

Grace Weaver: The Theater of Public Life
by Susan Thompson



James
Cohan

Grace Weaver, Affront, 2020

In the paintings that comprise Grace Weaver's aptly-titled exhibition *STEPS*, people on the move in the busy city rush up stairs and tumble down them. They collide abruptly on the sidewalk, run through the streets, and stomp each other's feet. Observing this collection of steps and missteps, a panoply of related idioms spring to mind, all of them evoking feelings of instability, awkwardness, or failure—key themes within Weaver's work.

Watch your step, out of step, step in it, step aside, overstep, put your foot in your mouth, foot fault, on the back foot, shoot yourself in the foot, put your foot down, get off on the wrong foot, drag your feet, have two left feet, keep you on your toes, don't step on any toes, make your toes curl

These new paintings represent a sure-footed stride forward within Weaver's practice and she advances several new developments in the work. The artist is best known for paintings that highlight her subjects' fraught interior lives through quiet moments rendered in bold swaths of radiant color. Works such as *Fair-weather* (2019), *The Date* (2016), and *Finale* (2017), for example, convey small scenes of disconnect, dissatisfaction, and ennui. In this new body of work, it is apparent that the emotional stakes have been raised: while the earlier work mined the subtleties of minor quotidian anxieties, the new work is much less ambiguous in its exploration of the human psyche.

Themes of discomfort, insecurity, and estrangement from one's own body have long featured in Weaver's work, yet the rawness of those feelings more fully breaches the surface in these recent paintings. Here, Weaver's protagonists find themselves onstage in the theater of public life where they fail spectacularly, their worst fears realized. "I've always been interested in very, very subtle emotional territory, like a painting of someone being passive aggressive or subtly self-conscious—these tiny, non-grand emotions," Weaver says, acknowledging this shift. "In these paintings, I want to push that type of discomfort into a feeling of failure. Or the feeling of failing and then watching yourself being watched failing." In *STEPS*, the subtext has become the text. These figures fall on their faces and weep openly. They experience embarrassment, humiliation, and fear. They are exposed.

Much of the works' animating drama derives from the public settings in which these scenes unfold. In contrast to much of Weaver's prior work, which largely features intimate exchanges in private spaces, she has situated these works out on the city streets and filled them with dynamic action. Nothing within them feels static or fixed. Rather than capturing the nuances of a mood they depict the climax of an event.

The figure in *Misstep* (unless otherwise noted, all works 2020) has lost her footing and tumbled inelegantly down a staircase, landing with legs splayed and arms akimbo, dejectedly upended. Her crisp, fashionable blouse and perfect waves of hair suggest a confidence and ambition that were dashed by a deflating tumble. Similarly, in *Stunt*, a woman has landed at the base of the stairs on all fours, a position that is by turns degrading and inviting. In *Confrontation*, a man and a woman plow into one another forcefully as they round a corner. The impact causes droplets from her takeout coffee to fly upward and his black plastic bodega bag to drop downward as their limbs and lips interlock with inadvertent intimacy.



Grace Weaver, *Lust for Lite*, 2015



Grace Weaver, *Misstep*, 2020

The exhibition's title was fittingly inspired by Frank O'Hara's 1964 poem, "A Step Away From Them," a paean to the energy of city life as observed on a lunchtime stroll. Indeed, the city figures largely in these compositions. The dynamism of everyday urban activity that O'Hara's poem celebrates is best on display in the masterful *Transfer*. Four people hurry through a subway stairwell in a scene that is animated by a dizzying push-pull of upward and downward momentum and dramatized by a slew of recurring zig-zags; the visual rhyming of the accorded steps, flaring umbrella, deep-treaded shoes, and whirling knife-pleated skirt give the work an additional edge.

Given that the preponderance of Weaver's figures are women, the public setting of these works layers an additional valence of gendered scrutiny that is part and parcel of public life. Earlier works such as *American Apparel* and *Tutorial* (both 2017) show women privately experimenting with and evaluating their own appearance. Navigating public space as a woman requires a heightened awareness of one's own body, self-presentation, and comportment. A visual motif of upskirt exposure recurs throughout the works in *STEPS*, charging them with innuendo and lending an ominous tenor. Whether upended from a fall, subjected to an unexpected gust, or rendered from a low vantage, numerous female figures find themselves vulnerable to an unconsenting peek beneath their pleats. A line from O'Hara's poem comes to mind: "Then onto the / avenue where skirts are flipping / above heels and blow up over / grates." Such are the observations of a flâneur's gaze. The women depicted in works like *Shame* and *Affront*, whose skirts rise against their will, are not the tickled and titillating Marilyn Monroes of male fantasy. Their hands desperately grasp at their skirts' runaway hems, their expressions uneasy, eyes darting to see if anyone is looking, if anyone will take advantage of the situation for a glimpse of pink panties.

Such moments of unwelcome exposure have appeared previously in Weaver's work. In *Lust for Lite* (2015), for example, a woman's skirt blows upward behind her as she attempts to hold it down in front. She looks over her shoulder to meet the eye of a shirtless man behind her who looks on, his hips thrust forward as he leans against his bike. In *Winning Some/Losing Some* of the same year, a woman gets caught in a downpour, her white shirt dress soaking through and becoming transparent in the rain. While neither of these women seems demonstrably distressed, for any woman traversing the space of the city, the prying eye of the male gaze becomes inextricable from the looming threat of sexual violence. Weaver's women know, as all women do, that they are always the potential object of such violence. Many adopt a hunched self-consciousness and clenched hypervigilance—as seen in works like *5:30 P.M.* and *11:45 A.M.* (both 2019)—in preemptive response.

For as much as the women in these paintings feel threatened, however, the men depicted among them are decidedly unthreatening. They are neither physically imposing nor behaving aggressively. Although the men in *Transfer* and *Limbo* seem fairly harmless, their U-shaped legs reveal them as natural manspreaders and their normcore hipster attire suggests they might try to "play the devil's advocate" in a conversation about equal pay or reproductive rights. Nevertheless, it is the women in the paintings who inflict the most damage. In *Transfer*, a woman treads on the hand of a man who has tripped behind her, while a high heel menaces an unsuspecting loafer in *Step*. These minor transgressions are perhaps a small revenge for the constant state of fear and guardedness in which women live their lives.

Though Weaver began making this body of work in January of this year, she completed the paintings throughout the spring and early summer, which aligned with the onset of the coronavirus crisis in New York



Grace Weaver, *Transfer*, 2020



Grace Weaver, *Intersection*, 2020

and the accompanying season of quarantine. One notable phenomenon of this time has been the communal sense of dread. Previously considered an individual struggle, anxiety became a collective experience shared by all. This feeling of deep unease seeps into Weaver's compositions.

Of all the works in the show, *Intersection* is perhaps the most evocative of pandemic panic. Two women—one out for a jog, the other hoisting a young child on her shoulders—eye each other warily as they pass each other crossing the street. Though they seem to studiously avoid one another, their legs appear somehow entangled by unhappy accident. Several caterpillar-shaped plumes of smoke, steam, and exhaust wend through the composition. Most straightforwardly, these shapes represent various urban air pollutants, but in the context of the pandemic Weaver also sees how they might reference 14th-15th century miasma theory, which held that diseases spread through society in concentrated clouds of poisonous air. In the context of a city contracting from the threat of contagious disease, the notions of public exposure and vulnerability raised earlier take on additional resonances.

As the work took shape against the backdrop of a city absent of people, Weaver observed the pared down vocabulary of the empty streets. In situating these works within architectural space, Weaver began to confront classical issues of perspective and was inspired by Early Renaissance painters like Paolo Uccello, a pioneer in developing visual perspective in painting. In his review of a 2013 exhibition at the Frick Collection of the work of another Early Renaissance painter, Piero della Francesca, New Yorker critic Peter Schjeldahl described the artist's figures as standing "strenuously upright on earth," a turn of phrase that stuck with Weaver. "That's what it is to be human," she reflected, "that struggle to stand upright." In developing this body of work, she contended with this notion of "uprightness" and what it might mean for her subjects. The sturdy heft and Della Francesca's figures prompted her to also play with her own subjects' solidity and groundedness.

Indeed, there is a productive tension between weight and levity in the resultant works as the forces of gravity are applied variously throughout. The woman in *Affront* risks floating off in the wind, her body segmented like a balloon animal in a dress that is equal parts poof-sleeved Cecilie Bahnsen design and Oskar Schlemmer Triadic Ballet costume. Meanwhile, the woman in *Misstep* sinks heavily to the floor, gravity's victim. In *Crying (I, Upwards)* and *Crying (II, Downwards)*, the two weeping women appear subject to equal and opposite directional pulls as tears and breasts alike rise or fall in unison. *Transfer* sees gravity deployed omnidirectionally as the work's vertiginous perspective destabilizes firm understanding of up and down, ascent and descent.

A signature of Weaver's paintings is her maximalist use of supersaturated color, her approach to which is guided by intuition. She is drawn to pigments on the warm—and often hot—end of the spectrum: earthy, rusted umbers and ochres; sherberty, pastel cantaloupes and apricots; and artificial, cosmetic pinks and taxi-cab yellows. Earlier works such as *Getaway* and *The Lover of* (both 2015) feature an equal intensity of hue in both the figure and ground, but in more recent works the artist has scaled back the potency of the backgrounds in favor of more muted tertiary tones. The resulting contrast allows the throbbing pops of color to achieve a more vivid impact.

Weaver is interested in the cultural histories of color and often imagines external references for the tones she creates. In *Stunt*, for example, she cites both a fast-fashion taupe and a chocolate-milk brown as sources

for the background color. The specific hues used for the figure also help shape the viewer's perception of the painting's protagonist. The woman's skintight hot pink dress pairs with "nude" heels that are several shades lighter than her orange-tinted spray tan to channel a mid-2000s Kardashian-inspired aesthetic still seen among reality TV contestants today. These signifiers also inform a reading of the woman's seemingly humiliating hands-and-knees posture, recasting it as a self-possessed performance of sexual availability by someone who has carefully cultivated her self-presentation and is hyperaware of being watched. In this interpretation, she reclaims the subservient position by asserting her own agency in assuming it.

While the artist's palette recalls the exuberance of the Fauves mixed with the warmth of Gauguin, her forms are more reminiscent of the 1920s paintings of Fernand Leger, who similarly constructed his figures from building blocks of discrete shapes. Leger's influence is also seen in another of Weaver's signature devices: the heavily articulated outlines with interior shading that delineate her figures' forms. In marked contrast to the expressive gestural brushwork utilized by many of her peers, Weaver's emphatically inscribed lines are created through concentrated repetition. She lays down one color to create a shape and then traces its border over and over and over with deeper hue, resulting in a softening of the inner edge that glows with internal light.

For Weaver, this is a way to charge her forms with more weight and convey a sense of volume. Visually, it is reminiscent of the "rich design" aesthetic of Web 2.0, a tech graphics style characterized by the use of bevels, gradients, and drop-shadows. It also recalls the illustrated renderings of cell wall membranes in the biology textbooks of Weaver's youth, which were themselves inspired by electron microscope photography. The metaphor of the cell wall feels fitting for Weaver's biomorphic figures. As they enter the scrutiny of public space with their outsized emotions on display, this protective barrier might help thicken their skin.

SUSAN THOMPSON is a curator and writer based in Brooklyn. Thompson is currently on leave from the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, where she has worked as a curator for over ten years. In her time at the Guggenheim, Thompson has curated several exhibitions, including most recently *Implicit Tensions: Mapplethorpe Now* (2019), *Simone Leigh: Loophole of Retreat* (2019), and *Anicka Yi: Life is Cheap* (2017).

This essay was commissioned by James Cohan on the occasion of *STEPS*, an exhibition of new work by Grace Weaver, on view from July 15 through September 12 at 48 Walker St and September 13 at 291 Grand St. The exhibition will span both of the gallery's locations, with a body of new paintings in Tribeca and a selection of the artist's drawings in the Lower East Side. This is Weaver's second solo exhibition at James Cohan.