

## BACK TO THE BONE - Part I

### A Conversation with Todd Gray and Carrie Mae Weems

CMW: Just a few minutes ago I went over to my CD player and popped in Bobby McFerrin's music. Just as I turned it on, I realized there's a connection between what he's doing as a musician and what you're doing as an artist/photographer. With his amazing voice, Bobby McFerrin, this sort of crazy, kinetic human being, is playing with, in, and through the classics, bending them, making chamber or orchestral music something very different; he's *playing with* the classics. I thought: Wait a minute. Todd Gray is playing with the classics. You're playing with popular iconography, in terms of American pop culture, playing with the figures that we all grew up with. For the last fifty years we've been inundated with this material. Suddenly you've taken this pop material and flexed it and made them into something new.

TG: When I teach, I often tell my students to think of the camera as a musical instrument, like a guitar. You can play it as you've been taught, or you can go off in your own way and use it as an interpretive instrument. I've applied that to my thinking, working in a hybrid way to create a combination that mixes fine art and pop art. I think that's where my images work in people's minds, because they have to reconcile what they're looking at with the reaction they've learned to have to a particular pop culture experience.

CMW: These recent images of yours are very painterly. They make references to photography, and they are photographs, but they could also be airbrushed paintings.

TG: They break away from the traditional photograph. They resist that reading or they call it into question. They may actually share a lot more surface issues with painting than with photography. They suggest a dialogue between the two.

CMW: In terms of your formal approach, Todd, you began five years ago working with the silhouette form. Where did that come from?

TG: Having done work that was very much involved in the critical discourse around being Black in this culture right now, I also wanted to talk about issues that were not centered on my Blackness.

CMW: That work was very complicated, involving identity issues. It was much more fleshed-out than just being centered around Blackness. It was more like a critique of Blackness.

TG: The transition came about partly because I wanted to make absolutely beautiful photographic prints. I wanted to take on the idea of beauty because that idea had become tainted for me as a result of my academic training at Cal Arts. It was time to examine why that was considered pejorative. I also felt that my earlier work was just starting to make too much sense. I realized I needed to bring in psychological issues, and issues of sexuality and desire.

CMW: The way you bend the silhouettes -- I don't really want to use the word deconstructing -- maybe a better word is transforming, or even heightening or problematizing these images. I think it's probably the most important thing about the way your work functions. Suddenly the Goofy cartoon character is transformed into an ominous and brooding figure.

TG: What interests me is the potential for threat that these figures have, and their potential to trigger off other visual stereotypes. What I enjoy most about the work is it's ability to hold several different reads from several different audiences.

CMW: I'm also knocked out by the sexual iconography and the sexual play, placing figures we vaguely recognize as sweet and adorable cartoon characters into a highly sexualized place, disrupting what we've known previously. That's what I mean by bending the work, forcing it into another context. And then in another way, you start to have a sense of the ways in which we are toyed with and screwed by the culture of consumption.

TG: That interests me greatly. I want the viewer to deal with a lot of the issues that I deal with: Guilt, the falling from grace and innocence, and the whole idea of having desire but then thinking that desire may be bad or wrong. I wanted to evoke that, opening up that dialogue with viewers.

CMW: The work plays across a number of different positions. On the one hand you have that singular image of Bugs Bunny, then this figure with the corkscrew coming through him, or from him, as an extension of him. Those two images are so radically different they are no longer recognizable characters. They're only recognizable to the extent that they play a part in our psyche. But it's not an altogether familiar image in terms of pop culture.

TG: The name is recognizable but not the function. The function has been totally convoluted. And then one has to create new meaning for them. How do you react to that sense of sweetness that's usually connected with cartoons or Disney characters when it also involves something that's really aberrant. When they appear in the same picture plane, you are forced to create new meaning within that singular context. How do you make that transition? I'm very interested in getting viewers to think about how they construct meaning. They aren't given the meaning, but they have to discover the meaning or create the meaning for themselves. And that includes myself as well.

CMW: Why the triptych?

TG: Raised a Roman Catholic, I have dealt throughout my life with the residue of Catholicism and how it colors my thinking, how I deal with sex and guilt. I not only wanted to disrupt these familiar figures and in the process address issues of commodification, I also wanted them to be framed within a power system such as the Christian religion, thus the triptych.

CMW: There's a curious tension in them. In some cases the center image in the triptychs is the more active one. Maybe that's simply located in the obvious fact that there's a central engagement between two entities. The

side panels are more static. For instance, in the image of Bugs Bunny and the Piggy figure with the couple fucking in the center, there is a very different kind of presence. That is a really powerful presentation. But something shifts in the other piece, for instance with Daffy Duck or Mickey Mouse, in relation to the center panel. They are a bit more complicated.

TG: And much more subtle. I think there's so much of a built-in response to the suggestion of gay sexuality, to homoerotic imagery, even though it's just clearly two toys. The mere idea provokes certain cultural responses in a majority of people.

CMW: You seem to be presenting more sequences of photographs, suggesting a narrative that moves across the individual works. Using a triptych is like telling a story; you have a beginning, a middle, and an end. But it takes longer to move across that story because it doesn't present a singular or linear narrative. Do you think that's another reason you're using triptychs as opposed to single images alone?

TG: I started putting triptychs together specifically because a singular image was not enough. My ideas involved more issues than could be conveyed in a singular image.

CMW: But there are also several singular pieces in this recent series that stand alone as powerful images. They demand and command a certain pause, attention, and thoughtfulness. In a sense, you have two ways of telling a story. Is this the reason you began to rely on other strategies of working? It becomes a complex laying out of images. It might be a triptych or a diptych. It might be five pieces, ten pieces, a whole fuckin' room. It's not about one single image, but it's about the composite of all of these images coming together in order to make a much more complex statement.

Maybe the traditional way of viewing photographs is no longer enough for either of us. Basically the history of photography has been that you work for several years to make a collection of photographs, then frame 'em up and put 'em on the wall about ten inches apart, and that's

that. You know? You and I have been resisting that for a very long time. Or maybe it's not so much a question of photography not being enough. Rather, it's the way we've been using photography which hasn't been enough. Is photography enough for you, Todd?

TG: I've been thinking more of spaces, where you not only look at a piece, but actually enter a space and become enveloped by the sensibility, by the ideas, and must consider your relationship to that space in order to create meaning from it. I'd like to create a space that metaphorically spins and throws off. A media train wreck.

I'm also thinking about time. I'm thinking about ideas that move. The time one takes in front of a piece, contemplating it or dancing with it if you will, is arbitrary. It's happening right when you're in front of the piece. In contrast, a video requires you to stay with it for a specific predefined amount of time. Afterwards you can process it, when it's in your head. Some of my ideas are going in that direction. Photography does not demand enough time to fully experience a piece. That's why I wonder if photography is enough, because it can be limiting to my ideas. Given the complexity of some of these ideas, maybe they can't be accomplished in a fixed moment or communicated in a single visual icon. It's something that needs to move through space and may also involve your ears.

CMW: Do you think of your work as spectacle?

TG: I think I use elements of spectacle, specifically the language of spectacle, in that I'm appropriating that language from mass media. The work is dependent on that system, on that strategy, because the viewer has been trained to react to it.

CMW: What is it about the spectacle in your work, or in the work of others that you admire, that offers a new way of thinking about artistic practice and where that can possibly take us? Or is it just an illusion that art takes us anywhere?

TG: For me it's not an illusion. I definitely get taken -- sometimes for a ride. [Laughs] And sometimes someplace wonderful, and hopefully it makes me more self aware. I use the element of spectacle as another form of critique because I like to point back to the popular language currently used in mass media. The whole idea of spectacle is to reduce everyone to spectators so they are numbed in looking at an event. They have no other recourse. It seems too massive to have any sense of control over it, either intellectually, physically, or economically. I like bringing that concept into an art space, into the dialogue of art so that it can mirror the dialogue of pop culture, of commodity culture. I think I use spectacle as an inclusive device, as a form that people are familiar with. So that someone who has not studied art history, who does not pour over *Artforum*, who is not part of that elite dialogue will still recognize their position to the work because the language of spectacle is apparent. That sign of spectacle welcomes them into the work as the first utterance of the dialogue. I want a kaboom. I want people to get hit. And I want there to be nuance, but I want it to follow the flash of recognition.

CMW: Beautifully stated. In this language-based world of ours everything is kind of piled on top of the other, to be consumed and devoured by something else. I think we sometimes lose sight of our own potential, our own possibilities, and the breadth of our own work. On the one hand there is a kind of mass spectacle that dehumanizes. But you are suggesting that you can produce a spectacle against, in which for a moment there's the realization that your language, your voice, has not been completely subsumed. It has not been lost, and it must be uttered. The artist has the possibility of realizing that and articulating that, serving as a powerful voice.

TG: Most definitely.

CMW: Outside of the context of a gallery in the mid-1980s, your early pieces portraying boxers punching out buildings accomplished that in the public space. In the quiet of night you'd plaster these huge pieces around Los Angeles, and the next morning people saw these amazing

photographs, 6 X 8 feet, ripped and torn. Your language putting its stamp on the city.

TG: I'd put them up anonymously, then take a snapshot just to record it. Displayed on the streets of the city, that early work was actually a very direct way of dealing with the question of participating in the cultural elitism of the gallery system. Resisting entrance into that system, I chose to work in agitprop, the guerrilla art mode. I wanted to speak directly to people. I didn't want to be interpreted by a gallery or a museum or a cultural center. I did not want an interpreter present. I wanted the reaction to be direct. And I wanted there to be an element of confusion where the viewer had to assign meaning to image. The images were so visceral, people were compelled to engage their immediate responses to them and ask: What the hell is this? Is it advertising? What does this have to do with my life?

## BACK TO THE BONE - Part II

### A Conversation with Todd Gray and Carrie Mae Weems

CMW: The kind of critique you provide is an important one. But at the same time you're involved in the culture of consumption in a very direct and unmitigated way. I'm thinking about your work as a commercial photographer. And I'm also thinking about much of the work you've been engaged in since I've known you over the last fifteen years -- your artistic work. How does your most recent work connect with all this?

TG: Because I work both in the world of advertising and in the world of fine art, there is a contradiction. I think my work is informed by this, however, and I'm very conscious of that contradiction. I've actually infused the contradiction in my work. I'm particularly curious about what happens when you mix high and low culture, fine art culture and pop culture. We normally separate the two, but what happens when these two trains collide?

CMW: That's also something I've become interested in. I'm very much interested in the mess of things, not necessarily the resolve. To a certain extent I've simply grown to believe that there are no fuckin' answers. Ultimately there are only a series of questions. Some of those questions are very simple, direct ones and some are very, very complicated. Of course, I guess solving them doesn't necessarily mean that you come to an answer, you know. Solving them for yourself might be that you've just figured out exactly what the next question might be.

TG: A lot of what you're saying describes the process I go through.

CMW: You and I have talked about, on the one hand, our great desire to be considered artists in our own right. On the other hand, there are only rare moments when we can think about ourselves apart from our identity as African-Americans. Part of the power and the charm and the fun of what diasporic artists like Bobby McFerrin or Anna Devere Smith or Donald Bird are doing is that the material passes through this Black mind, it

passes through this Black body. It's in this passage that it takes on another cultural nuance.

TG: I was reading Cornel West, and he pointed out that jazz could never have come about if Africans hadn't been introduced to European musical instruments. Both conditions were needed for jazz to happen. And so he sees it as a hybrid, as an effect of the diaspora.

CMW: We are contextualized, you see. The power of Black art is, in fact, because it is Black. For me it's an embrace of what it means to be and how I interpret that being. That's the artistic element that you're really talking about. How we process, how we interpret this experience is different, right? Your work is different than mine, but nevertheless it exists on 'the changing same,' as Baraka would say.

TG: I acknowledge what you're saying wholeheartedly. But I also know that what affects me is my utter suspicion of culture, because it's been my history and my experience that it often contradicts itself when it comes to me. That's why I want to look at it. The culture sets up rules that I've been told to follow. I've often found when I follow those rules I've actually gone backwards. It's because of this that I look at the system of culture with extreme suspicion. That includes the systems of academia and of corporate culture, the whole system of survival in this society. I'm talking about how I navigate society at large because of my Blackness.

CMW: It's a system that's not for you. You might as well break the rules because the rules weren't meant for you anyway, right? [Laughs]

TG: Right, definitely. Even to the point of looking at Mickey Mouse with suspicion, and looking at Daisy Duck with suspicion, because I have a feeling that there's a big old jackhammer behind their bodies, ready to hit me over the head. [Laughs]

CMW: We are in this very curious and unique dilemma as African-American artists, as Black artists -- whatever we want to use. My father said, "Don't

call me colored, don't call me black, don't call me negro. Call me a man."  
[Laughs]

TG: I hear that.

CMW: On the one hand, there is something specific and unique about our historical circumstance. Very ugly things have happened, very tragic things have happened, and amazingly beautiful things have happened. You know that idea of mess that I was talking about earlier? We are a very messy people. But nevertheless, weaving throughout is an effervescence, a particular kind of energy and vision, a particular way of moving, a particular kind of language, a particular way of participating in the world -- those things are very unique, very powerful, very beautiful and often very difficult to describe. Like this idea of bending, which is part of the ongoing tradition within African-based communities, to improvise, to flex, to swing with. In terms of your work or that of other diasporic artists, we're talking about a culture that has not been allowed to participate within the dominant system. And even when one attempts to, there's the critique that you're going with the status quo. So necessarily out of your own determination to be free, you have to go against the cultural grain. You have to exist on the edge of things.

TG: I like to be in the river, but I really like to create on the banks, on the tributaries.

CMW: Given that your work is being shown within the borders, where is that edge for you? It's a question I have for myself.

TG: How do I view the mainstream when all the while I'm participating in the mainstream? For me it's always important to critique. I cannot do work that does not contain a strong element of critique. If I don't do that I am betraying myself on some level. If I come up with an idea in which critique is not readily apparent, I'll still pursue it because at my core, in the way I've been brought up to think, I am so much connected with the idea of fairness and speaking up about inequities that I've witnessed. I need to trust that the element of critique will be there on some level.

I feel I've resolved a lot of this in my current work, because I imagine I'm actually carrying on conversations with the individuals looking at these images in the gallery space. They're forced to think more deeply about these icons of popular culture, which seem to take on an almost religious weight when they're so large.

CMW: Popular culture, the religion of the masses, the opiate of the people.

TG: Entertainment has replaced spiritual ecstasy in our culture. Once spiritual systems gave us that feeling of euphoria, now that's been replaced by entertainment. And that's also what I'm calling into question.

CMW: There's something about this inability to pass through life without critiquing. It's a part of our conditioning, the way in which we understand our lack of privilege, the way in which we grasp the fullness of our responsibility . . . Lawd.

TG: I think I used to call that guilt. I suppose that's the word I associate with it because when growing up I attended so many predominantly Jewish schools. And I also think there's Catholic guilt. It's a word that I became familiar with. However, I feel what we're talking about now is far more complex.

CMW: Guilt is not a word that's in my vocabulary.

TG: I don't envy you, but I applaud you.

## BACK TO THE BONE - Part III

### A Conversation with Todd Gray and Carrie Mae Weems

CMW: You seem to be asking much more of yourself that you have in the past.

TG: I think the work is getting more personal in a way. I have tended to think of critique as primarily a way of looking at things outside of myself in direct relation to my Black body. Now it seems I want to look a little more inward, and by looking inward see outward. I am committed to using my voice to criticize what's going on around me, what's happening in America, what it means to be a human at the present time. I also want to look a little more inside and comment on what's going on in my head and in my body, what's going on in my perception of reality. That may reflect a little bit more accurately what's really happening.

CMW: That's very deep. There's an awful lot you can do to change the rest of the world, but the best thing you can do is to try to work on yourself. That's important work that needs to be done. You now have the understanding as well as the grace and the sophistication to turn inward and look at the complex nature of self. And it's pretty scary, but it's unavoidable if you are really want to deal.

I look around and see all the things that matter to me. And I know the only way I can deal at this point is to mediate it through my own personal experience and understanding. Do you know what I'm saying? What are the dynamics around power and race, sex and desire, that I need to look at, deal with? What are my fears and how do I grow through them? How do I uproot myself in order to plant something that's new and viable, or to uncover something that's been buried for much too long? And what does this have to do with anyone else or the work I produce?

TG: Part of my distrust of that process comes from a feeling of my insignificance as an individual. As I go inside to reflect on my concerns, my feelings, and my neuroses, I'm afraid there may not be enough value in that alone. As a result, I am drawn to using intellect to objectify what I'm experiencing, relying on intellectual tools to look outside of myself.

The split between body and mind, soul and intellect, often comes up in my work. It's a lot easier to look outside than to look inside.

CMW: It's hard for all of us, but I think it's scarier for men. You are the ones battling at this movement inside, coming to terms with accepting that you have to deal with it. I think there's something about the aesthetic quality of your photographs that must embrace more of the darkness that you're interested in, anchoring your work inside anxiety, where it belongs. To me it's very exciting to see this transformation take place, this clear articulation of a vision and expressiveness on your part. We are bringing into focus for ourselves and our audiences an amazing level of concentration and clarity of understanding. There's nothing you can do to keep it down, and it's fucking amazing. And you know when you've accomplished that, you can taste it in your mouth. You know what I mean?

TG: I know exactly.

CMW: Where does that come from?

TG: I guess that's where the humanity is. Gettin' back to the bone.

CMW: Gettin' back to the bone. It's instinct but it's also that you know you've done your work, that you've looked very deeply into the subject. It's illuminating.

TG: After a certain level of concentration and persistence, then there's clarity.

CMW: And that's what I think about the pieces in this recent series of yours. That's what's so powerful, this level of both play and seriousness. There's this beautiful saying: In seriousness there is very little room for play, but in play there is tremendous room for seriousness. I think these recent pieces really pull together in the deepest way what you've been working with for a very long time. They've become nightmares and we can really see them.

TG: They're definitely very dark nightmares. That's the way I see the world when I look, when I feel. I don't breathe it like that twenty-four hours a day because I just wouldn't be able to function. But I feel a real need to give a sense of what that is like, to communicate it and therefore gain more clarity about it. With that recognition and articulation comes more understanding, and with that understanding comes, hopefully, a way to live more fluidly, to go through life with a heightened awareness and with my humanity a little more intact. Hopefully by sharing it, that gesture opens a dialogue with other individuals whereby questions start getting asked, and feelings that have been submerged rise to the surface and are recognized. Hence, their experience of self and their experience of life expands.

CMW: What kind of impact does your work have on the audience? Do Black audiences perceive it differently than White or Asian audiences?

TG: I want to share something with you: I went to visit MOCA in Los Angeles a few weeks ago because my Goofy piece was included in a group exhibition there. A white man in his mid- to late thirties stood transfixed in front of that piece for a good five minutes. He just wouldn't move. I sort of stayed at the periphery until he did, and then introduced myself. I told him, "Wow, this is the longest I've ever seen somebody stand in front . . ." And he said, "I can't believe these people just come up to the work and smile and walk away. Don't they get it? Don't they see what you're doing? That is some bad, mean, motherfuckin' black man coming to rip me off or kill me. Man, all my fear of black people is right there." While we were talking, other people came by and he became irritated that no one else could see it. He said, "Don't they see what you're saying? Because this is no joke. You are not joking." I said, "You're right, I'm not joking."

CMW: That's what he said?

TG: Straight up. That was a perfect meeting in the piece of the conscious and the unconscious coming in through the back door, of what the piece

communicates objectively and subjectively. It's a rare person that gets it on both levels. I think most people experience a lot of tension in resolving what's pictured. The ethnic or socio-political thing called Blackness is subtle because there's not a Black person being located in these pieces. The overt sign of that body is absent. But I think the funk is there, and there's soul. Perhaps there's an aspect of reality and emotional weight that transcends Blackness. People can sense it if they can just get in touch with their humanity.

CMW: There are expectations that you're supposed to be doing a certain kind of work if you're Black. The Black subject matter is supposed to be clear and obvious in the work. It's supposed to be about Black people. It's a straightjacket that's being placed on us, forcing us into a box. It's horrible -- prejudicial and mean-spirited. When I do work that is clearly about something other than Blackness (which is most often the way white people insist upon reading all of my work), they just don't know what to do with it, and it doesn't get shown.

TG: They want you to luxuriate in your Blackness.

CMW: Exactly. Because they need to make statements and claims and money off that to the extent that they can. It's an economic thing. Often there's no vested interest in the work. Perhaps it's just being used for the benefit of a curator's career.

TG: I reflect on many such questions before making work. Why am I making it? Is it Black enough? Is it contributing something to the critical dialogue of contemporary art? Does it have presence? Is it going to be a success? Is there going to be some element of the profound there? Instead I would rather just do it and trust in the process, trying not to limit the work. But that's really difficult. It makes me think back to that white person at MOCA and all he could see in my Goofy piece was Blackness.

CMW: Comin' to get him, honey. [Laughs]

TG: I guess it comes down to whether people are aware enough and open enough to let something act upon them, to let down their guard and let their humanity take effect.