

Analysis of Two Artworks in the Henry Art Gallery —

Untitled and Fun. No Fun.

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In this essay, I describe details of two artworks on display at the Henry Art Gallery, *Untitled* by Carrie Mae Weems, and *Fun. No Fun.* by Kraft Duntz and Dawn Cerny. I address the prompt in depth, and provide a comparative analysis between these two works so as to comprehend Henry's goal in presenting these two very different artworks simultaneously. In brief, Henry values the contemporary impact that an artwork is able to bring to the viewer, such as encouraging them to reflect deeply on the present society.



Untitled, by Carrie Mae Weems

The *Untitled*, created by Weems in 1992, is a photographic triptych that features an enslaved black woman named Drana. The three monochromatic photographs are placed horizontally, with equal, relatively wide spacing in between. All three photos cover the chest and above body parts, naked, of the figure — a black woman with short hair and thin, vulnerable body-build. The photographs on the left and right, installed in round frames, show her side profiles, where she looks towards the rectangular photograph at the center. The side photographs are toned blue whereas the center photograph is pure gray-scale. In the center photo, the figure displays a facial

expression where she, with mouth shut, frowns and stares straight out of the photo at the audience. The long blood veins stand out on her naked breast, and the breast appears to be sagging as the side profiles show.

Weems, born in 1953, is an African-American artist whose work centers around invoking public awareness and reflection on issues relating to the present situation of African-American such as racism and sexism. Starting in 1980s, she has used art forms such as photograph collections, text, fabric, etc. to explore, depict, and reflect on the stories and heritage of black people in America¹. This particular work, *Untitled*, is part of Weems's *Sea Islands* series which explores the spiritual and cultural life of the Gullah people, descendants of enslaved Africans in Southern Carolina.

It is obvious that this work asks the viewer to think on the issue of black slavery. Beyond that, at a deeper level, Weems's choice of source photographs sends a unique message on its own. The source photographs were taken as daguerreotypes, which are small (handsize) images formed on silver plates. What is intriguing is that the person that requested these photographs of enslaved black women was a professor at a prestigious university who was searching for evidence to support his scientific racism claims. The concept of scientific racism, that there exists a "natural" biological hierarchy among human races which ranks white people higher than people of other races, is laughable from today's perspective. By choosing to use these source photographs in her anti-racist artwork, Weems sends a sardonic message: This photograph collection of Drana not only should not and does not provide any support for racial biology, but also debases and ridicules it.

The side text for this work indicates that Weems's manipulation of the source daguerreotypes includes changes in scale, color, and format. Weems enlarged the source images, and shifted the color in the two side photographs. She also framed the side photographs differently from the center one. Weems's manipulation of the source serves one purpose: to deliver her message better. The enlargement enables display of details that are crucial to show the figure's suffer. The format and color change leads viewers to consider the side photographs as one group apart from

¹ The museum does not provide a biography of Weems other than the mention of her nationality and birth year. I summarized her biography from on-line information (e.g. Wikipedia).

the center piece. In my view, this arrangement leads viewers to imagine the unimaginable: the wordless communication between the figures in the photographs.

The side text also describes Weems's motives: "Weems both asserts the continuing importance of the past and opens history for reconsideration and rectification in the present." The importance of these motives to her can be understood from her identity. Weems is an African American, therefore digging into the history of her origin is of fundamental curiosity to her. Furthermore, in her early 20s, Weems was active in political activities and worked as an organizer for a Marxist organization for 8-10 years². Because of this connection to Marxism, she likely believed in dignity and equal rights for people in the laboring class. As an artist, Weems strives to investigate and present the history in a way that allows viewers to find questions and answers, regarding race, sex, and social class, by themselves.

As an international student from a distinct culture, China, I was not very familiar with the issue of black slavery other than knowing its controversial role in history. Not to mention I did not know the effort of establishing scientific racism by the white intellectuals. Moreover, I observed from this artwork that enslaved people have emotions, anger and fear, just like everyone else, but they were suppressed to the point that the law deprived the enslaved people's right to conduct themselves, and their emotions were expressed through the photographs in an unnatural and uncomfortable way. In today's American society where the criticism of racism is becoming a social norm, I ask: With what measure would we claim that racial justice is achieved? Or is achieving racial justice a task that is always in progress but nobody in power really wants to finish it up?

The museum provides view points from three scholars, Megan Ming Francis, Bettina A. Judd, and Stuart Lingo. Francis praises the photographic triptych as an example to showcase how we should confront the history of racism. And I did not regard this work as a tool for confronting the history until reading her perspective. Judd brings up the troubling situation of inhumane treatment to the black people that for black people, names were labels, and mothers could not mother. This perspective of humanity adds another angle to my analysis of this artwork. Lingo

² This information is from Weems's official website at <http://carriemaeweems.net/>.

discusses the intention behind the artwork's structure that Weems implicitly elevates the figure by placing her as the center icon. He also regards this artwork as a reflection of "our wounded humanity and history". The discussion of the traditional meaning of rounded frames and art as a reflection provides new perspectives to me.

To conclude, the artwork *Untitled*, inspires a wide range of perspectives that reflect on the institutionalized slavery for centuries. It succeeds in achieving Weems's intention to have viewers reconsider and rectify the past in the contemporary world. It ridicules the scientific racism, and provides an exceptional example of how people in today's society should confront the past, which is through honesty and frankness, by looking directly into Drana's eyes and understand her pains. From my perspective, this work marks a milestone in advancing the transition of humanity towards greater social inclusion.



Fun. No Fun. by Kraft Duntz and Dawn Cerny (wooden stairs & furniture area)

Fun. No Fun. is a multi-part physical installation designed and created by Kraft Duntz, a Seattle-based artist/architect team of David Lipe, Matt Sellars, and Dan Webb, in collaboration with artist Cerny, a contemporary artist who works on a variety of mediums. There are three parts of this artwork: a wooden staircase, an arrangement of furniture, commodities and sculptures, and an area with two cylindrical architectures (I refer to it as the *inner room* in the rest of this essay).

As the viewer walks into the lower level of the museum (to the left-hand side of Weems's *Untitled*), she first encounters the entrance to the wooden staircase, a complex structure that covers the full width of the showroom. The viewer's field of view is filled entirely by the staircase as she first walks on it. As she follows the path down the stairs, the playful and colorful arrangement of the furniture and sculptures appears intermittently in her view, and gradually shows its full appearance. After the viewer exits the stairs, she may walk around in the furniture area. There are around five bizarre-shaped, sculpted shelves. Each of these shelves is colored purely in yellow, blue, red, or green. There are also chairs and pillows here and there, some placed on top of a rug. Other playful items, such as books, a fitness ball and stools are placed around. When the viewer looks up, she sees a still chain of fruit baskets hanging on the ceiling. There is an array of headlights on the ceiling too, to provide desired lighting condition. Next, the viewer walks down an incline and enters the inner room, as mentioned above. Compared to the somewhat clustered furniture area, this space is empty and dark. The first phenomenon that catches the viewer's eyes is the staircase-like projection of light onto the surface of a cylindrical structure. Hinted by the light, the viewer will find a spiral staircase that leads to the top of the cylindrical structure, and realize that there is nothing there after she walks up. The viewer may continue to explore in the inner room, and discover another cylindrical structure at the corner diagonal to the first one. She may walk into this structure, and find herself in a closed space with empty, white, tall wall surrounding her. Curious, she may look up and see a circular ceiling with natural light shedding in forming a ring around the circular edge. The viewer may find a switch, which toggles the man-made light at the center of the ceiling, but discover that the lighting condition inside the structure does not change much as she toggles. The exploration of this artwork then comes to an end.



Fun. No Fun. (inner room area)

The main engagement that *Fun. No Fun.* invites from viewers is exploration, both physically and mentally. Viewers are free to go to any corner of this work, even underneath the wooden stairs. In the mean time, viewers may choose to think about the reasoning behind the arrangement of objects in this artwork, or just feel it when no clue. Cerny originally allowed viewers to touch all parts of the artwork. However, due to thievery, she shifted her policy to keep viewers from touching them. As far as I am concerned, even though this change takes away one dimension of exploration, it is actually a commendable decision: It not only reduces thievery, but also helps viewers concentrate on the visual and mental experience, the very core of this artwork.

The seemingly independent parts of this work pose a question: How are they related? In my view, there is a general theme that all parts follow, which is a mixture of curiosity with frustration. This theme penetrates throughout the parts and the transitions between them. The wooden staircase appears to be complex, but was too simple to be a maze (part I). It raises viewer's interest to know what glorious item is down there that deserves the construction of such a complex staircase and her walking through it. Yet, the viewer discovers clusters of weird furniture and sculptures and cannot really reason about their arrangement (transition I). As the viewer walks inside the furniture area, she may observe the sculpted shelf very closely, and ask the staff why it is made that way. She finds it frustrating when the staff says, "There is not really a reason" (part II). When the viewer walks along the long incline towards the inner room, she may expect to see something similar — more clusters of interesting and bizarre objects. It is a frustration when what she sees there is completely different, empty and dull (transition II). Needless to say, when walking up a spiral staircase and discover that there is absolutely nothing at where it leads to, the viewer gets another dose of frustration (part III).

The museum places a piece of relatively long didactic text before the entrance to the wooden staircase, which only people with great patience would read through before actually experiencing the artwork. The text describes the installation to be composed of "built forms and voids that break the architectural narrative". It emphasizes that the different spaces in this artwork offer options but no resolution, and the artwork "reflects the inherent contradiction between exhilaration, expectation, and disappointment". In this respect, this description resonates with my

experience of this artwork, which is a constant coupling of curiosity and frustration, as discussed above.

Although the complex staircase, bizarre objects, and cylindrical spaces are distant from our everyday life, the message that they convey altogether is very close to us, that in today's world, we are flooded by the fancy entertainment contents (e.g. from social media) and by the variety of life opportunities that we are given. Nevertheless, we constantly feel frustrated. We do not really get what we expect. To me, this artwork alarms me to keep a clear head about the kinds of information I read through every day, and feel normal when I encounter a reason to feel disappointed. Conversely, if I reduce the level of fanciness of my life (e.g. by reading less entertainment content), I can feel less frustration, which is good psychologically for myself.

The photographic triptych clearly differs from the installation artwork in a lot of ways. First, they offer viewers different mental experiences. As a viewer, I felt compassionate about the depicted black women when looking at Weems's work, and was caught in a deep thinking about the history of black slavery. I felt puzzled, and alternation of curiosity and frustration, when experiencing the installation artwork *Fun. No Fun.*. Second, they ask for engagement in different time of human history, past versus present. Third, they differ drastically in the viewer's behavior required by these two artworks: Weems's work requires viewer to focus on the three photographs in front of her with thoughtful reflection, while Cerny's work requires viewer's active participation in the exploration task. These differences demonstrate that Henry embraces a broad spectrum of artworks.

As a first-time visitor to the Henry Art Gallery, I initially felt disconnected when viewing the *Fun. No Fun.* after the *Untitled*. However, further thinking makes me realize the connection. A common theme of these two artworks is about reflecting on the present with objectivity, and not take it for granted. Weems's work asserts the importance for people today to mourn about the suffer of the black people under racism, and reflect on the dramatic transition of public view, from viewing the source photographs as evidence for biological racism, to establishing social consensus that these same photographs reveal the evil of racism. Cerny's work motivates viewers

to reflect on our present world, one filled mixture of tangible with abstraction, and one where abundant opportunities to take actions are mingled with disappointing complexity and emptiness of resolution behind the scene. They both evoke reflection on different and important aspects of the contemporary society. This is the positive impact that Henry hopes to achieve through displaying these two artworks together.