



# Carrie Schneider's Grown-Ass Women: You Better Recognize

*Cauleen Smith*

*"I like the way you read. It's almost like being there watching everything happen."*

*"Thank you."*

*"There's a lot more books downstairs."*

*"I've seen them." I had also wondered about them. The Weylins didn't seem to be the kind of people who would have a library.*

*"They belonged to Miss Hannah," explained Rufus obligingly.*

*"Daddy was married to her before he married Mama, but she died. This place used to be hers. He said she read so much that before he married Mama, he made sure she didn't like to read."<sup>1</sup>*

This is a passage from Octavia Butler's innovative time-travel novel, *Kindred*. The woman reading to the child is a twentieth-century woman who finds herself trapped in the antebellum South. To ensure her survival she must perform as a slave until she returns to modern times. A literate slave possessed the ability to manufacture her own freedom, write her own pass (ticket), and navigate her own way. Reading is a currency for self-determination. In the case of Miss Hannah, I need to speculate that compulsive reading could be a silent willful protest against, and a retreat from, the system that sustained her.

In her video and photographic series *Reading Women*, Carrie Schneider renovates the trope of the bourgeois woman reading in her parlor, garden, or bedroom, and the viewer confronts what Griselda Pollock, in her feminist reclamation of the artist Mary Cassatt, calls "modern women" in "modern spaces."<sup>2</sup> In full disclosure, the author of this essay also appears in Schneider's work. When she approached me about the project, my limited art history education pointed me immediately towards thinking about Cassatt—a painter I'd always enjoyed because of her cinematic framing of her figures. Her paintings made explicit for me the aesthetic crises that

erupted as the ubiquity of the photographic image and the moving image increased at the dawn of the twentieth century. Cassatt approached her subjects at odd angles. She glanced them so as to examine the fleeting transitions of thoughts and gestures in and over time within mundane domesticity and the fashionable social arenas most frequently occupied. The image Schneider made was taken in my Hyde Park studio apartment on a summer weekday afternoon. There was no furniture, so it seemed reasonable to read Gwendolyn Brooks's influential volume, *Blacks*, on my carpeted floor. Carrie rejected that idea and brought me a very comfortable chair upon which I luxuriated (and which I very much missed after the shoot). These images are not documents. These images are proposals. The viewer is offered an interior scope. When Pollock describes Cassatt's painting *Five O'Clock Tea*, she could be talking about one of Carrie's photographs.

[T]he very hallmark of Cassatt's painting at this time is the way in which the represented space within the painting registers the space from which the painting was made, a space that included the artist, looking, painting, thinking, organizing, interacting with her models. Cassatt radically reconceptualized three spaces: the spaces of femininity—the social locus and activity that is being painted; space in painting—the repression of deep space in favor of shallow space, producing the effect of immediate proximity to her sitters; and the space from which the painting was being made. This was her artistic and imaginative space, which, occupied by a selfconsciously *woman* artist, renders the viewing position we are offered a historically and psychologically *feminine* one. . . . To see these paintings historically, the viewer needs to recognize the position from which the artist produced them.<sup>3</sup>

*You better recognize . . .*

Schneider's self-conscious contemporary examination of a private measure depends upon her presence and her "immediate proximity" to her subjects. We sit with the reader, we watch her digest the text. And though our attention may wander from her face to the texture of the upholstery, the cool window light, the glass of water, the potted plant, or the way she holds her cigarette (and yes, we may consider the fit and pattern of her clothes and the season they betray), the audit ends there. We must return to she who reads. Schneider does not require the reader's attention, or prop her up for aesthetic scrutiny; nor does she back away to a distance that would allow for our projections and desires to fill in and inform the space between us. She sits with her. She lets her be. Like a thermal current on a cool day the condensation of a woman into a being of pure thought, silent and in violent motion at the atomic level, offers mad quotients of marvel. A woman reading is not accessible or controllable. We cannot know what she might do. We are left to wonder.

Tom Weylin caught me reading in his library one day. I was supposed to be sweeping and dusting. I looked up, found him watching me, closed the book, put it away, and picked up my dust cloth. My hand was shaking.

"You read to my boy," he said. "I let you do that. But that's enough reading for you."

There was a long silence and I said tardily, "Yes, sir."

"In fact, you don't even have to be in here. Tell Carrie to do this room."

"Yes, sir."

"And stay away from the books!"

"Yes, sir."<sup>4</sup>

Butler's intrepid speculation allows us to confront our own investments in prerogatives now considered so mundane and routine as to be entirely overlooked when one searches for subversive models. And so Carrie Schneider's observations direct us into a renewed confrontation with the currency and alluring potential of a Reading Woman—like a vault, the longer we look, the more we want in. How long was Weylin standing there watching before she even noticed? Schneider's gaze teeters dangerously close to facilitating an objectified desire for the figure. This, I think, is inevitable. After all, we are looking at a Woman, and our social training teaches us that she is to be desired or at least evaluated with the potential for desirability in mind. The animation and the decoration of the body is still the domain of women, the realm in which their designated powers (of consumption) may be exerted, and the mode through which their depiction is most frequently disseminated. However, the possibility that a woman may enjoy her body's ability to convey the promise of pleasure, even while offering nothing more than time shared while the solitary work of thought and comprehension gets done, must be acknowledged. The physical languages of Schneider's models present a myriad of responses and relations to her camera. And it is clear that the photographer leaves the choice of these responses entirely to the model. Once the body is at rest and the mind takes flight, the image the camera records denies simple consumption. We are confronted with the gilded vault of a woman's mind, its treasures withheld. Go ahead viewer, look and learn, watch and wait. But do not mistake a woman with a book for anything other than a singular reservoir of generative power. *A reading woman is a grown-ass woman.*

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1. Octavia E. Butler, *Kindred* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), 87.

2. Griselda Pollock, *Mary Cassatt: Painter of Modern Women* (New York: Thames and Hudson, Inc., 1998), 121.

3. Pollock, 126.

4. Butler, 97.