with reporters and more casual observers. It's notable perhaps that in approaching the demonstrations, Weems chose not to focus on the theater itself but on its traces throughout the city, where storefronts boarded up to avoid stray projectiles became the built equivalent of keeping one's head down in a crisis. In *Painting the Town*, Weems evacuates her photographed scenes both of human figures and narrative content, but also of representational depth. The disappearance of Weems's alter ego here is notable as is the collapse of the middle ground spaces that the figure often occupies when facing one of Weems's chosen monuments. *Painting the Town #1* [Fig. 11] which centers on the protruding corner of a boarded up building is something of a transitional work that both repels the viewer from accessing the space while introducing the surface materials of masonry, concrete, glass, plywood, and paint that will appear in various configurations in the flattened, elevational images in low relief that follow in the series. In those frontal works, the accretion of surfaces is suffocating, particularly as the close-cropped views (see numbers 3 and 4) [Fig. 12 and Fig. 1] exclude even a hint of the sidewalk for scale or grounding. The fully saturated colors and plywood textures on display only reinforce the primacy of the picture surface here.

Whereas in *The Louisiana Project*, *Roaming*, and *Museums*, Weems always offered the viewer a way into the work even if only to deny full access, here, that empathetic overture is withdrawn,

[Fig. 11]
Carrie Mae Weem. 2021. Painting the Town #1.

[Fig. 12]
Carrie Mae Weems. 2021. Painting the Town #3.

as is the politics of recognition it might support. These are big, inescapable, works that don't require the viewer's empathetic response for their meaning. Both the form and the subject of the work are engaged with erasure. While the viewer is presumed to understand that the crudely applied washes of paint are covering some kind of graffiti, the communicative content of those underlying marks is never revealed. Stories, pleas, and demands on behalf of the dignity of Black lives are all subsumed beneath cosmetic patches of color. [Fig. 13, 14] Given the haphazard application of the covering, there is no reason to think that the motive of their unknown authors is anything other than erasure. This is not coordinated neighborhood beautification or even broken windows policing with all their racist implications, but the suppression of voice itself. Weems's work here appears to question the value of sharing stories in an environment that casually snuffs them out as soon as they emerge. Why continue to provide a guide and expose or re-traumatize another Black body if no one is willing to listen to what they have to say? Instead, Weems here adopts a more confrontational address, photographing painted surfaces in such a way that the works themselves appear almost more painterly than their objects. Further, the attention to plywood here, as noted by the co-curator of the *Policing Justice* exhibition, speaks directly to Black Portlanders who saw their communities decimated by redlining and the boarding up of family properties deemed by authorities to be blighted.[22] It's these stories of lost generational wealth, too, that are marked by surfaces of erasure and what reparative urban development projects such as Portland's Albina Vision are intended to address.[23]

22 See: Cecilia Brown. 2019. *Root Shocked*: https://vimeo.com/343674629
23 See: https://www.albinavisioninc.com/

[Fig. 13]
Carrie Mae Weems. 2021. Painting the Town #17.

[Fig. 14]
Carrie Mae Weems. 2021. Painting the Town #5.

While the latter narrative is perhaps less available to casual viewers of the photographs, the connection is no doubt integral to the work as Weems's subject remains a meditation on the history of violence—an abstract and recurring phenomena with concrete episodes. As such, Portland-based viewers of *Painting the Town* might also register in the blank plywood facades the vacant city blocks lost to the opioid trade, and of those suffering from addiction or houselessness attempting to merge into the recesses of a storefront façade in the hope of a night of uninterrupted sleep as their very existence is criminalized. And then, there are the local business owners and pedestrians who also contest and lay claim to the thin space of the sidewalk in concern for their perceived safety or livelihood as a proxy for more thickened and systemic forms of political and economic dispute that often confound the emergence of solidarity. A lack of justice pervades each of these instances of violence, reflecting a thinning public sphere whose armor is increasingly naturalized as in the ballistic glass and perforated metal screens soon to upgrade the defenses of the publicly accessible entry spaces of the Multnomah County Justice Center—hardened transparency supplanting evidentiary layers.

As the physical memory of the 2020 demonstrations fades and many of its political gains eroded in broad rightward turns in both state and federal arenas in the U.S., the charge of Weems's *Painting the Town* photographs remains present. For scholars such as Ruha Benjamin, the "diversity, equity, and inclusion" (DEI) and even "access" initiatives now being attacked and rolled back at the federal level were themselves inadequate stopgaps where justice and solidarity were what was needed. Here, the indiscriminate, yet pointed erasure-by-paint recorded in Weems's work is systematically being reenacted at every level, as is the intentional collapse of the space of public dissent and debate. The officially sanctioned demolition of the Black Lives Matter Plaza mural in Washington D.C. to avoid threats of funding cuts to the city in March 2025 is but the latest effort to whitewash the modest recognitions of the recent past.[24] Paint to plywood; hydraulic breaker to paving stones. In this environment, it's the foreclosed project of post-Civil War era Reconstruction that looms large, forcing every conversation on systemic justice into the framework of piecemeal repair, itself a reach so long as even the most fundamental stories of human dignity continue to be erased.

24 Ashraf Khalil and Jacquelyn Martin. 2025. "'More than brick and mortar:' DC begins removing 'Black Lives Matter' plaza near the White House," *Associated Press News.*
https://apnews.com/article/black-lives-matter-white-house-trump-bowser-f130daeb762e438fc8eddd3dd4da7982

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