

# Modern Painting, the Black Woman, and Beauty Ideologies: Carrie Mae Weems' Photographic Series *Not Manet's Type*

by

Kelsey Rae Winiarski

winiarski.kelsey@gmail.com

Art History Graduate Student and Graduate Assistant  
Department of Art History, Bowling Green State University,  
Bowling Green, Ohio

*Kelsey Rae Winiarski* is an art history graduate student working towards a MA at Bowling Green State University in Ohio. Her specialty is modern art, specifically Surrealism, and she strives to take an interdisciplinary approach to her research often incorporating psychology, philosophy, and feminist theory.

## Modern Beauty

*“Carrie Mae Weems pursues the arts as a cultural worker. As an artist committed to radical social change, she has created artwork that incisively examines, among other subjects, issues of race and racism, class and classism, gender and sexism”* (Piché 9).

Primarily focusing on issues of race and gender within her work, Carrie Mae Weems has created a voluminous portfolio of work that questions hegemonic ideologies in different aspects of African discourse. What roles Africans, primarily African women, played within different aspects of history remains an important question within Weems' work, which she attempts to answer through photography and video. Carrie Mae Weems' photographic series *Not Manet's* scrutinizes ideologies of beauty existent in the twentieth century through exemplifying acclaimed works of art from this period. Utilizing photographs of her own body in an intimate setting as the subject and juxtaposing each photograph with text, she ruminates over the role and rendering of Black women within the works of Édouard Manet, Pablo Picasso, Marcel Duchamp, and William de Kooning. Thus, *Not Manet's Type* alludes to the hegemonic attitudes of European society towards women of color while simultaneously bringing women of color into the foreground of discussion of Modern art.

Prior to this essay, *Not Manet's Type* has been noted but not extensively researched in relationship to race, Modernity, and beauty. Therefore, this study is the first to expound upon beauty ideologies in both this photographic series and Modern art in addition to exploring racial archetypes for Black women in Modern art in relationship to *Not Manet's Type*. In the book *Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video*, scholars Deborah Willis and Franklin Sirmans comment on the aesthetic qualities and tone of this work, but they do not explore ideas of racial beauty in Europe nor do they discuss the artists named by Weems. Scholars, like Sirmans, often overlook this series, instead focusing on Weems' more popular work such as the *Kitchen Table Series*. To explore and further understand *Not Manet's Type*, this paper will discuss Carrie Mae Weems as an artist, the series itself, the history of race and representation of Black women in Modern Europe and America, and the representation of Black women within works by Pablo Picasso, Édouard Manet, and William de Kooning.

### **Carrie Mae Weems as an Artist**

Born in 1953, Carrie Mae Weems is an American artist that works in a variety of mediums including video, film, and photography. Throughout her artistic career Weems has created a myriad of artwork that explores issues of race, sex, beauty, and the African experience. Similar to other postmodern American photographers like Cindy Sherman, Weems often plays the role of model, photographer, and editor of her work in order to have full creative freedom. Still an active artist primarily working in America, she has received countless awards for her contributions to the field of art including The Albert Award for Visual Arts, Visual Arts Fellowship, Photographer of the Year, and many more (“Women in Photography International Distinguished Photographers 2005 Award Carrie Mae Weems”).

Carrie Mae Weems started her artistic career with documentary photography. After receiving a camera from her friend in 1971, she began using her camera to “document activities of the political groups she was associated within the San Francisco Bay Area via general photographs of antiwar demonstrations, feminist marches, and left-wing political events” (Piché 10). From an early age, she realized that photography was not only a medium for creative expression, but also, it could be utilized as a powerful instrument to convey revolutionary ideas. Storr (2012) points this out, saying, “the goal of documentary or naturalistic art has usually been to shed light on dark corners of social reality and the public conscience, places beyond the keen of the “average viewers” or deeper in the guilty souls than most willingly go.” (Storr 2012:21).

Early in her artistic development, Carrie Mae Weems became substantially influenced by Roy DeCarava, an African American artist that focused on issues of race and beauty within his work which inspired Weems to do the same. Hence, “she was particularly inspired by DeCarava’s visual representations of black subjects that invert the dominant culture’s aesthetics, in which, informed by racist thinking, blackness was iconographically seen as a marker of ugliness” (hooks 67).

Weems began using her photography to not only document political and cultural events but also as a tool to explore ideologies of race, sex, and beauty within contemporary and historical societies. “She saw the medium’s ability to rewrite black cultural myths and provide counterpoints to negative perceptions and stereotypes” (Delmez 1).

Decentralization is another prominent theme of Weems’ work. She strives to bring the Black subject, rather than the White subject, into mainstream discussion in order to express a previously underrepresented experience in her works. “Weems’s decision to concentrate on black subjects was a challenge to white cultural hegemony, it signaled, more importantly, the emergence of a lifelong commitment to recover and bring to the foreground subjugated knowledge relating to African-American experience” (hooks 66-67). Weems believes that sharing this experience can be transformative to all viewers rather than solely a Black audience. She has yearned to insert marginalized people into the historical record in her works and hopes that her work will be accessible to people from all different backgrounds. She does this not only to bring ignored or erased experiences to light but to also provide a more multidimensional picture of humanity as a whole, a picture that ultimately will spur greater awareness and compassion (Delmez 1).

Her utilization of the Black subject has proved troubling, however. Weems states, “One of the things that I was thinking about was whether it might be possible to use black subjects to represent universal concerns... Yet when I do that, it’s not understood in that way. Folks refuse to identify with the concerns of black people express which take us beyond race.” (Piché 11). Although this has created issues, she hopes that issues in her works will soon be viewed as universal and accessible rather than art that solely comments Black issues.

“Beauty is a central theme in the photographs of Carrie Mae Weems. She uses historical and personal memory, biography, music, art historical references, and reenactments to state, perform, and create beauty” (Willis 33). Yearning to explore beauty ideologies in her pieces, she often uses herself as the model in her work to explore preconceived ideas of beauty within society. The tone of her work ranges from humorous to somber, but each work strives to challenge the viewer’s ideas on beauty, race, and sex and how each of these institutions is intertwined.

Carrie Mae Weems’ work can be compared to that of contemporary theorist and feminist bell hooks. Hooks, like Weems, strives to bring the Black experience to the forefront of discussion while simultaneously attempting to make it a collective experience opposed to an isolated one that can only be understood by a particular audience. In her work, hooks largely focuses on the issue of Black self-hatred: the idea that White supremacy and domination has forced the Black community feel that blackness needs to be negated in order to fit in to mainstream society. Hooks writes, “Rather than using coercive tactics of domination to colonize, [White supremacy] seduces black folks with the promise of mainstream success if only we are willing to negate the value of blackness” (“Black Looks Race and Representation” 17).

Since the twentieth century, beauty has been inscribed in terms of whiteness in both America and Europe. This has an adverse effect on the self-esteem of Black women in society; negating blackness is literally seen as a beautiful thing. “Since black people...are bombarded with messages that [they] have no values, are worthless, it is no wonder that [they] fall prey to nihilistic despair or forms of addiction that provide momentary escape, illusions of grandeur, and temporary freedom from the pain of facing reality” (“Black Looks Race and Representation” 19). In *Not Manet’s Type*, there is an underlying suggestion of Black self-hatred, that being Black is not beautiful nor enough to fit into historic nor contemporary society.

## **Modernism and the Black Woman**

Racial hegemony ideals have remained prevalent throughout the twentieth century, especially in Europe. Race became both a biologically and socially constructed institution that privileged White Europeans while denying Black men and women.

If race was an essence, entirely constituted biologically in the body, then its meaning would be stable throughout time...[Race], however, is a set of socially constructed boundaries, practices, and commonly held meanings mapped onto a population whose members themselves represent wide physical and social diversity. Physical differences can be used to distinguish racial groups, but it is the social meaning of those differences that make race matter and that carve the defining boundaries between races (Craig 9).

In spite of the abolishment of slavery, attitudes towards African men and women within Europe remained negative engendering blatant racial inequality in all aspects of society.

One of the reasons for prevailing negative attitudes towards Africans in Europe was the fetishization of this population. Both the people and culture of Africa became fetishes for Europeans who wrongfully appropriated their motifs, traditions, and cultural attributes into Western culture.

The fetish emerged in the intercultural spaces created along the West African coast by new trade relations between cultures so radically different as to be almost incomprehensible to each other...Fetishism was primarily a discourse about cultural conflicts in value, which allowed Europeans to...draw the unfamiliar and unaccountable cultures of the world into a systematic universe of *negative* value...[and] represent this universe as deviant and thereby undervalue and negate it (McClinton 186-188).

When a particular group of people becomes fetishized, there becomes an imbalance of power between them and the fetishizers; the fetishizers can view this group as subhuman.

Black femininity and sexuality became particularly scrutinized which, in turn, denied Black women the right to be feminine or sexual. One of the reasons being that “black people were figured, among other things, gender deviants, the embodiment of prehistoric promiscuity and excess their evolutionary belatedness evidenced by their “feminine” lack of history, reason and proper domestic arrangements” (McClintock 33). Black femininity was therefore constructed through the opposing White femininity; Black femininity was viewed as “the other” leading to pejorative ideas towards Black sexuality by European society and scientists.

For centuries European and Anglo-American art, science, and popular thought had constructed a normative ideal of white womanhood that relied on an opposing image of black women as the inferior “other.” Specifically, images of female sexuality, femininity, and beauty were composed along racially polarized axes. North American and British scientists of the nineteenth-century described black sexuality as lascivious and ape-like, marked by a ‘voluptuousness’ and ‘degree of lasciviousness’ unknown in Europe. Citing supposed physical distinction between African and European women as empirical proof, they contrasted black women’s presumed primitive, passionate sexuality to an ideal of asexual purity among highly ‘civilized’ white women (Cahn 126).

Denied femininity and sexuality, Black women earned respect for their physical and emotional strength, domestic talent, and public activism through occupying multiple roles such as homemakers, mothers, waged workers, and community leaders. Denied access to full-time homemaking and sexual protection, African American women did not tie femininity to a specific, limited set of activities and attributes defined as separate and opposite from masculinity. Rather, they created an ideal of womanhood rooted in the positive qualities they cultivated under adverse conditions: struggle, strength, family commitment, community involvement, and moral integrity (Cahn 117-118). Because Black femininity was constructed through much different avenues than White femininity, Black women were seen as more masculine and “primal” not only because of scientific findings during this time but also because these women worked, occupying multiple roles in European society simultaneously.

Beauty ideologies that were based on race came as a result from negative attitudes towards Black women and Black femininity. Beauty and Black women became polarized; European society equated Black with ugliness while equating White with beauty. “This racist legacy’s permutations throughout the centuries has meant that the Black ugliness/White beauty binary of imperialism and slavery and Black Nationalist counter discourses on African-centered beauty has spawned a racialized beauty Empire” (Tate 196). Contemporary scientists who insisted that their research bolstered this dichotomy of racial beauty backed beauty ideals in Europe. Havelock Ellis, a twentieth-century sexologist, argued that beauty “ran parallel to the evolutionary chain of being. White European and Anglo-American women occupied the most highly evolved, beautiful end of the scale, while black women were assigned to a place at the opposite end” (Cahn 126-127).

Negative attitudes towards Black men and women resulted in negative images of blackness being created as a result.

These negative images that permeate Western popular culture originated in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, during the first encounters between the Europeans and the peoples they subjugated and colonized...The enslavement of Africans, carried out in the colonies of both exploitation and settlement, fed Europe’s imagination of Africa and its dwellers and, in fact, determined the emergence of what today we call “Africa”, and of the heterogeneous groups since then labeled as “Africans” (Pinho 271).

The representation of Black women, which will be discussed further in the next section, was very limited and, most commonly, unflattering. Women were depicted as sexually starved and primitive or as maids within prominent paintings of Modernism. In *Not Manet’s Type*, Weems references these specific archetypes by referencing infamous Modernists that chose to depict Black women in these ways.

### ***Not Manet’s Type: Carrie Mae Weems’ Response to Modern European Maestros***

*Not Manet’s Type* focuses on how race fits into beauty ideologies in Modern society. This series, as the title suggests, evaluates her role as a Black female model within Modern art. The model in the five photograph series, Weems, moves from standing in the first two frames, to sitting propped against the bed, to sitting on the bed, and, finally, to lying on her back on the bed, nude (Sirmans 51). This woman is naked and clothed in the series of photographs appearing disheveled, exhausted, and defeated.

The series power lies in her narrative voice and her ability to create a scene...The setting is in the bedroom, a private but inviting space. We, the viewers, peer through the square mat into the round mirror that frames Weems' body, which lends an effect of peeping at a private moment. The time of day, the lace on the brass bed, the large white vase holding dried flowers, and the framed artwork on the wall offer a sense of reality, while the bright sun bleaches the lower half of her body and the bed...The series' text clearly shows her vulnerability as she attempts to empower her image (Willis 37).

By viewing Weems through the mirror, the viewer is made to feel voyeuristic, intruding on intimate and vulnerable moments of ruminating. This piece shows the woman at ends with herself and the placement of Black women within Modern art.

Text is juxtaposed underneath each photograph to reflect on the "status of the black nude within an art establishment that lionizes a Manet, Picasso, or Duchamp while denying women of substance, women like Weems herself, any role outside a largely decorative one in which they serve merely as exotic, and eroticized, objects" (Ebony, Harris, Richard, Schwendener, Valdez, and Yablonsky 198). The text reads: "Standing on shaky ground/ posed myself for critical study/ but was no longer certain/ of the questions to ask/ It was clear I was not Manet's Type, Picasso- who has a way with women-/ only used me & Duchamp never/ even considered me/ But it could have been worse/ imagine my fate had de Kooning gotten hold of me/ I knew, not from memory,/ but from hope, that there were other/ models by which to live/ I took a tip from Frida/ who from her bed painted incessantly- beautifully/ while Diego scaled the scaffolds/ to the top of the world". The text not only engages the viewer but also elucidates Weems' intentions for this series:

As Andreas Hapkemeyer asserts, Images are semanticized by virtue of the direct allocation of texts. Text is unmistakably referentialized through the assignment of images. More complex information, in an aesthetic sense, becomes possible. Text and image can complement one another. The text may just as easily work against the message of the images or the text may inject a level of meaning not foreseen in the images by introducing a new theme (Piché 14).

Weems' statements in each photograph allow her to further engage with the viewer as both model and artist; she asks her viewer to critically think about the role of Black women within Modern art, specifically within the works for Picasso, Manet, and Duchamp.

This series primarily focuses on beauty ideals prevalent in Modern art and European society and how these proved problematic for Black women. Denying sexual or feminine agency to Black women, Modern society also inscribed beauty and femininity through White women. These issues are referenced through Weems' text evaluates the image of Black women in Modern paintings.

“In image and text, Weems effectively readdresses such cultural imbalances, challenging the attitudes that foster social inequity in the first place” (Ebony, Harris, Richard, Schwendener, Valdez, and Yablonsky 198). This series forces viewers to think about the image of Black women while bringing the Black subject to the foreground of discussion.

*Not Manet's Type* also encourages viewers to think about Black self-hatred and loving blackness. By providing viewers with case examples of how Black women were rendered in Modern art, this series suggests that Modern beauty ideologies prove problematic for Black women. Rather than continue to feel incomplete or ugly because Black women in both Modern and contemporary societies do not fit within White standards of beauty, Black women should embrace their blackness as this ideology of beauty does not have to be the only standard in society. Loving blackness, as hooks says, is a form of political and cultural resistance that allows Black women to feel beautiful and accepted in society without conforming to White standards of beauty. Weems' work may discuss beauty within Modernism, but it also forces viewers to think about how much has actually changed for standards of beauty between then and now.

Modernism has innumerable definitions, but, for the purpose of this paper, it will be defined within the context of Modern art. Clement Greenberg, a highly influential art critic during the twentieth century, defines Modernism as “the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence” (Greenberg 83). Modernism rebels against previous schools of thought that promoted realism; Modern art abstracts subject matter in new and different ways therefore criticizing the discipline itself. Modernism encompasses a broad range of styles and ideas from a myriad of artists who were innovative for their time. Weems has selected some of the most well-known and remembered Modernists to discuss in this photographic series.

Modernist painting, like European society, alluded to the prevailing attitude that Black is equated with ugliness. In painting, Black women were either entirely absent or depicted in certain, usually unflattering, lights engendering specific archetypes to be created including the servant and the Hottentot Venus. “It is within the colonial space of the west that ‘Hottentot Venus’ emerged, an iconic sexual and racial identity that resulted from the transatlantic imperialist regimes of global colonization. The term Hottentot is present within nineteenth-century western human sciences as a name for a group of people or tribe and, sometimes, even for a distinct race” (Nelson 125). The Hottentot bolstered Europe's negative attitude towards Black sexuality; this woman is sex-crazed and, therefore, equated with savageness or primitivism. “The associated of black people and sexuality goes back to the Middle Ages: sexuality itself had long been called ‘the African sin’” (McClintock 113).

In Modernist painting, Black women were denied beauty and agency. When not depicted as a Hottentot Venus, Black women would usually be portrayed as a domestic servant aiding their White employer. “The figure of the black servant is ubiquitous in European art of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries...

One of the central functions of the black servant...was as a maker of the sexualization of the society in which he or she was found” (Gilman 15). In spite of Black women occupying multiple roles, painters most often portrayed them as servants in the background of their works. These women were denied agency as they were rarely the main focus of Modernist works.

Beginning in the early twentieth century, there was an interest in depicting non-western motifs within Modernist works. These motifs, which were usually African, were most often wrongly appropriated by Modernists to break away from traditional European painting. Pablo Picasso was one of the first to incorporate African motifs in his paintings as seen in *Les Femmes d'Alger*. Picasso heavily borrowed from African visual culture to create a pastiche of African and Modernist styles within this work. “[Picasso] came to recognize the elemental, ‘magical’ power of African sculptures in a period of growing *negrophilie*, a context that would see the irruption into the European scene of other evocative black figures” (Nelson 132). This interest in African motifs included the Black subject within Modernist works. These interests, however, were superficial as African women, sculpture, and masks were fetishized.

Modernism, usually associated with artistic experimentation and progression, remained conservative when regarding race. Carrie Mae Weems brings attention to several artists’ use of Black women as models including Manet, Picasso, and Duchamp. These artists depict Black women within the confines of existing archetypes at the time: nonexistent, the black servant, and the Hottentot. Weems most likely selected these artists because they are some of the most well known artists from Modernism. During this era, Picasso, Manet, and Duchamp were critical figures within the art world for their works that challenged traditional art norms such as style and subject matter. In spite of these innovations, none of these artists strived to create innovative visions of race.

Édouard Manet is one of the arguable founders of Modernism through the flattening of his subjects on the canvas. Before Manet, it was expected that painting mimic real life which meant having a realist painting style. Manet broke away from this tradition and produced work that appeared flat unfinished through the visibility of brushstrokes and lack of shading. Some of Manet’s work was notoriously scandalous not only for the style but also the subject matter, which often involved prostitutes. These women defied the submissive, seductive female archetype prevalent in painting since the Renaissance by actively staring at the viewer.

Manet’s portrayal of women of color was conservative in comparison to his depiction of White, sexually proud women. One of his most famous works, *Olympia*, utilizes the Black woman the same way she has been used for hundreds of years: as a servant. This painting depicts a White female prostitute, Olympia, reclining on a sofa. She is nude firmly placing her hand over her genital region and looking towards with viewer without shame. This painting, inspired by Titan’s *Venus of Urbino*, depicts the courting of Olympia by a male customer, which is suggested by the gift of flowers that the Black maid presents to her.

The Black maid is pivotal in the discussion of race and sexuality within Modernism. “The association of the black with concupiscence reaches back into the Middle Ages...The association of figures of the same sex stressed the special status of female sexuality” (Gilman 16). *Olympia* alludes to the sexuality of both these women and Europe’s prevailing attitudes towards it.

Manet’s juxtaposition of the black body of the maid with the white body of the prostitute located the conflation of race and sexual deviance within the nineteenth-century discourses of female sexuality...They were both viewed as sexually deviant in an essential way that implicated their very biology. But whereas the white woman’s sexual deviance allowed for the possibility of transcendence or redemption, the black woman, physically marked by the stain/color of her racial difference, could never transcend her “primitive” sexuality (Nelson 134).

The Black maid in this work, akin to within European society, is denied sexual agency.

In *Not Manet’s Type*, Weems writes “It was clear that I was not Manet’s type” most likely alluding to the treatment of the Black maid in *Olympia*. Manet comments on racial sexuality but used the White prostitute as the primary focus in this painting instead of equally incorporating the Black maid. This maid serves more as a background figure opposed to *Olympia*. Weems comments on Manet’s preference for the White subject; *Olympia* is one of Manet’s only paintings that incorporates the Black subject yet does not make this subject a primary focus suggesting that Manet’s “type” for female models and subjects is that of White, European women.

Pablo Picasso, who aided in Modernism’s *negrophilie*, created a parody of Manet’s *Olympia* making the Black subject the primary subject. *A parody of Manet’s Olympia with Junyer and Picasso* replaces *Olympia* with a Black prostitute whose nude body is emphasized by the blue color that starkly contrasts with the white background and other figures. One of the male figures is arguably Picasso himself who bares striking similarities to Picasso’s self-portraits in the early twentieth century. “By producing a picture of himself pointing at the reclining Negress, Picasso stresses his self-consciousness about his own absorption with the African as the subject of Modern art” (Gubar 218). Unlike *Olympia*, this figure does not make an attempt to hide her body; her breasts and genitalia are prominently displayed as her two male courtesans gaze at her genitalia. “The bodies for the black woman and the white prostitute became conflated into a single iconic “Hottentot” anatomy in his drawing to service not one but two white men The Black woman, always already sexually promiscuous, uncontrollable and feral, is represented as a prostitute.” (Nelson 135). Picasso used the Black subject as the primary focus in this work but did so in a much different way than Manet. He appropriated this woman into his drawing to further bolster existing stereotypes surrounding Black European women such as their sexual appetite and promiscuity. Unlike *Olympia*, who is suggested by Manet to only sexually serve one male at a time, this woman serves two men simultaneously. Picasso has transformed this woman into a sexual spectacle to be degraded by the focus on her genitalia and breasts rather than her face which is barely defined.

*Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. M.)* further focuses on Picasso's interest in fetishizing and appropriating African subjects into Modernism. This painting, depicting a group of prostitutes in Barcelona, was extremely controversial when it was first exhibited not only for the dripping sexuality but also the incorporation of the African mask which adorns the prostitute that is squatting in the right-hand corner. Similar to his parody of Manet's *Olympia*, Picasso likens excessive sexuality to Black women. "Picasso saw the sexualized female as the visual analogue of the black...He linked the inmates of a brothel in Barcelona with the black by using the theme of African masks to characterize their appearance "(Gilman 25). Although innovative through its Cubist style, Picasso portrays race in a very limited, stereotypical way.

In the second photograph of *Not Manet's Type*, Weems states that Picasso only uses her. Possibly alluding to these two works, she comments on how Black women and the African subject have been wrongfully appropriated into Picasso's works. Rather than innovatively depicting the Black subject or use African masks and sculptures in their rightful domain, Picasso creates a pastiche of Modernism and the African subject that bolsters ethnocentrism.

Both Picasso and Manet bolster existing notions of beauty within Modernism. Similar to Havelock Ellis, whose findings stated that beauty ran parallel to evolution, Picasso and Manet equate White with beauty and Black with ugliness or savageness. These artists, whose works have become archetypes of Modern art, exemplify ideologies of beauty that Weems finds troubling. The Black woman in each of the previous works discussed remains confined to traditional archetypes and serves as either a background or exotic spectacle for the viewer.

Weems believes that Duchamp, like many other Modernists, did not incorporate Black women within his work stating, "Duchamp had never considered me". Marcel Duchamp, famed as a Dadaist and Surrealist that pushed the boundaries of art, did not generally make gender or race issues within his work; he instead focused on readymade objects: artwork created using everyday objects and reappropriating them as art. Duchamp, however, did play with gender briefly with his alter ego Rose Sélavy. In the early 1920s, Duchamp took on this pseudonym while dressing up as a woman in photographs. A fan of puns, Duchamp made the name for his drag character sound like "Eros, that's life". Rose Sélavy forced viewers to question the boundaries of gender. However, issues of race is never touched upon within his work. Weems continually appears disappointed by Modernism; men who were famed as innovators did not use their position to innovatively comment on race more specifically the Black female.

She, however, appears thankful that some Modernists, such as William de Kooning, did not incorporate the Black female subject in his works, stating in fourth photo in the series "But it could have been worse imagine my fate had De Kooning gotten hold of me". De Kooning, an American abstract expressionist, violently portrayed women in his *Woman* series. This series "clearly bring together the legacy of Picasso's cut-up women and the iconic objectification of woman in the blood red lips that are displaced and violated sign of her 'wound'".

De Kooning uses Picasso to allow him to cut the female open...The ambiguity of these images lies precisely in their oscillation between metonymic and metaphoric figuration of female sexuality on the one hand, and of masculine castration fantasies on the other” (Orton & Pollock 272).

In *Woman I*, the woman’s body is mostly indistinguishable from the background besides her breasts which are outlined in black paint. De Kooning violently depicts this woman through his aggressive brushstrokes; she is fragmented appearing as a distorted sexual object to be used by men. De Kooning suggests that this woman is White through the grayish-white pigmentation of the skin. Weems believes that the depiction of Black women could have been further damaged if de Kooning chose to represent this subject in such a violent way.

Relying on existent ideas of beauty, Weems comments on the role of Black women within Modernism, naming several well-known artists from this period, she demonstrates both the artist and European society denied Black women beauty and sexual agency. These beauty ideals, deeply entrenched within Modern European society, only allowed White women to be sexual and feminine; Black women were equated with ugliness, exoticness, and masculinity as they did not occupy the same roles as their White counterparts. Bringing attention to these issues, she simultaneously brings the Black subject to the forefront of discussion allowing the limited depiction of race to be criticized and evaluated within Modern art.

Weems builds off of Modernist racial beauty ideologies and applies these to contemporary society. After the viewer ruminates over the role and rendering of Black women in the early twentieth-century, they are encouraged to think about how or if these ideals have changed. This series can then be related to bell hook’s theories on Black self-hatred and loving blackness. According to contemporary theories like Sheila Jeffreys and bell hooks, society still equates Black with ugliness and White with beauty. Western cultural hegemony has evolved from merely depicting Black women in specific archetypes to suggesting that changing their skin tone, hair color, and overall appearance will grant them freedom from the racial beauty dichotomy.

*Not Manet’s Type* allows Weems to engage the viewer and discuss previously unexplored issues of race, beauty, and sex. Allowing the viewer to interact with her in an intimate, private setting, Weems creates a space to ruminate over issues posed by the text underneath. Her complaints are bolstered by European racial hegemonic ideologies which equated White with beauty and Black with ugliness. Appearing disheveled, frustrated, and exhausted, she seems disappointed with these artists; although innovative in style and subject matter, Manet, Picasso and Duchamp remain conservative when it comes to race depicting the Black subject in preexisting archetypes. In spite of these critical issues of race and beauty within Modern art, Weems succeeds at bringing these issues into discussion. *Not Manet’s Type* allows viewers from all different backgrounds to critically engage with Weems and castigate championed Modernists’ use of Black women in their artwork.

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