

VOGUE

At the Obama Presidential Center, Carrie Mae Weems Is Using Jazz to Tell a Uniquely American Story



Photo: The Obama Foundation

When photographer Carrie Mae Weems first got a call about creating a new commission for the Obama Presidential Center back in 2023, she found herself revisiting a conversation she'd had with her friend Butch Morris, the late cornetist and composer, in the days following Barack Obama's historic presidential victory 15 years earlier.

The two were at lunch, discussing what Obama's win would mean for America—and especially for Black Americans—and how they might capture such a moment in their art. Morris's answer was immediate. "I hear the blare of trumpets," he told Weems.

Weems circled around that notion as she imagined, and abandoned, several ideas for what would eventually become *The Cool Blue Wind*, a 29-piece photo collage installed on the top floor of the museum tower.

The piece is one of 28 site-specific works created by 30 artists, including Mark Bradford, Maya Lin, Julie Mehretu, and the late Richard Hunt, for the 19-acre site on Chicago's curador of the State Department's Art in Embassies program—stand as one the most ambitious undertakings on the sprawling campus, which will open to the public on June 19.



Photo: The Obama Foundation

“The center is really so much about dialogue, about convening, about bringing people together,” says Louise Bernard, the center’s museum director. “The arts are an amazing vehicle for doing that work.” The commissions, she adds, are “able to speak to the idea of hope and possibility” and “bring a sense of gravity to the convening areas.”

Few artists seem better suited to such an assignment than Weems. A MacArthur fellow and the first Black woman to receive a retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum, Weems, 73, is one of the most influential voices in contemporary American photography. For more than four decades, the multidisciplinary artist has created work that probes the stories America tells about itself. Her landmark *Kitchen Table Series* (1989–90), for example, used the intimate terrain of family life to illuminate larger questions about race, gender, and class. In *The Museum Series* (2005–06), Weems appears with her back to the camera outside institutions such as the Louvre and Tate Modern, questioning whose histories museums preserve and canonize, and whose they exclude. And in *Blue Notes* (2014–15), a series of blurred and atmospheric portraits of Black cultural figures, Weems considers the ways racism has obscured and diminished the legacies of Black American icons.

Weems has also spent years grappling with what Obama represented in the broader American imagination. In *Constructing History* (2008), she incorporated footage from across the country to document reactions to Obama's historic candidacy and election. In 2012, Weems created another video work, *the Obama Project*, which examined both the hopes and the symbolic weight projected onto the nation's first Black president. So, when the Obama Foundation approached Weems about making a piece, the artist had no shortage of ideas.

Weems's first proposals were more literal. One incorporated faces of those who worked alongside Obama throughout his career. Another idea focused on the president himself. "But I realized there will be thousands of images of Obama," Weems recalls. "They didn't need another one from me." Eventually, she returned to Morris's trumpets.

Like a democratic society, a jazz ensemble depends on balancing individual expression and collective responsibility. "There are all these individuals who are working together toward a common cause or theme," says Weems. "And each one, at a certain point in the music, is allowed to play their solo and be heard within the context of the song." No matter how far afield the music travels, she added, "you have to stay in step and return to the foundation in order for it all to work together seamlessly."

It mattered, too, that jazz is rooted in a distinctly Black American tradition. "In the United States, we are the primary articulators of jazz and blues," Weems says. *The jazz trumpet*, she felt, offered a unique way of thinking about Obama's rise and the possibility of collective change.



Photo: The Obama Foundation

The collage, created from both archival images and Weems's own photographs, begins with soldiers from the 54th Massachusetts Regiment, the famed Black Civil War unit, and moves through images of jazz musicians, instruments, and marchers, before culminating with young people dancing during the Civil Rights Movement. Between them, fragments of music history unfold across the wall. "There's a rhythm to the photographs," Weems says. "The way they work in juxtaposition to one another, what's large, what's small." The work "has a certain kind of dynamic, a narrative that is actually played out on the wall."

Weems also composed an original 40-minute piece with musicians Craig Harris and Vijay Iyer, among others, that accompanies the collage. Like the collage, the music, titled "The Obama Suite," unfolds across several movements, with melodies passed between walking bass lines, haunting meditations, and emphatic improvisations. The result is a rich sonic tapestry that complements, and deepens, the visual piece.



Sky of Hope by Idris Khan in the Sky Room at the Obama Presidential Center. Photo: The Obama Foundation

That idea is echoed throughout the campus, where many of the art commissions examine the unfinished project of America itself. In the Sky Room, for example, *Sky of Hope* by the artist Idris Khan transforms Obama's 2015 Selma speech into a cascade of hand-stamped text. Outside, Alison Saar's sculpture *Torch Song* reimagines the Statue of Liberty through the lens of blues music and Black womanhood. Jeffrey Gibson's *Yet With a Steady Beat* combines Indigenous visual traditions with affirmations such as "I've Got the Power" and "I Am the Proud Child of an Immigrant."

"Every artist really understood that this was a significant moment, and that we had stepped into history," Weems says. Creating a work on such a scale, she added, meant asking a larger question: "Does the piece have the ability to speak to now and to the future of now?"