ON VIEW JUNE 17 2023

PRESENTED AT
THE ALICE AUSTEN HOUSE MUSEUM

CURATED BY
VICTORIA MUNRO,
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
ALICE AUSTEN HOUSE
Jean Weisinger is an artist who cares deeply for her subjects and approaches her work with a sensitivity that reveals itself in her vast archive of work.

I was first introduced to Jean in 2020 when I was curating an exhibition dedicated to the power of Audre Lorde’s words and her representation in photographs. Jean has taken some of the most iconic images of Audre, and I felt compelled to understand more about her process, body of work, and experience as a photographer. Over the following two and half years, I have been so fortunate to be in conversation with Jean about the possibility of a solo exhibition to begin to shine a light on her decades long career and the impact of her work.

As an artist who curates exhibitions, I center care, support, and artistic collaboration in the process of creating exhibitions that can foster understanding and create new pathways for artists. This exhibition is a small glimpse of what is possible for Jean and her work.

Progress Towards Freedom and Love feels at home here in Alice Austen’s living room and bedroom spaces, and speaks to the level of intimacy that is ever-present in these photographs.

Progress Towards Freedom and Love should grow and travel to be viewed by an expansive audience, mirroring Jean’s travels with her box of printed photographs at the ready to reveal to people of color around the world that they can see representations of themselves and feel included.

Jean Weisinger is an essential voice in Black photography, and I am honored to support the ongoing efforts to preserve and share her largely unpublished canon of work.

— Victoria Munro, Executive Director, Alice Austen House
I am so excited about returning to working on my negatives and photographs; I fell in love last week with the sight, the feelings of all those beautiful faces, spirits, and souls who have given me their trust—the ones who I have had the privilege to document.

I hope that I get to make more exhibits, to produce a proper book detailing my journey as an African American photographer. I want to share this rather enormous body of work with the world. (I can’t quite believe that over the years, I have taken nearly 250,000 photographs that I can count so far.) And as Audre Lorde said to me, “Jean, these photographs are beautiful, positive, and powerful images of women—you need to show your work SO THE WORLD CAN SEE.”

Getting my breath back after 18 years of struggling with asthma has made such a great difference in my life, thanks to my incredible doctors, and the people who stood by me during many difficult years, never giving up on me: the friends who helped me remember to never give up on myself. And then one day, Victoria Munro called, offering me an exhibition at the Alice Austen House Museum. After the recent passing of my beloved grandson Ivory P. Jones Jr., I couldn’t imagine continuing with my photographic work: Ivory was my biggest fan, my soulmate, the one person who never judged me.

Despite my initial hesitation, Victoria didn’t—wouldn’t—give up on me and Ivory’s words “get busy living, grandma-ma” wouldn’t let me sleep.

So here we are. Here I am.

PROGRESS TOWARDS FREEDOM AND LOVE
This portrait of Audre Lorde (1934–1992), taken in 1990 in Boston at the *I am Your Sister* conference, was one of my very first photographs—the beginning of my passionate journey to discover what was to become my life’s work.

When I first heard about this conference, honoring and praising Audre Lorde and her astonishingly beautiful, mythological, spiritual, and often African-focused poetry, I knew I had to be there. Teaching myself along the way, I wanted to document every moment, every day of this great event, and oh how happy I was that Audre Lorde was alive to experience being embraced by this out-pouring of love, able to see how much her work mattered, to know she had a powerful impact on the lives of women and girls all over the world.

Insisting that “poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives,” and that “in our world, divide and conquer must become define and empower,” in her poetry, essays, and memoirs, Audre Lorde announced the many—and inseparable—aspects of her being: “Perhaps for some of you here today, I am the face of one of your fears. Because I am woman, because I am Black, because I am lesbian, because I am myself—a Black woman warrior poet doing my work...are you doing yours?”

Known for her many volumes of poetry, including *From a Land Where Other People Live*, *The Black Unicorn*, *Coal*, *Our Dead Behind Us: Poems*, and *The Marvelous Arithmetics of Distance*, Lorde has also written numerous books of memoirs, essays, and speeches, like *Sister Outsider*, *The Cancer Journals*, *A Burst of Light*, *The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House*, and—like Maya Angelou’s genre-bending *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*—Lorde merges biography and invention, what she names a bio-mythology: *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name.*
Novelist, poet, and non-fiction writer, recipient of the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award for her much beloved novel, *The Color of Purple*.

This is the first time that I accompanied Alice to one of her readings. After her wonderful and joyful reading, she was signing books with a ballpoint pen. As a lover of fountain pens (which I always carried with me), I handed Alice my silver fountain pen to sign her books, and decided to take a photograph to show her how well the pen looked in her hand.
Over the years, I have taken many self-portraits, but this was the first time that I decided to use my camera to take a different perspective for a self-portrait, to fully apprehend how in a single moment of time, Alice Walker was seeing me. In my art studio, I was dressed in her cotton shirt.
Jean Weisinger,
Rigoberta Menchú
Oakland, 1990

I took this photograph in 1990 at a big celebration in Oakland, CA, after Nelson Mandela was released from prison. Alice Walker was speaking, as was Rigoberta Menchú. I never met her, but I took this photograph of her with a long lens from the audience.
Jean Weisinger
Demonstration Around Pro-Choice
1992
Jean Weisinger,
Imani Harrington
At the Beach, circa 1992

Playwright, writer, artist, and producer Imani Harrington’s writings and ideas on HIV/AIDS have been featured in numerous magazines, newspapers, and abstracts, as well as at local and national conferences. She also writes reviews on theater and psychology and leads workshops and performances. Ms. Harrington has received many awards for her writing and her social and community activism, including Bay Area Poets & Writers Award for Fiction, the Giorno Poetry Award and a PEN American West grant. She is the author of the collection of plays Positive/Negative: Women of Color and HIV/AIDS.
An Oakland native, Paris Williams has always had an interest in history. She received her degree in Anthropology from Antioch College and MA at the University of California, Berkeley. After conducting research and fieldwork in more than a dozen countries, she was commissioned by Festival at the Lake in 1990 to develop this exhibit on the history of Oakland’s natural and ethnic diversity. She also worked on an oral history project on the California Hotel and the development of the post-war African American community in Oakland.
In the summer of maybe 1984, I was trying to get to California from Chicago and friends had told me about three women who were looking for a fourth rider to save money on a trip that would end in California. During the trip, these three women—all white—told me that Angela Davis was going to be the featured speaker at a conference in Arcata, California, so I decided Angela should certainly have as many women of color participants as possible.

I had always wanted to meet her—so I decided I would definitely go to this conference with the three of them. The conference, however, was sold out, but I somehow managed to make myself invisible (something I had done with a sold-out Gordon Parks conference too) and just strolled in the door—despite security women on either side of the door checking for passes. I stopped for free coffee and doughnuts and spoke for a while with Angela herself without realizing who she was until she walked up onto the stage, and I saw the tall, beautiful, articulate woman I had just spoken to. I was more than a little embarrassed. But I got in line to say hello and told her I had to go as I didn’t have tickets to stay.

Her kindness and our sense of connection were quite powerful for me. She immediately went to the organizer and requested a conference pass and a meal ticket for me (which I shared with my three sister travelers, who, like me, didn’t have any money for food at the event.) Angela and I had several conversations during the day, and I was able to photograph her there.

That was how I met her. We exchanged numbers, and eventually Angela wrote me a note because I had told her I was planning to move to San Francisco. So she sent me a letter and she said, “If you’re still thinking about coming to California, you should do it by November because this big group, NIA, is having their first gathering of African American lesbian women.

Angela Davis, cultural theorist, essayist, autobiographer, and the 1980 Communist Party candidate for Vice President of the United States, is Professor Emerita in the History of Consciousness and Feminist Studies Department at the University of California, Santa Cruz. She is a scholar, historian, and political activist who has been fighting against economic and racial injustice since the 1960s.

Wide-ranging in her areas of interest, Angela Davis authored *Women, Culture and Politics* (1989) and *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (1998), a text that interpreted “the work of these three prominent performing artists of the African American past as helping to forge other legacies—blues legacies, black working-class legacies, of feminism.”
Among her many exceptional books, Davis’ 1981 collection of essays, *Women, Race and Class*, discusses the conditions of slavery for woman, and cites the courageous and infuriated words of Margaret Garner (the historical figure who inspired Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*: “I will go singing to the gallows rather than be returned to slavery.”

Indicting Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* for “miserably fail[ing] to capture the reality and the truth of Black women’s resistance to slavery, Davis also indicts contemporary white feminists for their own occluded vision. In “Rape, Racism, and the Myth of the Black Rapist,” an essay included in *Women, Race and Class*, she focused attention on Susan Brownmiller’s racist misreading of a Black fourteen year old boy’s alleged wolf whistle at a white woman in Mississippi; Carolyn Bryant’s fabricated accusation was used by her husband and another white man as a justification for Emmett Till’s abduction, torture, and murder.

Her essays offer a Marxist analysis of racial oppression in America, and argue persuasively that the long-term ramifications of freeing political prisoners (of which she at one time was one) “transcend its immediate objective to free specific individuals,” noting that the struggle to free the “Scottsboro Boys” resulted in Supreme Court decisions requiring that indigent defendants be provided with free legal representation in capital cases, and that blacks not be barred from jury duty. Unfortunately, given implicit bias and systemic racism, coerced false confessions and prosecutorial misconduct, events like the guilty verdict for the Scottsboro Boys (nine young boys and men imprisoned for many years based on the “evidence” of two women who finally acknowledged that they were never raped, and had made the whole story up) continue to be perpetrated. The 1989 case of the “Central Park Five,” five Latino and Black teenagers, ages 14-16—later exonerated—who were wrongly convicted of the brutal assault and rape of a white woman known as the Central Park jogger, spent between six and eleven years in prison. Their convictions were later vacated after a serial rapist confessed to the crime in 2002; DNA tests confirmed his guilt. Two documentaries, one by Ken Burns (*The Central Park Five*) and a Netflix miniseries by Ava DuVernay (*When They See Us*)—beautifully done but excruciating to watch—are not about anomalies. Angela Davis’ probing essays, her determined activism regarding the carceral system, and the establishment of the Innocence Project, are all in the category of “necessary but not sufficient” to stem the tide of thousands of wrongful convictions in this country. It will—and must—take all of us.
Jean Weisinger,
ACHE Conference
San Francisco, CA 1992

The American College of Healthcare Executives (ACHE) National Congress is a premier international event dedicated to advancing healthcare leadership excellence.
Storme Webber is a two-spirit Sugpiaq / Black / Choctaw poet and interdisciplinary artist. Her work is cross genre: incorporating text, performance, audio and altar installation, archival photographs and collaboration in order to engage with ideas of history, lineage, gender, race, and sexuality. Her practice explores liminal identities, survivance, and decolonization, and does so in a blues / jazz-based experimental manner, often incorporating acapella vocals. Her performance is described by the artist Laiwan as poetics / jazz.

She has received numerous honors and residencies; including from Hedgebrook, Ragdale, and Banff Arts Centre, and recently was honored with the James W Ray Award. Her first solo museum exhibition, *Casino: A Palimpsest*, was presented at Frye Art Museum in Seattle. Minh Nyguyen, in *Art in America*, wrote:

“Rather than erect divisions between personal art and historical archives, *Casino* considered the intangible properties by which art and poetry are connected to family, ancestry, language, and public memory, revealing intergenerational, underground histories of resilience.”

She studied at Lakeside School and holds a BA from the New School and an MFA from Goddard University.
Dr. Ekua Omosupe was a graduate student in literature at UC Santa Cruz from 1985 to 1997, and received her Ph.D. in literature. She was a faculty member in the English department at Cabrillo Community College since 1992. Ekua's poems and essays are published in various journals and anthologies. Her first book of poetry, *Legacy*, was published by Talking Circles Press.
When I went to Cuba through Global Exchange in 1992, I very much wanted to meet Black Panther and member of the Black Liberation Army Assata Shakur. After attending a talk by Assata, I asked her for a personal meeting to interview and photograph her, and was delighted when she agreed.

An activist, writer, and poet, who, after being wrongfully found guilty of first degree murder and other charges in jury trials that were marked by physical abuse, the burglary of her defense counsel’s office, and government officials’ unconstitutional ex parte communications with the jury, was handed down a life sentence, and imprisoned. Managing to escape in 1979, she ultimately landed in Cuba, having been given political asylum by Fidel Castro.

She is still revered for her early and path-breaking work in Oakland and New York City, for community organizing like the Free Breakfast Program for children, which propelled elementary and high schools across the country to adopt programs like it, as well as coordinating the Black Panther Party’s Free Clinics, also an enacted concept subsequently becoming a mainstay medical program that exists in virtually every American city and rural area, as well as across many parts of the world.

Author of Assata: An Autobiography, and co-author (with Dhoruba bin Wahad and political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal) the volume Still Black, Still Strong, Assata refers to herself as a “20th century escaped slave,” and continues to this day to proudly celebrate her radical vision of resistance.
I was in the country up in Northern California at Alice's place, with my grandson Ivory—he was 5. We had just finished riding in a rowboat, and he had pulled the boat out of the water with me sitting in it. I was really surprised. So he was taking a nap, and I was writing about the day.

I've been keeping a journal since I was 14. I used to have migraine headaches, and I found that the medication the doctor prescribed made me sleepy, and I didn’t want to take it. So I started writing, and it helped. I don’t have migraines at all anymore.
Ms. Louise Patterson became the first African-American to graduate from the University of California at Berkeley in May of 1923. My meeting of Ms. Patterson was through a friend who had taken Ms. Patterson to an exhibit of my photographs in San Francisco, 1993, and she requested a meeting with me.

I arrived and was a frequent weekly visitor of hers until the end of her life. We have hours of her telling me about her circle of friends when she lived in New York, which included poet Langston Hughes and novelist Zora Neale Hurston (an American author, anthropologist, and filmmaker who portrayed the racial struggles in the early 1900s American South and published research on hoodoo. The most popular of Hurston’s four novels is *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 1937), artist Aaron Douglas, and the novelist and playwright Wallace Thurman who became her first husband.

She and Langston were very close: a lifetime friendship which she fondly spoke of during our lunches and trips to the shops. In 1940, she married William Lorenzo Patterson, lawyer and executive secretary to the International Labor Defense, which defended the Scottsboro Boys (1931–1937).
I took this photograph of Ntozake Shange (1948–2018)—poet, playwright, novelist, educator, essayist, cookbook author, actor, director, dancer, and installation artist—in the early 1990s, at San Francisco State University. I was walking on campus with Angela Davis when we unexpectedly ran into Ntozake. Since I carried my Nikon camera with me virtually everywhere, I was able to take advantage of meeting her for the very first time, and photographed her then and there.

In an interview with Henry Blackwell, Shange explains the degree to which “writing with me is a visceral thing. I have to get certain ideas out, or I will get sick, I will cry, I will become catatonic. I don’t have a choice,” a claim of a literary destiny that mirrors for me my fiercest experience of what it means to be the photographer that I am.

Like many African American political activists, writers, musicians, and other self-determined and self-empowered women, Shange—born Paulette Williams—claimed for herself a new name, an African name: Ntozake Shange: “she who comes with her own things” and she “who walks like a lion.”

Among her many publications, Shange remains most well-known for a literary genre she created and named: the Obie Award-winning “choreopoem” For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf (1975). The narrative begins staccato and broken, full of “half-notes scattered without rhythm / no tune distraught laughter falling over a black girl’s shoulder;...”dead so long, closed in her silence so long/she doesn’t know the sound of her own voice, her / infinite beauty...” But in a marvelous reclaiming of the power, possibility, and agency of black womanhood, at once historically accurate yet deeply personal, Shange celebrates seven Black women who discover their ability to heal themselves, who transform themselves into African goddesses:

   all the gods coming into me
   laying me open to myself [...]
   I found god in myself
   & I loved her / I loved her fiercely

The choreopoem repudiates and overcomes Black women’s subjugation by those black men, who—robbed of self-identity and self esteem, brutalized and colonized by systematic white racism—focus their hurt and anger, not on those who have literally and figuratively enslaved them, but on Black women instead.

Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo (1982), her first full-length novel is, like her choreopoem, a defiant admixture of traditional form, including here recipes, letters, poetry, narrative, and magic spells.

I feel so grateful to have read her, to meet her, to be privileged enough to have photographed her.
I had an exhibition of my work at a culture center somewhere in New York. I knew who Barbara Smith was, but I never met her, and she stopped by and came up to me. We ended up spending the entire rest of the day together and I took this quick photograph of her.
Jean Weisinger,
Ntombi Howell (1951–2003)
Writer, Poet, Activist
NIA Collective, CA, 1993

“The key is acceptance,” she said, “As a Black woman, a lesbian, an ex-drug addict, one of the things that was important to me is that I was accepted as who I am in this community. So I can pull all my strengths out of me and improve my community.”

—Ntombi Howell

The above quote was published in The Examiner, February 11, 1998.
There was a professor at Alabama State University. I had given a television interview for them—for her—and she told me that the university had provided her with the funds to drive me around the South for one month. Everything was paid for. And so she picked me up in Chicago. I had never traveled to the South, and I had always had a little fear about the South because of being Black and everything, and she was white woman, and so we went driving to the South because I felt I couldn’t continue to photograph outside of this country without photographing the heart of this country.

So I gathered a box of 11x14 photographs to take with me so that I could show other people that do not get to go to museums and galleries or even have magazines to look at to see that there are Black people in Cuba, what the Black people in India look like, etc. I used to just always carry a box of photographs. And usually when somebody asked me about them, I’d show it to them: photographs of people from other parts of the world.

When I was in New Orleans, I had the box with me, and there was a group of elderly people sitting on the side, and they asked me, “What’s in your box?” And I said, “Some photographs.” And so they asked, “Can we see?” And I showed them.
Sistahfest, organized by the Annual United Lesbians of African Heritage (ULOAH), was an annual 4-day all-Black lesbian cultural, musical, and political retreat founded in 1990 and held in the Los Angeles area.
Jean Weisinger,
Sonya Richardson
Doctor of Physical Therapy, Martial Arts Black Belt
San Francisco, 1994

I had the privilege of painting this Healing Tree on Sonya’s body for her upcoming performance of martial arts. I started making Healing Trees over thirty years ago, and I have given them to many people.

27 January 2014
Chicago

Dearest Clare,

The conversation we had last week about my healing trees have really made me do some serious thinking about them. I can’t remember a time or a drawing without them really. I know that as my mother got sicker and my migraines became a weekly occurrence in my life, that it was the trees and writing in my journal that eased the pains away, and for many years, after I dropped the bright bushes treetop full of apples, they became bare, it was the branches that took shape, that told the story of that tree. It was Chicago’s trees and the many months of fall and winter and early spring where the trees stood naked yet still so full of character, and I was always curious about them.

Were they healing trees then? Did I think of them as such? I remember by the time my grandson Ivory was seven and was leaving San Francisco to return home nearly two thousand miles away, he told my partner at the time to take care of me and to remember that if the branches are leaning to the left or right (too much), that it meant that I was sad, and if the branches on the trees are up...it meant that Grandma is happy. I never knew he had paid so much attention to my trees, but then it was in his first year of life looking (no one else cared) at one of my painting and pointing to the moon, he said moon. In every of my drawings / paintings of trees, landscapes, and seascapes there is always the presence of the moon.

Jean
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