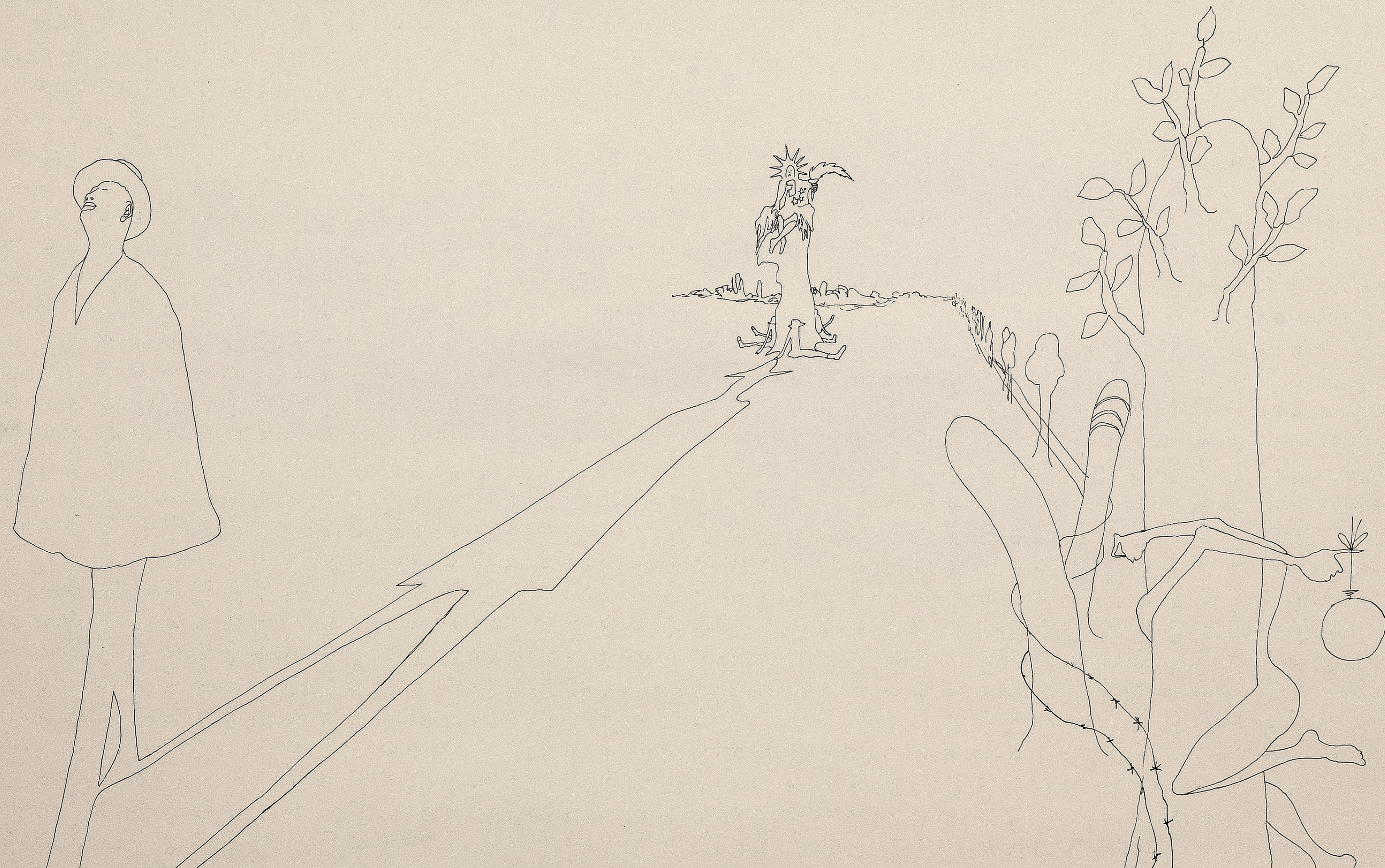


Benny Andrews
The Bicentennial Series



BENNY ANDREWS

The Bicentennial Series

SYMBOLS

TRASH

CIRCLE

SEXISM

WAR

UTOPIA

NOVEMBER 8, 2016 – JANUARY 21, 2017





Benny Andrews, 1976; photographer unknown; Courtesy of the Benny Andrews Estate.

The Bicentennial Series 1970–1975

In 1970, Benny Andrews began work on *The Bicentennial Series* in response to the national commemorations planned for the 200th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. Fearing that African Americans would be invisible from Bicentennial narratives and festivities or that their contribution to American history would be defined exclusively in terms of slavery, he intended his series to convey the point of view of a Black American man, one whose perceptions would challenge the dominant national mood of celebration and nostalgia. For five years, Andrews devoted his time and talent to sharing his “feelings and impressions of this place—America.”

Andrews began to conceptualize this monumental series in 1969. The idea grew out of his long-standing commitment to political activism. A co-founder of the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition (BECC)—a political group that demanded the inclusion of Black artists and curators in New York City museums—Andrews had been an energetic critic of the ways that the city’s many art institutions marginalized and even excluded Black American artists. After reading several *New York Times* articles covering plans made by Nixon’s Bicentennial Commission, Andrews realized that the institutions at the center of the celebrations were similar to those he had been protesting. In a 1975 interview, he explained, “By 1970, ... the government had already planned to appropriate hundreds of millions of dollars to bicentennial projects. For white America, the full spectrum of their lives would be shown—everything from Washington’s crossing the Delaware to abstract expressionism. But for Black people, the emphasis would be on restorations of the Old Slave Mart, country churches, and slave cabins. There would be those typical capsulated histories of great ‘Negro firsts,’ and that would be it. The only statement made that would represent us as a group would be that once we were slaves, but now we’re not.”¹

Afraid that the American Bicentennial would omit the voices of contemporary African Americans, Andrews decided to create his own vision of America, producing one major, monumental work per year leading up to the 1976 Bicentennial. In his journal, Andrews described this project as “a Black artist’s expression of how he portrays his dreams, experiences, and hopes along with the despair, anger, and depression to so many other Americans’ actions.”² He was also “painfully aware of the problems that faced Black painters and sculptors until recently, and that was the lack of space, money, materials, and buyers to paint or sculpt in the now commonplace American style. BIG!”³

His efforts resulted in six distinctive groups of works organized around six central themes: national symbols, national trash, the vicious American cycle of racial dominance, sexism, war, and utopia. In all but one case, these six groups include a monumental-scale painting as well as the drawings and oil-and-collage paintings Andrews made in preparation for the large-scale work. These eloquent, moving, raw glimpses into Andrews’s take on America and its history incorporate such topics and themes as Southern rituals, oppression, justice/injustice, incarceration, regeneration, violence, inequality, technology, feminism, motherhood, the absence of humanity, fantasy, and idealized beauty. Holding deeply to his Southern roots and masterfully crafting timeless allegories, Andrews revealed American truths that today feel as relevant as they were 40 years ago.

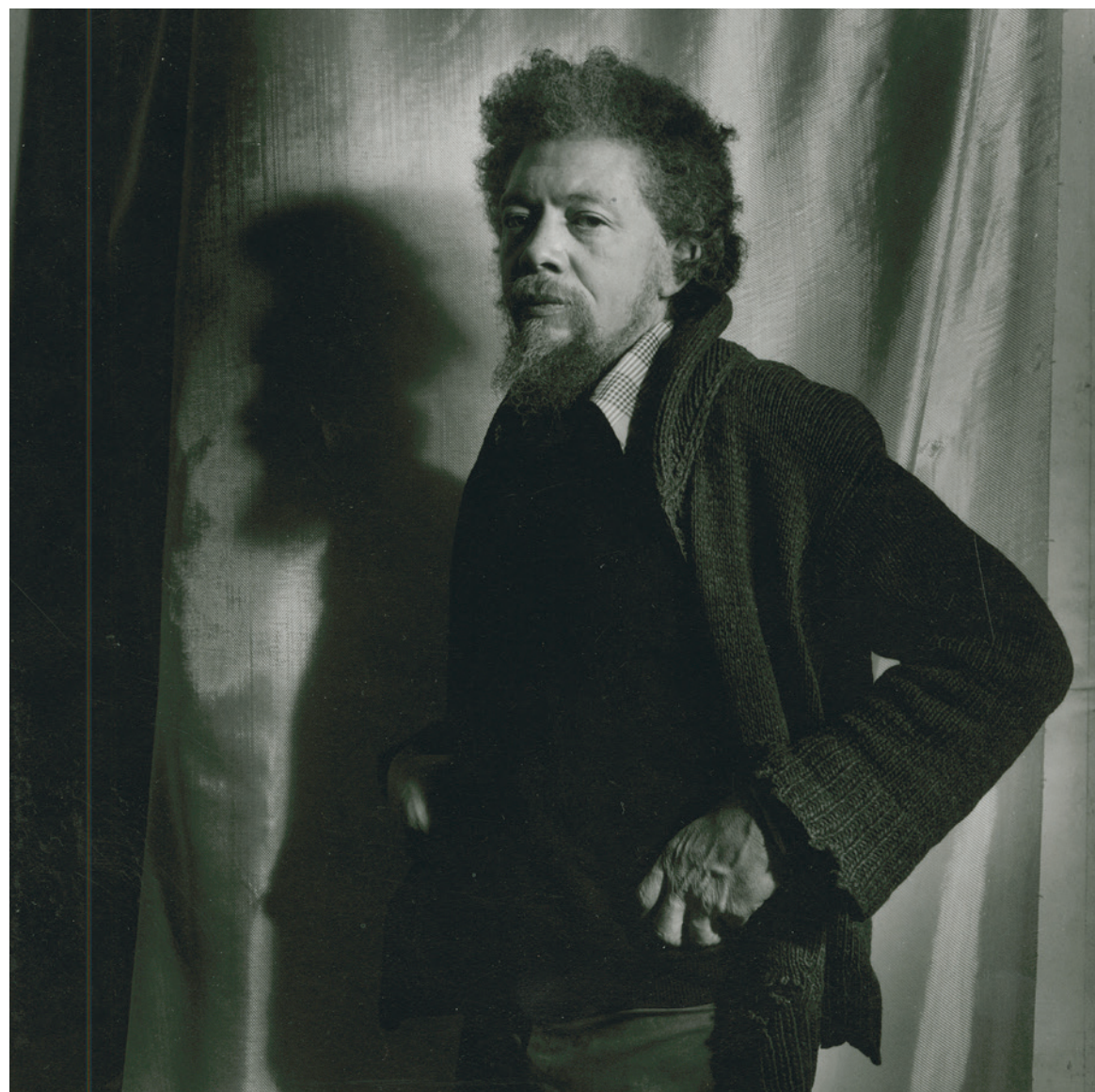
¹ Benny Andrews quoted in Diane Weathers, “An Artist Spanning His Heritage and Predicament,” *Encore: American & Worldwide News*, (February 3, 1975), 44.

² Benny Andrews, “UTOPIA’ Working Title for the Third Piece of ‘Six for Seventy Six,’” (unpublished journal entry, May 20, 1972).

³ Benny Andrews, “Bicentennial” (unpublished essay, 1974), 2.

A Love of Everything: Benny Andrews, American History, and the Politics of Representation

Pellom McDaniels III



Benny Andrews, 1975; © Anthony Barboza

On January 18, 1975, Gudmund Vigtel, the director of the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, Georgia, opened the long anticipated, most determined, and most reflective show of Benny Andrews to date: *The Bicentennial Series*. Andrews had become widely known as a “social artist,” recognized by his colleagues, art critics, and curators in the major museums throughout the country as a firebrand. Vigtel knew about Andrews’s involvement in protests in New York against the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art, but he embraced the southern-born Andrews’s observation that the “big plans for the American Bicentennial were not likely to cover much of the area of black art.”¹ Vigtel no doubt understood that the *Bicentennial* show was not only unique, but also bound to garner a considerable amount of attention across the country. In the catalog for the show, he identifies “Symbols” as the initial work for the series and explains how, through this massive painting and its studies, Andrews exposes his “background of black Georgia sharecroppers [and] a series of direct observations, both personal and universal, scathing, as well as compassionate” about America.² Andrews’s observations were not simply undeniable; they proved necessary and appropriate for the times. With Vigtel’s help, Andrews was able to give America a “birthday gift” of love and truth more than a year before the red, white, and blue celebration perpetuated the myth of American exceptionalism.³

For most, the High Museum exhibition was a revelation of the monumental scope of work—

in both size and content—that Andrews had been engaged in since the late 1960s when he originally formulated his concept of the “six for seventy-six” exhibition of works in anticipation of the bicentennial.⁴ Acknowledging the number of challenges black artists faced related to representation in major museums and gallery shows—especially between 1963 and 1973—Andrews used his frustration as the basis for his inspiration. He identified these tough times as the source for works of art that could be “shaped and molded from strong principles deeply embedded within [...] artists who had an insatiable need for making art, [a] love for people and hopes for a better and more humane world.”⁵ The High Museum exhibition was a breakthrough for Andrews. This series expressed what America meant to him and the people, or the “folks,” he came from.

Unlike most black artists of his day, Andrews was very vocal about his roots, his experiences growing up in the brutal south, his having picked cotton, and his family’s having lived in extreme poverty. He also made sure to discuss the importance of art in his childhood, and how drawing saved his life. The pencils and paper given to him by his mother helped him beat back the hopelessness that loomed over the cotton fields like a great specter waiting to descend and take him as its next victim. Andrews worked hard to stay connected to that which was important to him: the South and its people. Most of all, he wanted to share his perspective on what was not to be forgotten in the enterprise of remembering the “who,” “how,” and “what”

that made America. Painful, traumatizing, and exceedingly contradictory as it was, America remained, above all things, home. Andrews understood the complexity of this reality and sought to communicate it in *The Bicentennial Series*.

Within the contexts of the 1960s civil rights, black power, and black arts movements, black artists like Andrews began contesting the “legitimacy of Museum procedure[s],” especially as they related to the mounting and exhibiting of African American produced works of art. Curators in the major museums featured representations of “blacks” as objects and not subjects. Furthermore, the institutionalized racism found in these museums influenced and was perpetuated by the art collected, which tended to portray black people as “empty eyed and full of feelings of inferiority.”⁶ Andrews argued that these kinds of images put on view for the public’s consumption had repercussions:

Think of perpetuating such images within black children, who *do* visit these museums with their school classes and parents. They will believe like my generation did: that there are no black artists who have other things to say about the black experience. -When there are! and have been for the better half of this century.⁷

This narrow view of black life also affected whites who came into contact with images of the “empty eyed” black people “full of feelings of inferiority,” which in turn carried over into life in the real world. Such images helped to shape and maintain the “racial attitudes and behavior of white Americans towards black Americans.”⁸ Like Andrews, other black artists began arguing against the internal policies in place in major museums that prevented collaboration with knowledgeable black artists, curators, and/or art historians related to exhibitions and acquisitions.⁹

In 1969, Andrews along with painters Cliff Joseph, Henri Ghent and John Sadler, succeeded in bringing black artists together to challenge the entrenched position maintained by museums. As a founding member of the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition (BECC), an organization created to support the needs of

black artists and black communities, Andrews and other black artists such as Faith Ringgold, Vivian Browne, Reginald Gammons, and Russell Thompson, challenged the gatekeepers and tastemakers holding the doors tightly closed. The BECC called for a boycott of the Whitney Museum of American Art and the “upholding of the black community’s cultural integrity.” In an organized effort, the BECC brought black artists together to discuss the politics of representation, the significance of work done by black artists, and what constituted black art. Moreover, black artists gathered to interrogate the overall importance of their collective contributions to the ongoing development of black life in America. The radical stance that Andrews and the BECC took as a step in disrupting the limited roles that American museums promoted and supported for black artists created opportunities for black Americans to have greater access to the means of self-representation.

By 1971, Andrews was in the thick of it. His mind was not only on helping to develop strategies to force the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art to rethink their positions, Andrews was working on his newest project, “six for seventy-six.” In response to an article written about the forthcoming American Bicentennial of 1976, which included plans for the production of stamps and coins to commemorate the nation’s birthday, Andrews realized that museum shows would continue to misrepresent black people as “empty eyed” props to heroic white figures who would be portrayed as having conquered “savages,” built monuments, and explored outer space. Andrews recognized that these efforts to reinforce the mythic narrative of America’s rise would exclude any meaningful engagement of black perspectives:

[F]or the Bicentennial celebrations...I got to thinking. “HmMMM, now everybody and their uncle will be grinding out what they consider to be the most important things about this country over the past 200 years.” Then I thought a little more about that, you know like what would we the general public be bombarded with? Well I decided that unless more regular and a larger cross section of the people get

involved, we’d be snowed under George Washington crossing the Delaware River.¹⁰

His plan for deconstructing the meanings associated with the Bicentennial Celebration included the production of one large piece per year leading up to July 4, 1976. Having been an integral part of the protest movement against the museum czars, Andrews knew what to expect from the status quo with regard to accounting for black people in the process of revisiting the birth of the nation.¹¹ He knew that the contributions of black people to the shaping of the American landscape, culture, and traditions would be relegated to the margins and that black “empty

eyed” props would be used with the explicit purpose of making the triumph of whiteness obvious.

To meet this tremendous challenge, Andrews called upon his experiences growing up in the South, his interactions with people of various dispositions, his understanding of American capitalism, and the history of America not written in text books, but on the bodies of black people. Through *The Bicentennial Series*, Andrews brought to the fore the contradictions, traditions, and myths that made up the fabric of America.

The Aesthetics of the Folk: Speaking the Unspeakable and Telling the Truth

[To] understand the art and [the] life of Benny Andrews one must first consider the history of the Andrews family and the related history of Plainview [Georgia].¹²

—Richard Gruber

Born on November 13, 1930, to George and Viola Andrews, Benny Andrews developed his talent and his vision as an artist when he was just a child growing up in rural Madison, Georgia. Like a majority of African Americans in the South at that time, the Andrews family lived off of the land as sharecroppers. To be sure, sharecropping was a family business, and no one could be spared from the fields to watch over a small child during the planting and harvesting seasons. The fields had to be tended and there was always work to do. As soon as they were able to walk, most children of sharecropping families participated in the daily rigors associated with farming, laboring alongside the rest of the family. For black children, the rural southern educational system of Georgia offered certain challenges associated with receiving a quality education. First, the system was segregated to prevent African American and white children from attending the same school. Second, the facilities used by African American children were inadequate and frequently unsafe. Third, the school year for African American children was generally from October to April, given that they helped in the fields by planting or harvesting

from May to September. Indeed, most teachers of African American children were poorly trained and somewhat illiterate themselves.

These factors defined life in rural Georgia. They provided families like the Andrews a clear understanding of the “fact of blackness” that was looked upon as a marker of inferiority and ineptness.¹³ It was this fact that Andrews would later reflect on when discussing the dynamics of his hometown of Madison and Plainview, stating that the “racial customs demanded that... [blacks] step aside and not dare to look up and connect” with the eyes of white people.¹⁴ This was the world of Andrews’s youth, a world that he carried with him as he began to plan for his flight to regions away from the degradation and hatred that filled the South. While race and racism were critical factors in the shaping of both black and white experiences in the South within the context of the first half of the twentieth century, violence and the threat of violence were considered part of the daily routine. Still, the unconventional yet customary relationships between whites and blacks in the rural setting of Morgan County, Georgia, where Andrews’s family established its roots, would have one believe otherwise.

The complex interaction between black lives and white lives in Plainview, Georgia resulted in the creation of a community bound by traditions initiated in the past that remained powerfully influential in the present, having a direct impact on the everyday lives of community members responsible for maintaining the social fabric of Madison. Ritualized interactions, social protocols, and rigid boundaries functioned as symbolic gestures to keep order, an order that was not only precarious, but also demanded the second-class status of African Americans. Indeed, the timeless landscape of rural Georgia, its November cotton flowers, southern yellow pines, and Georgia red clay, spoke volumes to those whose lives revolved around their understanding of the believed differences between blacks and whites, and the meaning of life and death in the South. For Benny Andrews, his own family history is symbolic of the many mysteries and contradictions he later sought to address in his work as an artist, especially in his *Bicentennial Series*.



Map of Georgia State, c.1900, Rand McNally Atlas of the World

At the turn of the twentieth century, Plainview, Georgia was a community built around the Oaks Plantation, the estate of William Jackson Orr,

a former “officer in the Georgia units of the Confederate Army during the years of the Civil War.”¹⁵ And like a majority of plantations in the South during slavery, especially in the black belt where cotton cultivation was king, the powerful Oaks Plantation benefitted from the labor of African American slaves. Considering the fact that the Oaks Plantation covered more than thirty miles ranging from the town of Monroe to the community of Buckhead in the southeast, we have to account for the number of the slaves it would have taken to work the land to make it profitable. Historians have noted that on large plantations where cotton was grown, each adult slave was responsible for cultivating and harvesting between ten and twenty acres of cotton. Taking into account this information as well as the fact that the Oaks Plantation was comprised of more than twenty thousand acres of land, it is difficult to appreciate just how many enslaved African Americans were at the disposal of William Jackson Orr and his overseers. Suffice it to say, Orr had a reason for defending the peculiar institution of slavery and all its ills against Northern aggression due to the fact that his family’s future was dependent upon the institution and the exploitation of black labor.

James Orr, the son of William Jackson Orr and Sarah Angeline Few (Orr), was born on December 17, 1879 at the end of Reconstruction and the beginning of the neo-slavery of sharecropping. By the time he was capable of taking over the family business, James would have learned from his father the meaning of being white and male in the South. Moreover, a young Orr would have gained the knowledge of how to use his power to influence those freed by the Emancipation Proclamation, and the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the United States Constitution. In other words, James Orr would continue to maintain the legacy of slavery on the land born out of his father’s efforts to create a world steeped in southern pleasures, including the domination of the black population. Nevertheless, “Mr. Jim,” as he was known, would not only be committed to the traditions of the South, but he would also seek to create an identity for himself based on the unavoidable relationships between those who worked the land, inhabited the town of Plainview, and

carried the burden of race, thereby creating new traditions out of the old.

In his historical novel *Rosiebelle Lee Wildcat Tennessee* (1980), Raymond Andrews, the younger brother of Benny Andrews, writes about his paternal grandmother, while suggesting the type of man that his paternal grandfather, James Orr was. Andrews writes that:

By the rest of the Muscogean County’s white ruling class Mister Mac [Orr] was looked upon as somewhat an enigma. They were willing to accept that the growing pains of youth had lured him away from college to work on the lowly railroad—though this was certainly not an action befitting a person of good breeding—and that this was the reason behind his bicycle trip to the Wild West, where it was rumored around the country that he’s lived among the wild and naked savages. However, the local elite were not about to look the other way when he took up his peculiar relationship with the negress with the long straight hair and even longer name.¹⁶

Sometime around the turn of the twentieth century, Jim Orr met Jesse Rose Lee Wildcat Tennessee Andrews, a woman with a racially mixed heritage.¹⁷

Born on March 7, 1872 in Maxey, Georgia to Minerva Jones, who was black, and Charlie Brightwell, who was half white and half Cherokee, Jesse Rose Lee moved to Plainview with her family sometime between 1883 and 1885. According to biographer Richard Gruber, by “all accounts, Jesse was a most singular, and unforgettable individual. As described by her son, George, and others, she possessed an independent spirit and striking physical beauty.”¹⁸ The beautiful Jesse Rose was married to one of Mr. Orr’s black field hands, Eddie Andrews. However, being empowered through his inherent sense of superiority and uninhibited from seeking what he wanted from those whose purpose was to serve, Orr claimed Jesse Rose as his own, disregarding the sanctity of the institution of marriage or the validity of Eddie Andrews’s claims of manhood.

Orr’s aggressive pursuit of Jesse Rose

recalls the nineteenth century practices of slave masters, overseers, and plantation foremen using their power to possess black women’s bodies and fulfill insatiable sadistic sexual fantasies and desires. In her essay “The Body Politic: Black Female Sexuality and the Nineteenth Century Euro-American Imagination,” feminist scholar Beverly Guy Sheftall argues that the “violation of the bodies of enslaved African women resulted from [the perception that they engaged in deviant sexual behavior, and that they were savage and bestial].”¹⁹ Furthermore, the bodies of these women “were branded for identification on the shores of West Africa, were raped during the middle passage, and were forced to engage in sex and beaten in the fields of slave plantations” in the South.²⁰ Black women’s reproductive capabilities were exploited in order to advance the wealth of plantation owners through the production of additional slaves.



Benny Andrews visiting his old home, a two-room wood frame house, in Plainview, Georgia. Photographer Unknown; Courtesy of the Benny Andrews Estate

In his text *Darkwater: Voices from the Veil* (1920), the preeminent scholar of African American life and history W.E.B. Du Bois suggests the degree of degradation experienced by black women at the hands of white men in the South. Du Bois writes:

I shall forgive the white South much in its final judgment day: I shall forgive its slavery, for slavery is a world-old habit; I shall forgive its fighting for a well-lost cause, and for remembering that struggle with tender tears; I shall forgive its so-called “pride of race,” the passion of its hot

blood, and even its dear, old, laughable strutting and posing; but one thing I shall never forgive, neither in this world nor the world to come: its wanton and continued and persistent insulting of the black womanhood which it sought and seeks to prostitute to its lust. I cannot forget that it is such Southern gentlemen into whose hands smug Northern hypocrites of today are seeking to place our women's eternal destiny,—men who insist upon withholding from my mother and wife and daughter those signs and appellations of courtesy and respect which elsewhere he withholds only from bawds and courtesans.²¹

Du Bois's vehemence is matched by men and women who struggled against and sacrificed their lives on behalf of "the race" to be free from the institution of slavery and Jim Crow, to finally win out over the degrading systems of oppression that made a mockery of human life. What is more, the institution sabotaged the legitimacy and sanctity of marriage between black men and women both during slavery and well into the twentieth century, especially in the South.

The historian Manning Marable acknowledges that "since slavery itself was authoritarianism in the extreme, with the white slave owner exercising physical violence to maintain political hegemony, no 'family provider' or Black patriarch could be allowed."²² For Marable, black manhood was rendered powerless under the mantle of slavery and Jim Crow. Black men were unable to

provide full protection to their wives, daughters, sisters and mothers. That slavery created and perpetuated the systematic devaluation of black life in general and black womanhood in particular in America well into the twentieth-first century is an understatement.²³ Slavery and the abuse of black women became the basis for the wealth of the United States and was woven into the very fabric of the nation.

In the case of Jim Orr and Jesse Rose Lee Wildcat Tennessee, it is hard to determine the nature of their relationship. Orr pushed back against the very southern tradition of having two families: one white and one black. In *Dangerous Liaisons: Sex and Love in the Segregated South* (2003), historian Charles Frank Robinson argues that "Southern society would allow white men to have sexual relations with women of color with relative impunity but would scarcely agree to these same men cavorting with such women as lawful mates."²⁴ According to Gruber, "Rather than agreeing to maintain a socially acceptable (for his class, at the time) public master and servant relationship, with Jesse serving as his mistress, and then marrying within his own class to establish a white family, he flaunted established conventions by maintaining a relationship with Jessie for almost fifty years."²⁵ By 1917, and after the death of Eddie Andrews, it had become common knowledge in Plainview that the three children that Jesse Rose had given birth to had been fathered by Orr: Frederick in 1909, George Cleveland in 1911, and Beatrice in 1917.

afternoon. She taught the seven grades in between that time.²⁸

For the children of sharecroppers, school was a place to gather to learn something about the world; however, little inspired the curriculum towards an academic end. The care and concern that the community had towards its most vulnerable members, its children, is clearly represented by the effort the community demonstrated in providing some access to the outside world. Unfortunately, in reality, African American children of sharecropping families of the South faced a life where their labor had a higher economic value than their education, their bodies worth more than their minds. Indeed, it was a reality that a majority knew to be an unavoidable if not inevitable fact of life. Andrews would later comment that the degrading system "reeked of suppression" and that "it was assumed by the overseers [on the plantation] that when I finished...[the seventh] grade I'd be taken out of school and work on the farm like all the other boys and girls my age did. There was nothing said to this effect, it was just a forgone conclusion."²⁹

And yet, Viola Andrews maintained high expectations for her children, especially Benny, who she recognized had a talent that could take him away from the hellish environment of sharecropping. She would say that after the "cotton picking season was over Harvey and Benny entered school. I helped them with their lessons. It was a pleasure for me to do so; they spent a lot of time with comic books and drawing: Benny never tired of drawing."³⁰ Purchasing paper, pencils, and crayons, Viola made sure that Benny (as well as his nine other siblings) had whatever support he needed to explore possibilities for his life through art. Through his love of drawing and creating art, Andrews sustained his mind and cultivated his ability to express ideas that developed out of experiences from his southern childhood.

Additionally, Andrews's father George, who was also an artist and would come to be known as "The Dot Man," as well as younger brother Raymond, who would become a writer and a novelist of some significance, provided the artist community necessary that would foster the multiple forms of expression Andrews would later utilize throughout his long and storied

career. In the catalog *Folk: The Art of Benny and George Andrews* (1990), curator Patricia Blandon suggests the degree of influence that George Andrews had on Benny as an artist:

George Andrews reminisces about Benny scratching pictures in the dirt with nails or sticks and aggravating his siblings by falling behind in his cotton picking to draw on scraps of paper. Benny matches these stories with recollections of the mysterious appearances of chalk drawn biplanes on the sides and roofs of Morgan County barns. His father drew these double-winged airplanes at night, undetected by local landowners. Though George has ceased such nocturnal exploits, he retains his "character" status in the eyes of many young people in Morgan County. Benny grew up watching George draw or paint on every sort of fragmentary material in their sparse surroundings.³¹



Circle Study #18, 1972, india ink on paper, 18 x 12 inches / 45.7 x 30.5cm, signed

A Southern Upbringing: Challenging Traditions in the Pursuit of Freedom

Early in his life, Andrews recognized how art "would become an essential part of his daily routine" especially at Plainview school, where the lesson plan varied based on the piecemeal curriculum and the ability of the teacher to lead the students in the educational process.²⁶ According to Andrews, Mrs. Bertha Douglas, a teacher paid for by the local black Plainview Church, taught "primer through seventh" grades while also being required to prepare meals for

the children.²⁷ Andrews recalled:

Mrs. Douglass taught them all, and on top of that she cooked a lunch. To give an idea of how little instructions we got, the school day began at 9 o'clock and ended at 3 o'clock. Mrs. Douglass began cooking at 10:30 in the morning, and dealt with that through the lunch meal, cleaning dishes, etc. until it was around 1:30 in the

In his youth, Andrews's sense of creativity was fostered by both his mother and father's understanding of the power of creativity and the power of free expression. Viola Andrews's purchasing of materials to assist her son's exploration of his ideas and George Andrews's examples of creative freedom served as the foundation for Andrews to explore the possibilities for what would become his life's work.

Andrews struggled against the institution of segregation and the neo-slavery of sharecropping. The boy wanted to go to school in an effort to realize a future systematically denied to black children in the South at the time. Local traditions dictated that African American children of sharecropping families of Morgan County stopped attending school after the seventh grade to take their position in the cotton fields alongside their parents. These expectations were reflected in both the allocations of funding provided by the state of Georgia and the local community board of education, and the kind of curriculum in place to emphasize a culture of work. However, Viola Andrews was adamant that her children gain the necessary education that could take them further than she and her husband, George, had been able to go. To that end, Viola Andrews negotiated with the plantation owner and the overseer, who allowed Benny to attend the local school on days when work was slow on the farm, or when there was inclement weather.

From 1943 to 1947, the adolescent Andrews would labor as a sharecropper, toiling between rows of dirt lined by November cotton flowers, newly unfurrowed cotton balls, or the dried debris left after the harvest, while also working hard to keep up with his school lessons. Burney Street High School was located in the town of Plainview four miles away from the land the Andrews family farmed on. To be expected, Andrews struggled with many topics in school, not unlike a majority of African American children of sharecropping families who tried to better their circumstances through education. Although he was often behind due to the demands of sharecropping and of the overseer, Andrews was able to use his talent as an artist, "substituting drawn assignments for the standard written ones."³² Permitted by teachers to use art as an interpretive medium,

Andrews thus developed his ability to visually communicate concepts and ideas.

After graduating high school, Andrews left rural Morgan County for the urban environment of Atlanta, Georgia with the hope of becoming successful, but most of all becoming someone. Living at the Butler YMCA with his older brother Harvey, Andrews took odd jobs around the city before securing a position as a bus boy in the upscale yet segregated restaurant *Emile's*. Andrews's experiences in Atlanta were a mixture of excitement, wonder and resentment. His humble background and upbringing could not prepare him for the types of racism and classism that defined the complex dynamics found in the southern black Mecca of Atlanta. What was most disturbing to Andrews was the degree of intra-racial tension and animosity that existed between blacks based on skin tone and hair texture. On more than one occasion Andrews's interactions with black Atlantans became violent because he looked too white.³³ To protect his psyche, he continued to draw and develop his talent.

By 1948, Andrews was ready for a change. According to Gruber, "unexpectedly, during the first week of September in 1948, he received a letter from his mother informing him that he had won the 4-H scholarship that he had applied for, while he was on his trip to the state convention in Savannah."³⁴ Indeed, while attending Burney Street High School in Plainview, Andrews had been a member of the 4-H club and had qualified to compete for the newly established scholarship being offered by the Southern Iron Company. The scholarship provided two years of tuition each for one black student and one white student who were 4-H members in the state of Georgia. Andrews now had the chance attend to one of the three state colleges designated for blacks: Georgia State, Albany State, and Fort Valley State.

Andrews's decision to attend Fort Valley State College was influenced by Warren Cochran, the director of the Butler Street YMCA. A philanthropic and genuinely caring person, Cochran had once taught at Fort Valley and knew several people there. To aid with the cost for room and board, Cochran helped Andrews to secure part-time employment in the art department under the tutelage of Lawrence

Jones. Andrews arrived via Greyhound bus in the small town of Fort Valley in the fall of 1948 with his belongings and an understanding that his "dream was coming true."³⁵ Unimpeded by his poor educational background, Andrews explored the possibilities for his life beyond the small college campus and the state of Georgia. With regard to his experiences at Fort Valley, Andrews would later recall:

My drawing had become a necessity. Now I think to draw, but mine was always a reality – it was very functional. So it was not so much to dream of what I would do in the future. I was using it to survive in the present. Now what did happen, is when I went to Ft. Valley State College, they were not going to have that kind of thing. I mean, drawing my way through mathematics, etc. If it had not been for the fact I had won a 4-H Club scholarship, I would have just flunked out of there before my two years....They couldn't afford to throw me out of school because it was such a bad example. So they managed to keep me in school as an example – to bring students down to me [from the rural areas of Georgia]. And of course I hated the farm so soon they quit bringing students.³⁶

Andrews was unabashed about his dislike of sharecropping and rural living, which undermined the administration's emphasis on industrial and agricultural education. From 1948-1950, Andrews used every opportunity available to him on the campus of Fort Valley State to expand his horizons. However, he refused to submit to activities which required him to participate in his own degradation.

By 1950, Andrews had tired of the mundane rituals and suffocating racism of Georgia and was ready to experience something new. In fact, he was desperate to leave the oppressive environment and the "demeaning attitudes" of whites towards blacks, which had turned every day into an exercise in negotiating one's humanity.³⁷ Taking advantage of President Harry S. Truman's Executive Order 9981 (1948), which banned racial discrimination and segregation in the armed forces and sought to enable blacks to serve their country on equal footing as full-fledged citizens, Andrews joined

the United States Air Force.

Leaving Georgia for basic training at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas in July of 1950, Andrews realized that if he were going to discover himself, he would have to do it alone. His life experiences up to that point had been controlled and influenced by external forces, which imposed a desperate reality on him and his family and limited his vision for the future—a reality that he was unwilling to accept. The Air Force offered him a means to explore the world and his place in it, which in turn allowed him to move beyond the physical and psychological boundaries reinforced by southern traditions.

Trained as a Military Police Officer (MP), Andrews served in Northern California and Anchorage, Alaska throughout the duration of the Korean War (1950-53). Ultimately, he achieved the rank of staff sergeant, before being honorably discharged in 1954. While stationed in Alaska, Andrews had learned about the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and where to apply. One of four hundred applicants admitted for the fall semester of 1954, he enrolled with funding from the GI Bill. For Andrews, Chicago represented his rebirth and reinvestment in pursuing the ideal life he had envisioned for himself as a child in Plainview and as a student at Fort Valley State College. Through drawing and creating art, Andrews developed his own unique language with which to address the past—both national and personal—and to speak to its significance for the present and the future. In *The Bicentennial Series* as elsewhere, artistic practice served to satisfy his desire for personal transformation as well as his drive to memorialize the collective past of all Americans.

New Beginnings: Painting as a Language and Record of Truth

[W]hen I entered the Chicago Art Institute in the fall of 1954 and was in a fine arts museum for the first time in my life, I found my role model in reading about and seeing the works of Van Gogh. Even after my ardor had cooled for his works I still cherish[ed] the idea that he lived to express himself through his art.³⁸

—Benny Andrews

In the same year that Benny Andrews began pursuing his degree at the Art Institute of Chicago, the United States Supreme Court handed down its ruling in favor of Oliver Brown, the plaintiff in the landmark case of *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka*. The Supreme Court's decision began the process of unraveling the institution of Jim Crow that had shaped the lives of millions of black people in the southern United States. Upon his arrival into the Windy City, Andrews embraced his new world like a tourist on holiday, wandering up and down Michigan Avenue, through Hyde Park, and learning the ins and outs of the city. In addition to instruction, the Institute provided him with a community of students, many of whom would become lifelong friends and colleagues. But what was most exciting for Andrews was the opportunity to visit the city's numerous museums and galleries, discovering the works of Pablo Picasso, Auguste Rodin, van Rijn Rembrandt, and Paul Cézanne. The twenty-four-year-old self-taught artist was on top of the world and living his dream of becoming a professional artist. His appreciation for Vincent van Gogh, as well as the "American Action Painters" inspired him to seek freedom through the creative process. The works of Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko also gained the attention of Andrews, who found himself mesmerized by the boldness of abstract expressionism, a style he came to embrace as if he had invented it.

Under the direction of instructors such as Kathleen Blackshear, David Landis, James Paulus, and Herman Graff, Andrews took courses in art history, theory, design, and technique. He learned that painting was a language and through it he could tell stories, record history, and anticipate future possibilities. Through this language, Andrews's artistic mastery and his

keen awareness of both the process of making art and the artwork of others became tools of empowerment that allowed him to combine the tangible materials of canvas, paint, and rope with his vision and ability to capture his memories and experiences. Taking the advice of one of his instructors, the visiting professor Boris Margo, Andrews began creating from the standpoint of his own knowledge of people, places, events, and situations. This approach became the basis of his work on rural black folk. Still, by experimenting with new techniques of expression, communication, form, and symbols, Andrews challenged the boundaries and significance of the dominant artistic narrative in relation to black life and history. In essence, what Andrews was preparing for was a movement towards a more progressive view of art produced by blacks, one that extended beyond European aesthetic values and captured the humanity of an oppressed people in the process of living.

Following in the footsteps of previous black graduates of the Institute such as Hale Woodruff (1900-1980), Elizabeth Catlett (1919-2012), Archibald J. Motley, Jr. (1891-1981), and Richmond Barthé (1901-1989), all of whom had become well-established in the art world, Andrews used his talent to tell the story of black people in America through his own voice. Woodruff, Catlett, Motley, and Barthé had successfully challenged the notion perpetuated by white critics that a black aesthetic worthy of acknowledgment did not exist. In his essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926), the black novelist, poet, and essayist Langston Hughes suggests how the work produced by black artists should be understood:

Let Paul Robeson singing "Water Boy," and Rudolph Fisher writing about the streets

of Harlem, and Jean Toomer holding the heart of Georgia in his hands, and Aaron Douglas's drawing strange black fantasies cause the smug Negro middle class to turn from their white, respectable, ordinary books and papers to catch a glimmer of their own beauty. We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.³⁹

This freedom that Hughes suggests can be found among black artists whose work incorporates the language of the liberated and an "important pathway to freedom and individual self-discovery."⁴⁰ Black artists like Andrews, whose life experiences were similar to those of a majority of black people, were able to communicate through a particular vernacular style that was partly based on this shared history of growing up in the South.

In Chicago, Andrews discovered how to trust his intuition and move towards what felt right, aesthetically and in terms of subject matter. Experimenting with different mediums and styles and discovering a new language and forms, Andrews began incorporating textured materials into his work. Collage provided him a degree of depth and breadth not found in painterly realism. His wanting to share what he learned with others, especially those he felt connected to, led to the creation of *Janitors at Rest* (1957). Andrews's decision to paint the three black janitors who maintained the building and frequently cleaned up the paint spills of the students was a spontaneous gesture towards communication. In a 1975 interview Andrews recalled:

They were always sitting in the toilets, because whenever we'd spill some paint, they would grab a mop and go running out there and mop it up, then they'd go back and sit in the toilets. They had all these

little half pints bottles so they'd be down there drinking. And I always talked to them because they were the kind of people I came from, they were like my relatives.⁴¹

One of Andrews's most important works, *Janitors at Rest* was the precedent-setting creation that all artists seek in their quest for affirmation. Andrews's connection with the black janitors as "relatives" was based on both an imagined and real connection to the past, as well as their shared experiences in the North as *New Negroes* on the one hand, but as black men on the other. Their individual and collective presence at the Institute was inspirational to Andrews, the former sharecropper finding his way in this new world of art production and forging ahead into the unknown.



Andrews' first oil and collage on canvas painting, *Janitors at Rest*, 1957, completed during his final year at the Art Institute of Chicago.

After four years of struggling to find his voice through his art, Andrews graduated from the Art Institute of Chicago in 1958, with a Bachelor

of Fine Arts (BFA) degree more than prepared for the professional career that awaited him. In July, after moving to New York, where his future wife Mary Ellen Jones Smith had relocated from Chicago, Andrews and Jones Smith welcomed the first of their three children into the world, a son they named Christopher. The responsibility

of a family hastened Andrews's purpose in New York City, where he and the other "Young Turks" of the art world went to make their mark.⁴² However, the world that Andrews was about to enter into struggled against those who would challenge the status quo.

To Revolt and Resist: Dismantling and Disrupting the Status Quo

In his essay "Towards a Black Aesthetic," Hoyt Fuller argues:

The black revolt is as palpable in letters as it is in the streets, and if it has not yet made its impact upon the Literary Establishment, then the nature of the revolt itself is the reason. For the break between the revolutionary black writers and the "literary mainstream" is, perhaps of necessity, cleaner and more decisive than the noisier and more dramatic break between the black militants and traditional political and institutional structures. Just as black intellectuals have rejected the NAACP, on the one hand, and the two major political parties, on the other, and gone off in search of new and more effective ways means and methods of seizing power, so revolutionary black writers have turned their backs on the old "certainties" and struck out in new, if uncharted, directions. They have begun the journey toward a black aesthetic.⁴³

The 1960s saw black people organize effectively for change, not only politically but also culturally, economically, and socially. In this era of non-violent resistance, civil disobedience, and large-scale protest, Andrews developed his ability as an outspoken advocate for social justice, challenging the white establishment's power over art production in general and the work of black artists in particular. Empowered by his experiences, Andrews set out to dismantle or at least disrupt the prevailing discourse, which undermined the work produced by a majority of black artists as less refined than that of their white counterparts and therefore void of depth and originality. Through frequent encounters

within the highbrow New York art scene, Andrews recognized that critics who covered exhibitions featuring the work of black artists had come to believe that those who drew inspiration from the so-called "masters"—Michelangelo, Rembrandt, even Picasso—were somewhat worthy of criticism based "purely on artistic values" associated European sensibilities. Conversely, these same critics refused to acknowledge the unique aesthetic present in the work of black artists, which was gaining momentum during this most volatile of times in American history.⁴⁴

For the up and coming Andrews the times called for a discourse on race and oppression, which he began to faithfully embrace as an artist of the people. "Whatever it is that I do or do not do in the paintings I paint," Andrews opined, "really are attempts by me to communicate to the 'Folks.' While I could write yards on who the 'Folks' are, just let it suffice it to say for this time they are 'us.'"⁴⁵

Andrews's motivation to paint for and about the folks was inspired by his desire to recognize the common humanity connecting people throughout the world. Andrews worked hard to represent universalized forms of human suffering and oppression that could be read in the images and art he developed and produced over the duration of his career. The muted and muddy colors used in works such as *Woman* (1962) and *Men's Room* (1962) appear to remove the category of race in an effort to realize the universality of human suffering. The thickly painted surface expressed a range of emotions through his limited palette of colors. This exercise forced Andrews to allow the common humanity of the individuals to shine through, and it added to the richness of technique used

to depict the living conditions imposed on black people through the institution of segregation in the South. Finally, Andrews's experiment in universalizing his subjects also created the opportunity to examine the life of those "folks" that lived in the urban setting of New York City: blacks, Jews, Poles, wealthy and poor, young and old. "The folks" to Andrews became literally just people of flesh and bone and sinew, whose diverse but human experiences were significant to the whole of society and in need of being recorded.

spaces, and the city's overall uniqueness. Stuart Preston, an art critic for *The New York Times*, reviewed the showing writing, "Among the artists who retain a foot in the representational world, Benny Andrews in figure paintings...tries for a compromise, still somewhat uneasily, between recognizable subject matter and avant-garde techniques." [i] Indeed, this review of his work was significant considering previous responses by critics looking for black artists to represent a certain black aesthetic, one that was indicative of the blackness of blackness. Still coming into his own, Andrews took Preston's words as complimentary, as well as encouraging.

From 1962 to 1967, Andrews produced a number of significant works including "Many Sins" (1964), "Southern Landscape" (1965), "Flag Day" (1966), and "Heaven" (1967). These works demonstrated Andrews's range, concerns, and the degree of originality that he was capable of achieving. Because of his singular style, Andrews received a considerable amount of attention from the most well known critics of the day, and he was also invited to participate in a number of group shows and solo exhibitions throughout New York City, as well as his home state of Georgia.

In 1966, after receiving rave reviews in the New York media regarding his work and his rising status in the art world, Andrews received word from Bray-Hampton Gallery in Atlanta, Georgia that a benefactor was interested in sponsoring a one-man show of the Georgia native's work. Unsure of the legitimacy of the offer, Andrews called on his mentor, Warren Cochrane—the former director of the Butler Street YMCA in Atlanta and now the Executive Director of the Harlem Branch—to help him and potentially make contact with the anonymous benefactor so that Andrews could understand what the motivation was to bring him back to the South. In a November 1965 letter to Cochrane, Andrews wrote:

By now, assuming you have managed to get through my last two get well letters, I think you have an idea of the trials and tribulations of one your former boys. Anyway last night I received a call from the Bray-Hampton Gallery in Atlanta notifying me that they will be happy to give me a one-man exhibition February



Many Sins, 1964, oil on canvas, 97 ½ x 51 ½ inches; Courtesy of the Benny Andrews Estate

In February 1962, Andrews mounted a one-man show at the newly opened Forum Gallery. The show featured images of Andrews's paintings of New York's diverse populations, boroughs,

12, 1965, also the owner went into details about the plans they have for the opening. If it works out the way they are planning it should go a little way in helping race relations in Atlanta. They will have a cocktail opening night, and invite all the Prominent Negroes and Whites for a truly interesting type of social event....They will invite all the colleges to send classes to the Gallery, etc. So you must be on hand to see the return of the native son.⁴⁷

Unbeknownst to Andrews, Cochrane contacted the Mayor of the City of Atlanta, the Honorable Ivan Allen, Jr., to gain support for the show and provide an opportunity to the deserving Andrews, who was proud of his southern roots and was planning to return to visit family and friends in Madison.



Cotton Choppers, 1965, oil on canvas, 25 x 35 inches

Cochrane’s support of Andrews was received with enthusiasm, as well as trepidation. In his letter to Allen, Cochrane was sure to include press clippings, a biography and an accounting of Andrews’s awards. He also disclosed the fact that Andrews was married to a white woman, who according to Cochrane was “one of the finest women [he has]...ever met,” and that the couple had three children.⁴⁸ In response to Cochrane’s request, Allen wrote back:

Dear Warren:

You have presented me with an interesting problem – particularly since art is not one of my more knowledgeable subjects. I am quite impressed, however, with the material on Bennie Andrew[s].

I should be pleased to see him when he comes to Atlanta, and suggest that you have him call Mrs. Drummond to arrange the time.

Mayor Allen embraced having Andrews, a native son of Georgia, return home a conquering hero. To support the event, Allen forwarded the materials sent to him from Cochrane to the editor of the *Atlanta Constitution*, Don Deaton, extending his opinion that Andrews was “right impressive” and any “suggestions...would be appreciated.”⁴⁹

On February 12, 1966, with the assistance of Warren Cochrane, Mayor Ivan Allen, and Don Deaton, Benny Andrews opened his *Autobiographical Series* at the Bray-Hampton Gallery on Peachtree Place in Atlanta, much to the dismay of the Forum Gallery in New York. However, to the delight of his family and friends and new acquaintances, Andrews featured the paintings *Cotton Choppers* (1966), *The Poverty of it All* (1966), and *Death of a Crow* (1965). For Andrews, these were snatches out of time reflecting his memories of rural Georgia. The exhibition was a great success, primarily because it served to integrate the Atlanta art scene, but it did not change society overnight.

By 1968, in the months of unrest following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in April, Andrews, like many of his peers, found himself needing to do or say something in an effort to make sense of the chaos. He responded by taking on “a completely new adventure in both the art and the black world.”⁵⁰ On June 4, 1968 partly inspired by his having attended a reception at the Metropolitan Museum of Art where director Thomas Hoving introduced the upcoming exhibition *Harlem on my Mind: Cultural Capital of Black America, 1900-1968*—which had been planned entirely without consulting the numerous black artists living and working in New York—Andrews co-founded the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition (BECC). With fellow black artists Norman Lewis, Vivian Browne, Romare Bearden, Ray Saunders, and Henri Ghent, Andrews decided it was time for black artists to stand up and be counted and recognized for their work. The BECC had concluded that something had to be done to disrupt the continued racist representations

of blacks in the public by the gatekeepers of American art. The institutionalized process denied black artists opportunities to represent their culture, history, or vision for the future. The major museums were not concerned about how black people should be presented in a progressive society.

On January 17, 1969, deploying tactics developed during the civil rights movement, more than one hundred artists, patrons, and concerned citizens gathered outside the entrance of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The BECC thus began a process that would change how America saw the work of black artists. Simultaneously, this movement defined Andrews as a force in

the art world whose personal objectives would be defined by the mission of the BECC: “to alter curatorial policies and practices and to make credible the contribution of Black artists and art historians to the history of American art.”⁵¹ Indeed, for Andrews and his fellow artists, art, its production, and its criticism were more than mediums of social protest; they became the platforms from which people could “speak the unspeakable.”⁵² For black artists, art and its production were cultural, social, political, and economic processes that maintained and expanded the definition of blackness as well as the importance of art as a platform to disrupt narratives of convenience.

Of Black and White: Symbols of Pain, Pleasure, and Sacrifice

In 1970, after the opening of the exhibition *Afro-American Artists: Boston and New York* at the Boston Museum of Fine Art, *The New York Times* art critic Hilton Kramer wrote the following:

Would a museum with a healthier, more knowledgeable and sympathetic interest in contemporary art have been in a position to handle the complex problems of a “black show” differently? I don’t really know. For so long as political criteria are insisted upon in the selection of “black shows,” and the imposition of rigorous artistic standards is regarded as simply one more form of white racism, I am not sure that any art institution—no matter what its past history may be – can deal with the “black” problem any other way.⁵³

In response to Kramer’s criticism, Andrews, in his frank and direct way, questions:

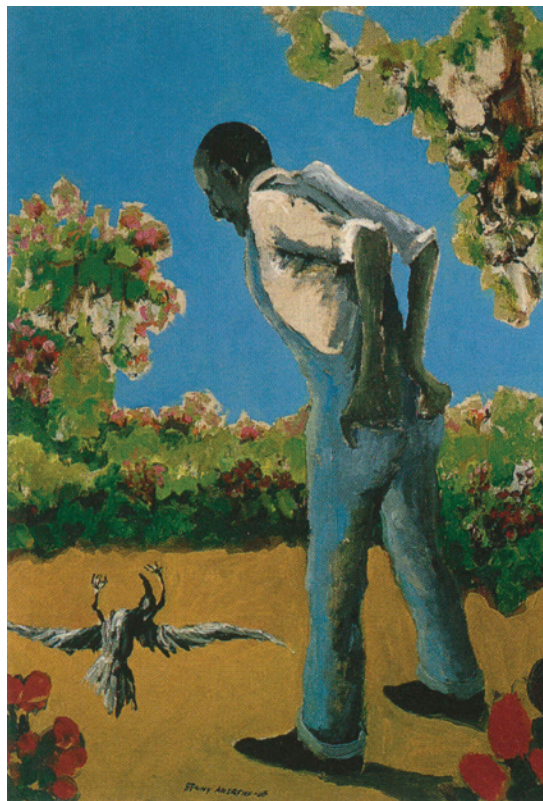
...why in the hell is it so damn confusing to see the Black artist expressing a feeling about black people, about environments and life as something unfathomable if artists like Goya, Picasso (and his *Guernica*, for example, and his long political battles with Franco of Spain), Durer, George Grosz, Ben Shahn, etc.

can be dealt with critically? I would be the first to say to hell with sentiment if I didn’t feel it, and if it was not ever present in my everyday existence.⁵⁴

Andrews’s decision to push back against Kramer and his obtrusive views related to the aesthetic practices and position taken by black artists shook up the New York art world. While most artists worked hard to get in the good graces with critics, many of whom were capable of making or breaking their careers, Andrews chose to challenge convention.

In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, the African American writer Toni Morrison writes that “Criticism as a form of knowledge is capable of robbing literature not only of its own implicit and explicit ideology but of its ideas as well; it can dismiss the difficult, arduous work writers [artists] do to make an art that becomes and remains part of and significant within the human landscape.”⁵⁵ Similar to Morrison, Andrews believed that criticism was a form of communication that provided access to knowledge through a narrative format. And like Morrison, Andrews understood that in privileging European or Eurocentric views about art and its production over the experiences and output of “Black artist[s] expressing a feeling about black people”

was problematic. He knew that something had to be done with regard to the amount of influence critics had on the careers of black artists, which in turn could have a profound impact on the development of a black identity beyond the imagined rural southern landscapes and fantasies associated with urban black life.



Death of the Crow, 1965; Collection of the Ogden Museum of Southern Art, New Orleans, LA

In response to the dismissive nature of specific white critics, especially those wielding power and control over the acceptance or rejection of art created by black artists—and therefore over the artists themselves—Andrews publicly challenged the policies and procedures of the arts establishment. He questioned, battled, and probed. How does one critique work that one does not understand? Why is it not necessary to know who the artist is, and therefore understand the choices made in the process of producing the work? What is the difference between the work of an artist who actively identifies as black and one who sees blackness as ancillary to their work? And, what role does objectivity play in

the assessment of art as a representation of the intangible? Andrews's observations were important for understanding the foundation from whence white critics placed value on the production of black art.

One critic in particular, Lawrence Alloway, became an invaluable resource for Andrews and his cause. A serious art critic who commanded the attention of the art world on two continents, Alloway understood art in terms of society as a whole. In *Topics in American Art Since 1945* (1975), Alloway defines the role of the critic.

An art critic's function is the description, interpretation, and evaluation of new, or at least recent, art. Though critics enjoy the art of the past, their publications on it are less likely to be decisive than those of art historians. Critics can rethink or refeel the art of the past in fresh ways, but art historians do this too, affected as we all are by the changing assumption of our time. An art critic with a retroactive focus would be one who was not facing what I take to be the critic's special area—the present, defined as a complex of paths whose nodes are to be sought and guessed at. Thus critics are closely dependent on the art being produced in their own time, both for subject matter and for their own set of values.⁵⁶

Alloway's approach to criticism as itself an art form influenced Andrews to begin to write seriously “to change and challenge the boundaries of American racial life” and to advance the tradition of critical thinking by artists in general and black artists in particular.⁵⁷

Andrews's decision to enter into the realm of art criticism also became an opportunity to educate black artists and the public on the need to articulate one's theoretical position or philosophical point of view related to art produced by blacks. What Andrews wanted the public to understand was that there is a certain amount of work that has to go into reading and comprehending the meanings behind a painting, which is based on the artist, their intentions, and the purpose of their work. He believed it was necessary for art critic and spectator alike to educate themselves about the artists and their

work, thereby gaining access to the narratives in plain view.

As Andrews understood it, critics unwilling to break from tradition to see something again for the first time could not be depended upon to provide a critical examination of the work black artists produced. This was unacceptable to Andrews, who by 1970 was becoming a prolific writer and critic for *Encore* magazine, and a public speaker. Lecturing across the country about the value of art as a form of communication and foundation for individual expression, Andrews also served on behalf of black artists pushing against the barriers that kept them out of the major museums and galleries. The radical stance that Andrews and the BECC took as a step in disrupting the limited roles that American museums promoted and supported for black artists created opportunities for black Americans to have more choices and take the chance to make known how they would like to see themselves represented.

By 1971, Andrews was in the thick of it. His plan for the bicentennial celebration included the production of one large piece per year leading up to July 4, 1976. Having been an integral part of the protest movement against the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Andrews knew what to expect from the art establishment with regard to accounting for black people in the process of revisiting the birth of the nation. He knew that the contributions of black people to the shaping of the American landscape, culture and traditions would be relegated to the margins and black “empty eyed” props would be used with the explicit purpose of making the triumph of whiteness obvious.

The first in the series was appropriately titled *Symbols* (1971). Premiering on April 25, 1971 at The Studio Museum in Harlem under the curation of gallery director Edward Spriggs, Andrews's ten foot tall and thirty-six foot wide mural juxtaposed the signs he associated with America, paying special attention to familiar experiences of blacks in the rural South. In the catalog for the exhibition, Spriggs recognizes that at “least three levels of autobiography are depicted through the panoramic sequence of scenes: The psychological and socio-historical experiences of a Georgia son, of Black people and

of this society.”⁵⁸ Clearly, *Symbols* was created by Andrews to address a lived reality that persisted in his memory and to be an accounting of the dreams of black people that also took care not to discount the nightmarish contradictions that emerged from how they defined themselves in relation to the South. From his depiction of sharecroppers in their piecemeal home, to the representation of white supremacy as the ignorance of the much maligned and misguided, and to the posturing capitalist enjoying the view, Andrews's mural, and related studies and drawings, made a profound statement about the connections of race, class, and power to American citizenship and the persistence of traditions and rituals used to keep people in their respective places in society.



Left to Right: Romare Bearden, Ernest Crichlow, Thomas Andrews, Benny Andrews, and Viola Andrews during Andrews' solo exhibition at The Studio Museum in Harlem, April 25, 1971. Photo by Eleanor Haas; Courtesy of the Benny Andrews Estate

A year later, Andrews followed *Symbols* with the composition *Trash* (1972), whereby he exposed American institutions, rituals, and beliefs as worn out, broken, and in need of discarding. Within the ten-foot by twenty-eight-foot frame, we see the connection between American symbols of white supremacy—defined by white women, the military, religion, and the Ku Klux Klan—and the phallic symbols of inferiority of African Americans. Three black men, one chained to the platform and assisting two others who grip rope tied to its frame, all struggle to pull this procession to the trash heap. In this painting, the labor of black men—the same labor used to build America's financial infrastructure during slavery and the

basis for white supremacy since—is tethered to the future of the country. Clearly, *Trash* was intended to address several of America’s long held anxieties related to race, gender, sexuality, and power, including relationships between black men and white women.

On the first platform, a blond haired and blue-eyed representation of the statue of liberty sits atop a tree trunk pedestal with her legs crossed and holding a lollipop that represents her innocence. At the base of the tree three headless (brainless) white soldiers surround the symbol of a virtuously white America, while a backward looking Klansman sits near the edge of an empty mattress. Riding on the second platform is the *War Bitch*, whose exposed breasts and amputated left leg, representing America’s disfigured past, has given birth to militaristic ideals and is still willing and able to feed the institutions being pulled to the trash pile. On the third platform, a female figure dances around what Andrews identifies as a “sex tree,” followed by a fourth platform on which religious symbols abound, as well as a statuesque one-legged white male figure with an erect penis—a clear representation of white masculinity as a symbol of divined procreative power. Andrews’s surrealist representations of American values not only connected the experiences of African Americans chained to the parade both literally and physically, but also the presence of blacks is necessary to provide the continued meaning associated with these American symbols of power.

The third mural in the series, entitled *Circle*, was introduced in 1973 at the ACA Gallery in New York. The revival-like scene depicting black women circling around a black man lying down face up on a bed while having a watermelon removed from his body speaks to black traditions and their ritual connections to things African and things sacred. In this community of black women, they maintain the power to “conjure” spirits or mythological creatures to assist them in their communal exercise of returning the possibility of manhood to one of their menfolk. In this image, they have come together to perform a ritual “ring shout” to bring the spirit down from the heavens. In the center of the sacred circle, we see the wraith-like creature hovering above

the bed and over the black male lying face up. These women are imbued with special powers of second sight.

In the catalog for *Benny Andrews: The Bicentennial Series*, Lawrence Alloway suggests that this image represents the ritualized act of purging the souls of black men, recognizing the importance of the “social role[s] of women in black culture.” These acts served to heal the damaged psyches of black men who were bombarded daily by the pervasive nature of institutionalized racism and white supremacy.⁵⁹ Andrews’s powerful imagery speaks volumes to how black men have internalized the inferiority that has been imposed upon their bodies, and the power of black women to claim the souls of black men, and assist them in their coming into manhood.

Of the four initial works created for *The Bicentennial Series*, *Sexism* (1974) is the last and most surreal. Exploring his own understanding of the institutionalized suppression of women in a male-dominant society and the importance of feminism as a tool to free both women and men from patriarchal hegemony, Andrews constructs a complex iconographic canvas of signs. Indeed, at the center of the work is a representation of a woman standing on top of a mattress in the middle of an island in the sky. Her act of breaking free of the weighted restraints in the presence of what appear to be her ethereal mothers—each draped in pastel colors, wearing hats and flying in what resemble breasts—is symbolic of the mystical quality often attributed to women in relation to the worlds of the seen and unseen. This narrative is one that Andrews carried over from “Circle,” in which he demonstrated the power of women to change the present and the future, as well as their ability to conjure the tools needed to assist them.

From January 18 to February 23, 1975, Andrews’s *The Bicentennial Series* would be on view at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, Georgia. The multi-layered, complex humanism the exhibition represented would intrigue, confuse and repulse art critics, while simultaneously leaving an impression on the viewing public that would validate and solidify Andrews’s future as a primary contributor to the growing body of work being produced by African American artists who

had taken it upon themselves to actively account for the black experience in America. In the exhibition catalogue, Andrews recalls his own youth in the unrelenting rural South where life was harsh and brutal, and the future of African American children was based on their ability to produce as laborers in the exhausted fields where thousands of dreams had gone to die. In

the essay, Andrews opines: “Oh sure, I can tell you about those fields, my dreaming up and down those unbelievably long and monotonous rows of spiteful little mean cotton plants.”⁶⁰ Indeed, by the time he was eighteen years old, Andrews left the rural Georgia countryside and those “long and monotonous rows” he had come to know as the son of a sharecropper and a son of the South.

Conclusion

Regardless of how painful the past was for Andrews, the cotton fields, pine trees, and hard red Georgia clay proved to be the marrow that would sustain his work as an artist for more than forty years. Recalling and reinterpreting traditions that made him who he was, Andrews was never far away from home. Moreover, these traditions would, in fact, provide him with a lifetime of inspiration that he could draw sustenance from as he developed into an artist of immense range and immeasurable potential, choosing to accept the “heavy burden” that his long time friend and mentor, the Austrian born sculptor and painter, Ludvik “Louis” Durchanek articulated in the letter dated January 30, 1962.⁶¹

It is a wonder that among all the turmoil of the city you are sufficiently detached to do what you are doing. I could not. I need this damn uncomfortable bush, and have even in this isolation browbeat myself to concentration. Above and beneath it all – yours and mine – is a love of everything. And this love of everything – living and dying – is a heavy burden, which an artist must bear.

Indeed, by 1975, Benny Andrews was recognizably a composite of the places he had been, the people that he met, and his experiences gained along the way, and yet he never really left the South and the Plainview of his childhood. Fighting against the institutional racism that persisted and had been interwoven into the world of fine art, Andrews communicated to his closest of friends and colleagues the need for black artists to be free to create the work that mattered

to them; art that was uncompromised by wealthy white patrons and critics, whose self-serving agendas did not advance the specialized area of art criticism or the appreciation of “good” art. Indeed, in reading interviews, his own writing and criticism, and previously unpublished letters, we can understand the burden that Andrews chose to bear in his pursuit of art as a method of articulation and reconciliation. Andrews’s impressive dossier not only demonstrated that he had accepted the challenge that Durchanek presented to him, he had charged head first into the proverbial lion’s mouth and began to create what would be one of the most productive series of paintings of his career.

After the High Museum show, Andrews added *War* (1975) and *Utopia* (1976) to *The Bicentennial Series*. These two additional works represent the natural progression of the project, which sought to explore questions related to history, memory, identity, and power. According to Andrews, *War* was created as “kind of a statement about my mother. And something that had to do with war...that made a comment on war.”⁶² Within the converging contexts of the United States’ involvement in Vietnam, the mounting casualties, and the impact political decisions had on families and communities, Andrews wanted to represent what he called the “kind of loss which gnaws at the heart, slowly and incessantly.”⁶³ While the central mural clearly depicts a great chasm between a lamenting woman and a fallen soldier in the distance, we can’t help but recognize this scene as one of the great tragedies of war: death in isolation from loved ones. The kind of loss that

Andrews sought to capture in the series of drawings and paintings for *War* was that of a mother's loss of her son. In the environment of the painting, the landscape is a clear indication of the distance between the two central figures. This was Andrews's statement about the horrors of war. Not only does the work invoke a sadness that can be unbearable, it also captures how the war or violence puts distance and barriers between human beings so that we can no longer see each other as people. War kills human compassion, which ultimately leads to the destruction of humanity.

The final mural in the series, *Utopia*, is the direct result of *War*, both figuratively and literally. This Eden-like landscape with its lush, colorful, and vibrant vegetation and birds flying free of the destructive force of humanity, is a fantasy that presupposes the complete destruction and annihilation of all humanity. Andrews, of course, was not advocating for war. He was showing us the ultimate result of its cost: the end of everything we know and the beginning of something new. In truth, Andrews began *Utopia* in 1972 as the third of six paintings for *The Bicentennial Series*, which he explains was to "be ready for exhibition as a group in 1976 as a Black artist[]s expression of how he portrays his dreams, experiences and hopes along with the de[s]pair, anger and opposition to so many of America's actions."⁶⁴ In his notes, he accounts for the difficulty in capturing something ideal and "elusive" when his mind was on one of the inmates at the Bronx Prison where he taught art, who had written to proclaim his innocence and plea for help.

I got seven years with no consideration. My background didn't warrant that Benny. Believe me this Lawyer I had just took my family's money for nothing! I have gone to the Hospital I may not be back if you can check and I am there would you come by my family needs legal help. I got a letter from Congressman Rangel in reference to a[n] investigation of my case. I am innocent.⁶⁵

The challenge of trying to create something like a utopia out of his mind with this looming was difficult to say the least. In the end,

Andrews's final work for *The Bicentennial Series* was playful and whimsical, but it was also cautionary. If the "isms" which impact our daily lives—racism, sexism, capitalism, etc.—are not addressed in a humanistic way, we are all doomed. But the question remained: could human beings inhabit a utopian environment without destroying one another? Andrews answers that question plainly: no.

His work up until this point in his career, for the most part, focused on the black experience in America and in the South, and the disallowances and traditions, which were connected to the past for people of African descent, and their possibilities for the future. Andrews's representation of "the folks" was encouraging to say the least, especially as black Americans sought a fully realized American identity after gains made during the civil rights era. Moreover, Andrews's work served to change how Americans in general and black people in particular understood race relations in the United States, and it revealed the need to seek and claim the truth as a portal to freedom and liberation

The Bicentennial Series provided Andrews a unique opportunity to examine America as he saw it. His overall program included redefining the position of black artists within the realm of contemporary art while advancing an understanding of people of African descent as integral to the history of the United States. Indeed, in the post-civil-rights era of the 1970s, whereby black people had achieved the designated outcome of full-citizenship rights through the discourse of social movements, Andrews's use of art and art production as a tool of resistance and reinforcement of the narratives that mattered to "the folks" is significant. Through his art, Andrews was able to communicate and frame the contributions made by the Black church to ground black communities, the significance of black women to the communities they fostered and cared for, and the vulnerability of the oppressed in an ostensibly democratic system that had been founded in support of white supremacy.

Andrews dared America to see itself through the eyes of one of its children. For some, Andrews's presentation of the interconnectedness of American history and life with all of its intertwined contradictions would be considered

subversive, anti-American, and "divisive" rhetoric. Still, for Andrews, his commitment to telling the truth and representing the experiences of southern blacks demonstrated his love for everything and his unrelenting passion for

traditions no matter how painful they were. In the end, it seems, this was all that we really have to ground us. At least, that is, on this plane of existence.

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About the Author

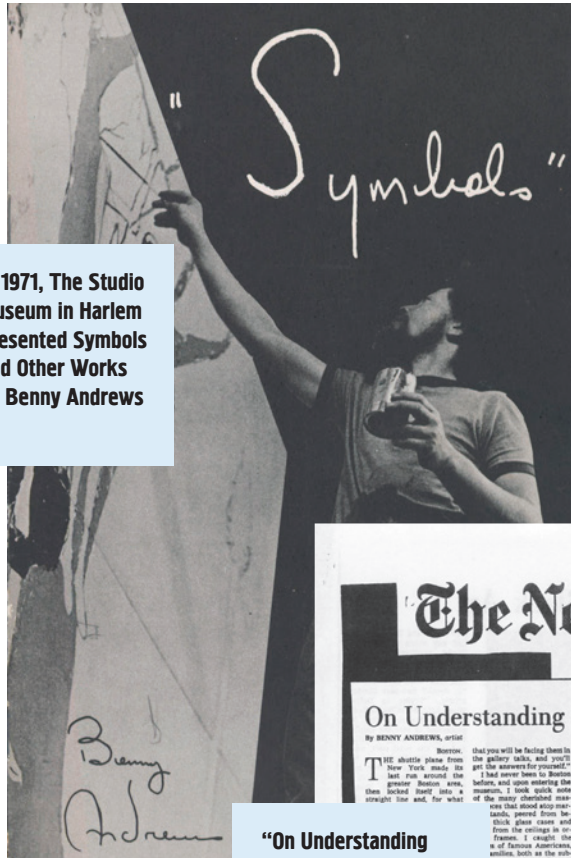
Pellom McDaniels III, Ph.D., is the Curator of African American collections in the Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Books Library at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. Along with a general interest in African American history, his research has focused on representations of black masculinity in history and visual culture. He is the author of *The Prince of Jockeys: The Life of Isaac Burns Murphy* (2013), the first definitive biography of this celebrated athlete, whose life spanned the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the adoption of Jim Crow legislation. Despite the obstacles he faced, Murphy became an important figure—not just in sports, but in the social, political, and cultural consciousness of African Americans. McDaniels has contributed essays to exhibition catalogs including *Leaving Mississippi: Reflections on Heroes and Folklore* (2014), *American Epics: Thomas Hart Benton and Hollywood* (2015), and *Without Regard to Sex, Race, or Color: The Past, Present and Future of One Historically Black College* (2015). His essays and exhibition reviews have also appeared in the *International Review of African American Art*. In September 2016, McDaniels opened the exhibition *Still Raising Hell: The Art, Archives and Activism of Camille Billops and James V. Hatch* in the Schatten Gallery at Emory University.

About the Stuart A. Rose Library

The Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library at Emory University houses a diverse body of primary sources associated with the African American experience, from literature and history to politics and popular culture. These include an extensive collection of correspondence, literary manuscripts, photographs, and ephemeral material as well as rare books, periodicals, pamphlets, and other printed matter. The library collects and connects stories of human experience, promotes access and learning, and offers opportunities for dialogue to all who seek knowledge by preserving distinctive collections; fostering original research; bridging content and context; and engaging diverse communities through innovative outreach, programming, and exhibitions. Of its many holdings, the Stuart A. Rose Library takes pride in its collections relating to African American artists and art historians. Among its more than two dozen collections, the papers of James A. Porter, Samella Lewis, John Biggers, Barbara Chase-Riboud, Camille Billops, and Benny Andrews stand apart.

In 2000, the Andrews collection came as a gift from the Benny Andrews Foundation to the Stuart A. Rose Library. Pellom McDaniels, III believes that the “Georgia-born Andrews is one of the most important artist/activist/educators of his generation, and is deserving of a more in-depth examination of his life and work.” The Andrews collection consists of correspondence, exhibit files, photographs, printed materials, writings and illustrations, audio-visual records, artwork, Andrews family correspondence and documents relating to his work with the Black Emergency Culture Coalition (BECC), the National Arts Program Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA).

SYMBOLS



In 1971, The Studio Museum in Harlem presented *Symbols and Other Works* by Benny Andrews

Benny Andrews in his studio located at 31 Beekman Street, 1970



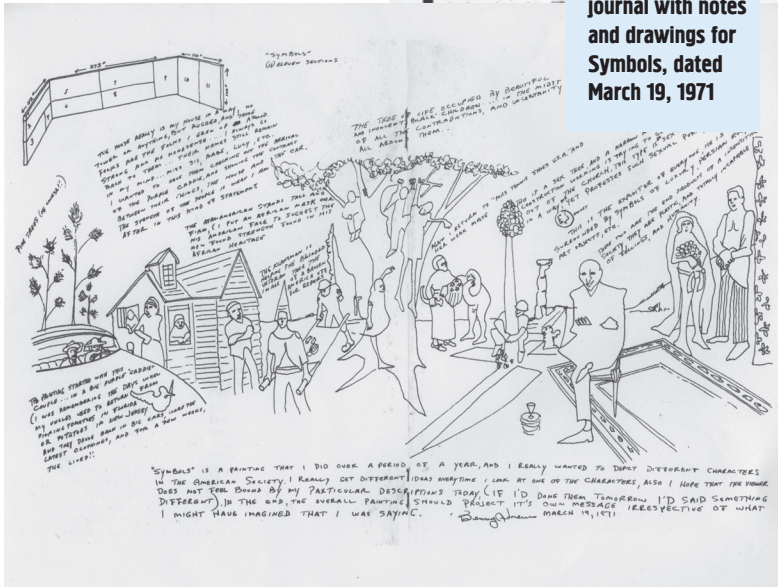
Photo by Marvin Bolotsky



"On Understanding Black Art," by Benny Andrews, published in The New York Times, New York, NY, June 27, 1970

"THE IDEA OF MY NEW WORK IS THE EXPRESSION OF AN INDIVIDUAL, IN THIS CASE, A BLACK INDIVIDUAL, IN AMERICA, IN THE 70'S, USING THE BICENTENNIAL AS A FOCAL POINT. THROUGHOUT THE WORK, I EMPHASIZE THE HISTORY OF THIS COUNTRY OVER TWO HUNDRED YEARS. MY NEW WORK FORCES ME TO POSITION MYSELF IN THAT KIND OF ARENA. THOUGH I DON'T WORK ON THE IDEA OF THE SPECTACULAR, I DID WANT TO WORK ON THE CHALLENGE OF BIGNESS. I HAD TO DO THE "BIG" WORK EVEN THOUGH I HAD TO DO THEM SMALL ENOUGH, IN SECTIONS, SO THEY COULD GET OUT OF MY DOOR AND DOWN THE STAIRCASE IN THE BUILDING. SO AS I WORKED IN MY STUDIO, I SAID I HAVE TO APPROACH THIS HONESTLY, AND I MADE NO ATTEMPT TO HIDE OR REDESIGN THE PANELS OR THE LINES BETWEEN THEM. I ALWAYS HAVE A NEED TO EXPRESS MYSELF ABOUT PEOPLE. I HAVE ALWAYS NEEDED CONTACT WITH WHAT I CALL "REAL" PEOPLE; THOSE WHO HAVE A REASON TO STRUGGLE. I AM TALKING ABOUT THE INHERENT HUMAN NEED TO SURVIVE, ETHNICALLY, CULTURALLY, MORALLY. THIS IS WHAT I NEED TO PUT ON CANVAS. I LIKE PEOPLE WHO ARE STRUGGLING; BLACK PEOPLE, POOR PEOPLE, SENIOR CITIZENS STRUGGLING FOR DIGNITY, FOR A REASON TO KEEP GOING. THAT'S WHY I CAN IDENTIFY WITH PART OF THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT AND WHY I WORK IN PRISONS."

Two pages from Benny Andrews' journal with notes and drawings for *Symbols*, dated March 19, 1971



SYMBOLS

1970

The first large-scale work of *The Bicentennial Series*, *Symbols*, concerns Benny Andrews's experiences growing up in rural Georgia. The work demonstrates a visual and thematic continuity with the *Autobiographical Series*, which Andrews had started in 1965 after receiving a John Hay Whitney Fellowship that enabled him to return to rural Georgia and address the lives of impoverished African American sharecroppers living under Jim Crow. In a 1974 letter to Thomas Armstrong, Associate Director of the Whitney Museum of American Art, the artist explained his choice to return to this southern imagery in *Symbols*, "Just being an American is mind-boggling in itself, add being Black in America, a cotton sharecropper who went into fine art...Wow!!... I always draw upon the essence of my dreams, impressions and the people of my down-home days. That doesn't mean I copy or paint them literally, it means that they are the foundations of my works. This is the crux of the statement that 'I feel very American'."¹

In the center of *Symbols* are four young children climbing a "tree of life" surrounded by a cast of characters participating in acts of symbolic oppression. Additional characters reminiscent of the artist's family and community stand outside the circling injustice, observing. In an annotated drawing of the work published in the The Studio Museum in Harlem's exhibition catalogue for *Benny Andrews: Symbols and Other Works* (1971), Andrews wrote, "The house really is my house in a way, no tower or anything, but rugged, and those folks are the folks I grew up around. Strong and no nonsense. ... I always go back to them. ... Their names still remain in my mind. ... Miss Sis, Babe, Lucy, etc. ... The strength of the people is what I am after in this kind of statement."² In 1972, Edmund Barry Gaither—Director and Curator of the Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists—wrote about *Symbols* in the catalogue for the ACA Gallery's exhibition *Benny Andrews: Paintings and Watercolors including "Trash."* According to Gaither, "Andrews gave emphasis anew to an exploration of his own past, and to the past of every country boy—black or poor white—in the land. ... It [*Symbols*] recalled the love that brought us through those years—the love of Aunts, Uncles, neighbors and church sisters—as well as the acid quality of exploitation, human abuse, and hardship which characterized the sharecropper system in the South."³ Andrews created four oil and collage on canvas and forty pen and ink on paper studies for *Symbols*. The final painting was composed of eleven panels and measured eight feet high by thirty-six feet wide. Completed in 1970, *Symbols* was installed the following year in an immersive U-shaped environment at The Studio Museum in Harlem.

1 Benny Andrews, letter to Thomas N. Armstrong, February 19, 1974.
 2 Edward Spriggs, ed., *Symbols and Other Works by Benny Andrews*, (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1971), 5.
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Symbols | 1971

oil on ten linen canvases with painted fabric and mixed media collage
436 ½ x 99 inches / 1108.71 x 251.46 cm, overall

Collection of the Ulrich Museum of Art, Wichita State University
Foundation Art Collection, Wichita, KS; Gift of Milton Ratner (1977.5.a-j)



Symbol Study #31 | 1970
india ink on paper
13 5/8 x 17 inches / 34.6 x 43.2 cm, signed





Symbols Study #37 | 1970
 india ink on paper, 17 x 13 5/8 inches / 43.2 x 34.6 cm, signed

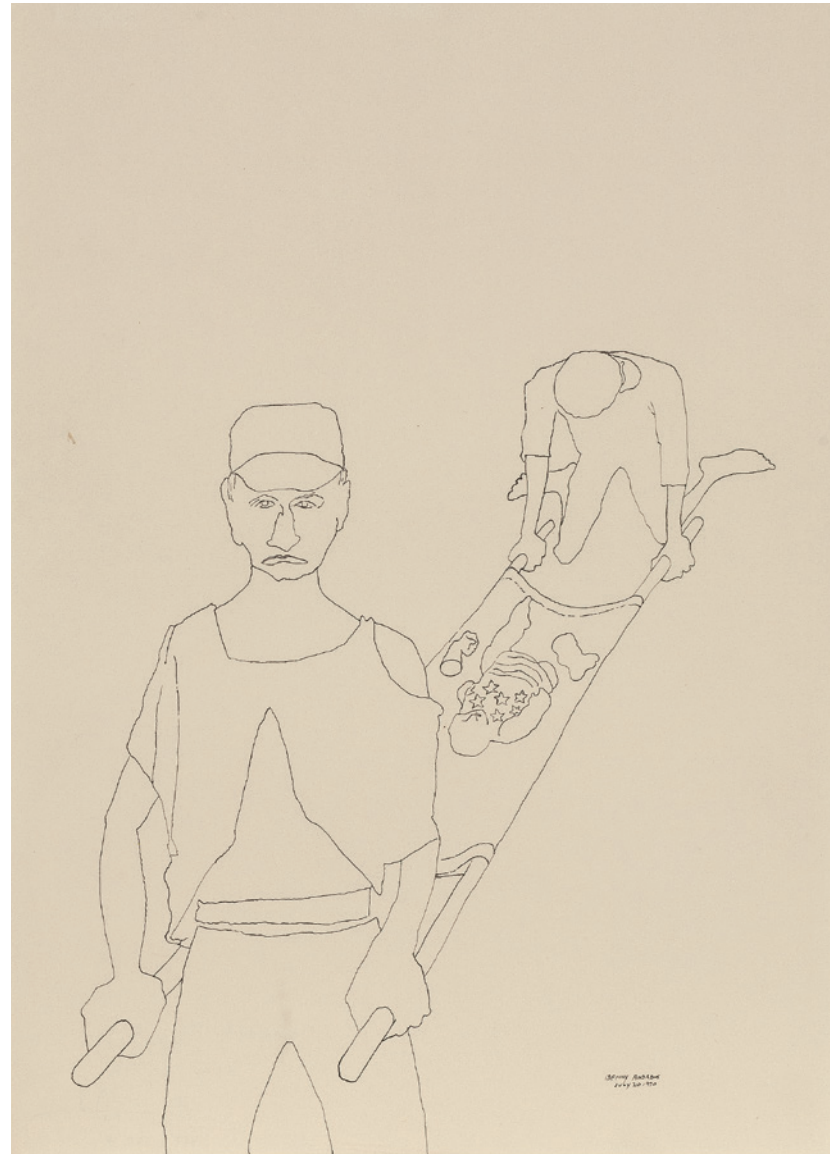


Little Richard (Study for Symbols) | 1970
 india ink on paper, 18 x 12 1/8 inches / 45.7 x 30.8 cm, signed

American and Mother (Study for Symbols) | 1970
india ink on paper
18 x 24 inches / 45.7 x 61.0 cm, signed

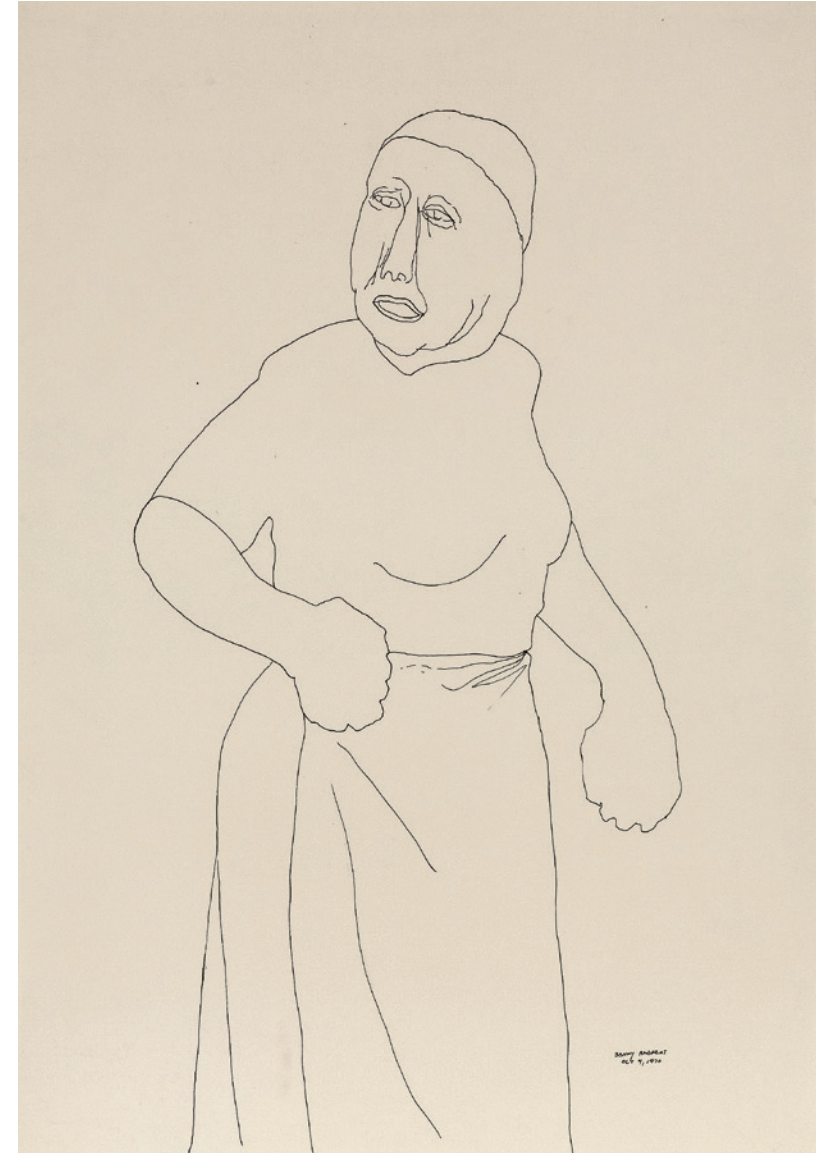


42



Cargo (Study for Symbols) | 1970
india ink on paper, 17 ¼ x 12 ½ inches / 43.8 x 30.8 cm, signed

43

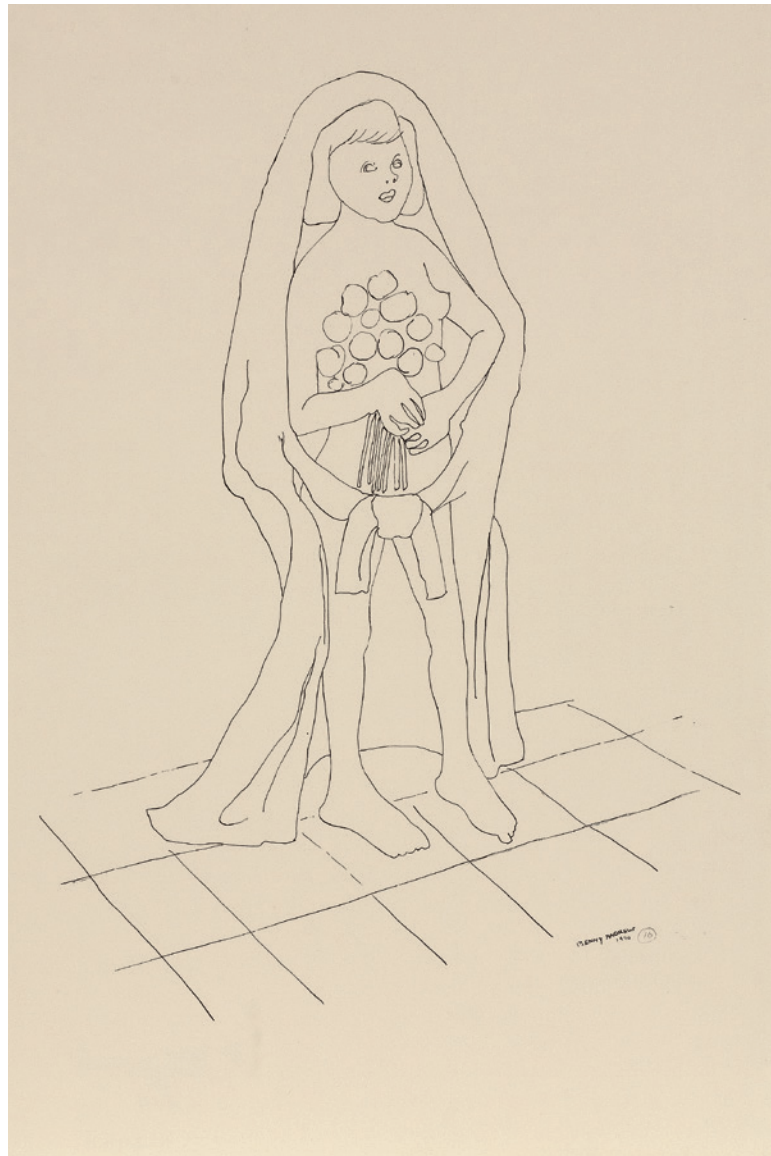


Woman (Study from Symbols) | 1970
india ink on paper, 18 x 12 ¼ inches / 45.7 x 31.1 cm, signed

Trio (Study for Symbols) | 1970
india ink on paper
18 x 12 ¼ inches / 45.7 x 31.1 cm, signed

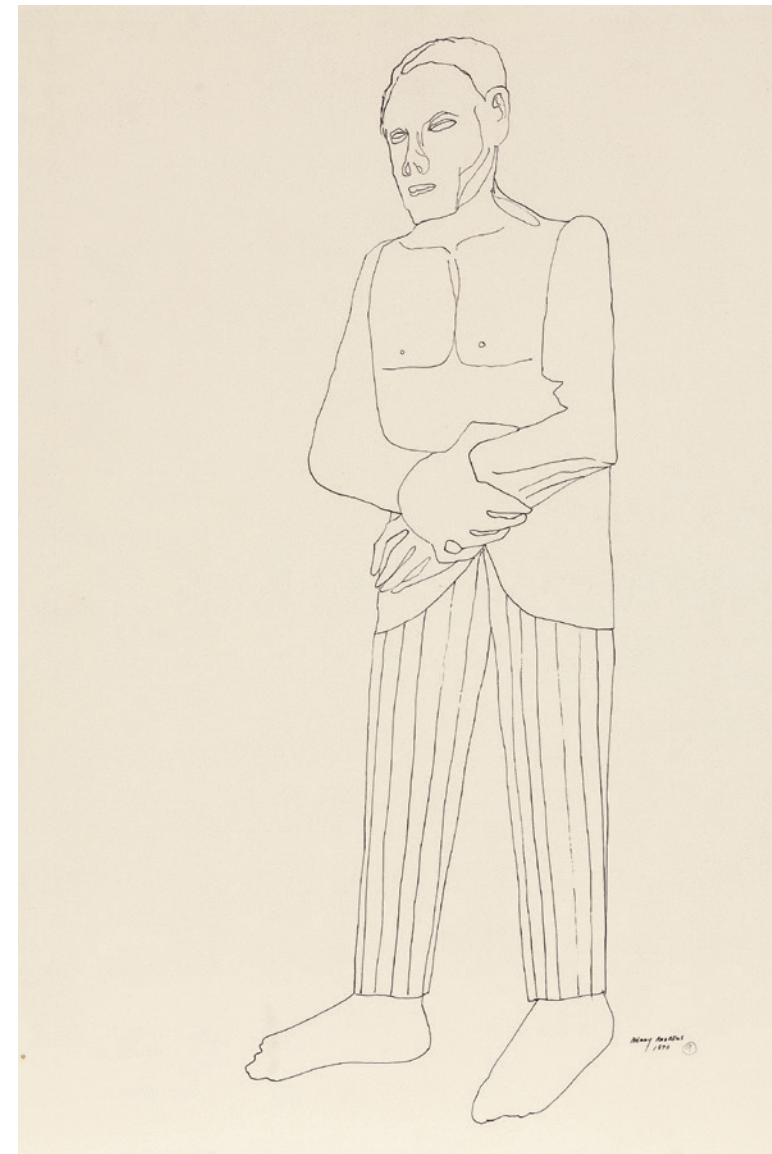


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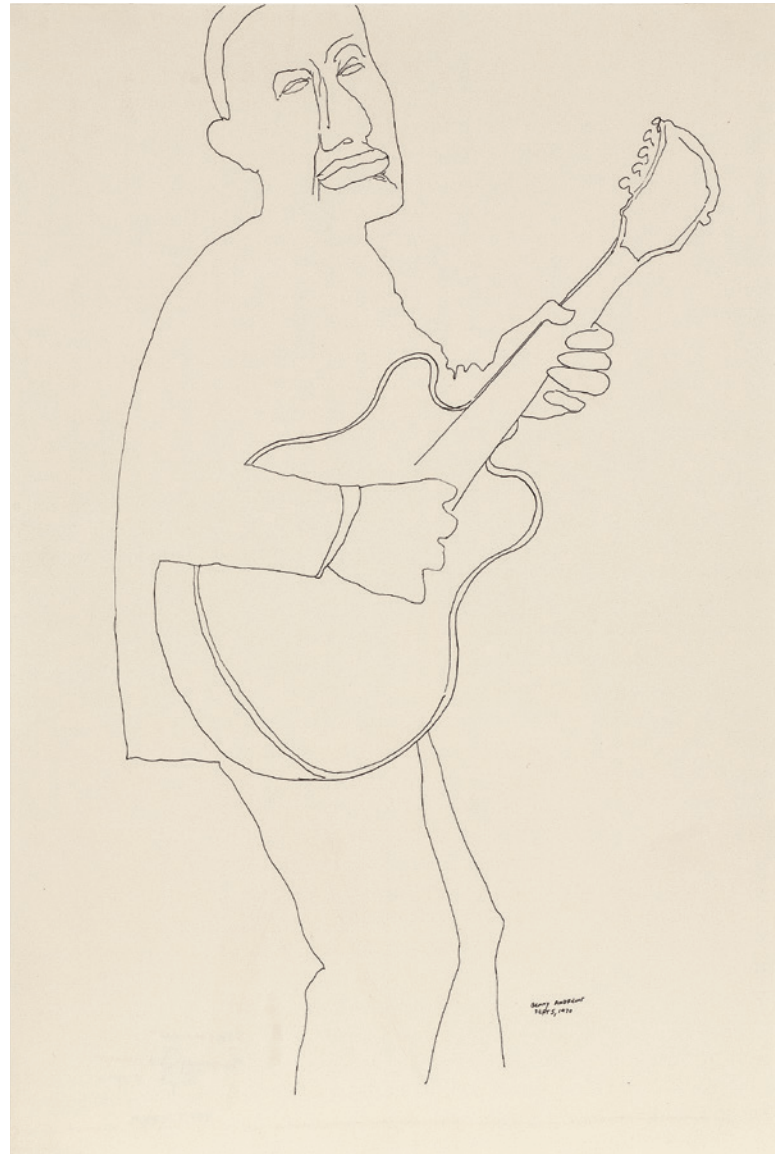


Bride (Study for Symbols) | 1970
india ink on paper, 18 x 12 1/8 inches / 45.7 x 30.8 cm, signed

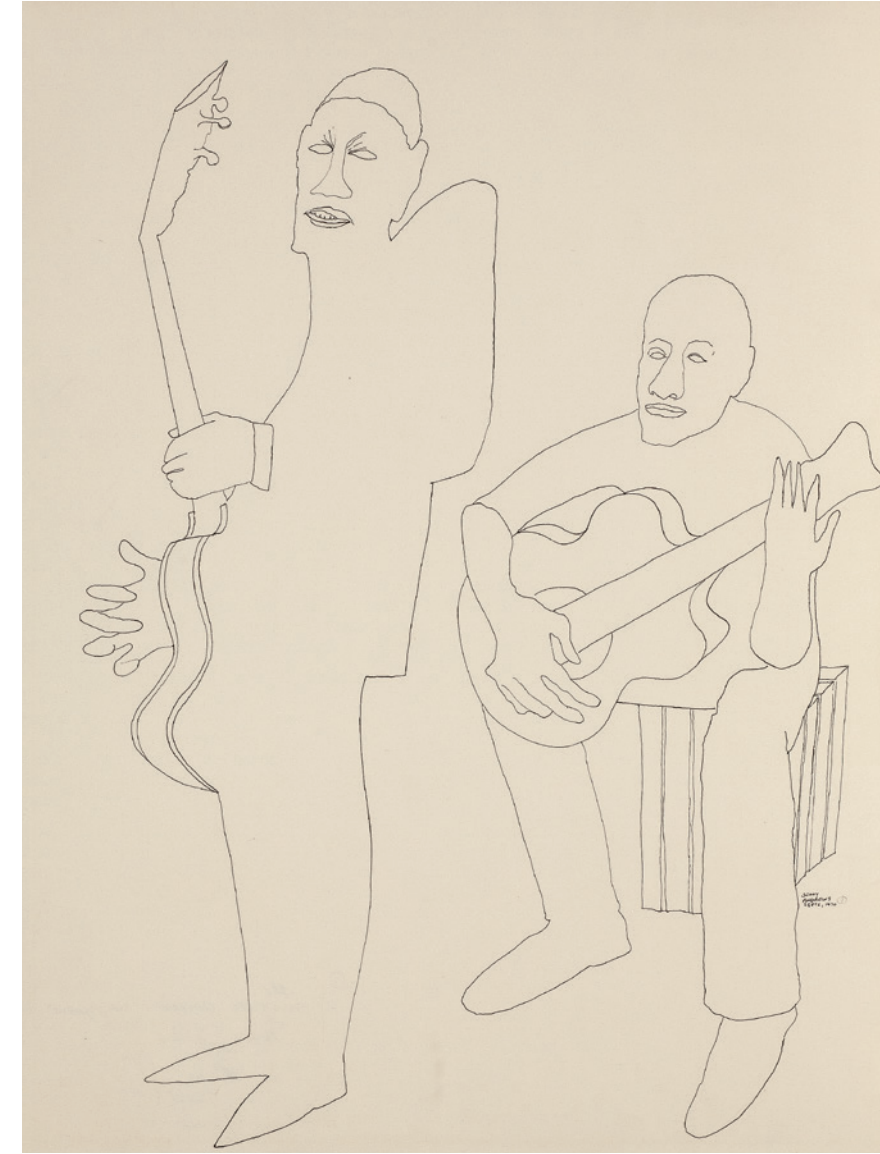
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Groom (Study for Symbols) | 1970
india ink on paper, 18 x 12 1/4 inches / 45.7 x 31.1 cm, signed



Strummer (Study for Symbols) | 1970
 india ink on paper, 18 x 12 inches / 45.7 x 30.5 cm, signed



Study of Guitarists for Symbols | 1970
 india ink on paper, 24 x 18 inches / 61.0 x 45.7 cm, signed

TRASH

“Notes on Doing Trash,” by Benny Andrews, published in the ACA Galleries 1972 exhibition catalogue *Benny Andrews Paintings and Watercolors including “Trash”*



Photograph by MARY ELLEN ANDREWS

Notes On Doing “Trash”

hard to put it into words, that's all.

no one, or two, or twenty reasons why I took on this as a familiar cliché, I did it because it was there. The absence with saying things in my way as artistically as possible, about how I felt about things and the symbols of certain evils of America posed a challenge. For example, how do you do it without laying every little inch of it right down front?

Events happened to help me with the things that I was trying to get together. The whole scene up at Attica State Prison came down, and it was literally upon me at the time that I was looking for a symbol of Blackness that could be depicted, to counterbalance all the symbols of Whiteness that I'd come up with in the painting until then.

I'd done a whole series of paintings and studies before, in a major work of mine entitled “Symbols” and although I felt I got across a lot of what I'm all about as a person, and where I'm coming from in this raucous society, I felt that I should try to tighten up the composition in a way that would allow the viewer to see the entire panoramic view in one sweeping look. I had that in huge paintings there is a tendency to read them from one point to another, while with smaller ones, the viewer tends to see the whole thing in one grand sweep.

There were other things, I wanted to share an experience with people who are unrelated to the exhibition calendar schedules of what's happening in the galleries and museums. I opened up my studio to the community and made it known through places like the Coontee Callen Library and the Union Settlement, etc. This was to be sure that I'd get school children and their parents to come. So for several months, as I struggled with the studies, and the final panel of “Trash”, I did so with people. It's too soon to say what influence this has had on me, and it was not always a smoothly flowing thing. For example, I found out that it was not enough to just open my studio door and let people come in and silently observe me while I worked. I had to acknowledge their presence, talk to them, answer their questions, listen to their ideas, and even their comments about things that had nothing to do with me, my work or art, but in general about life, folks, their children and mine. I would often sit on a stool off in the corner of my studio, long after the people of that particular day had gone and just stare blankly at the unfinished painting, and sometimes the unstarted-about painting of that day and think about all kinds of

COVER: “TRASH” 10' x 28'

BENNY ANDREWS



Benny Andrews and his son protesting at the Whitney Museum of American Art, January 31, 1971

© Jan van Raay

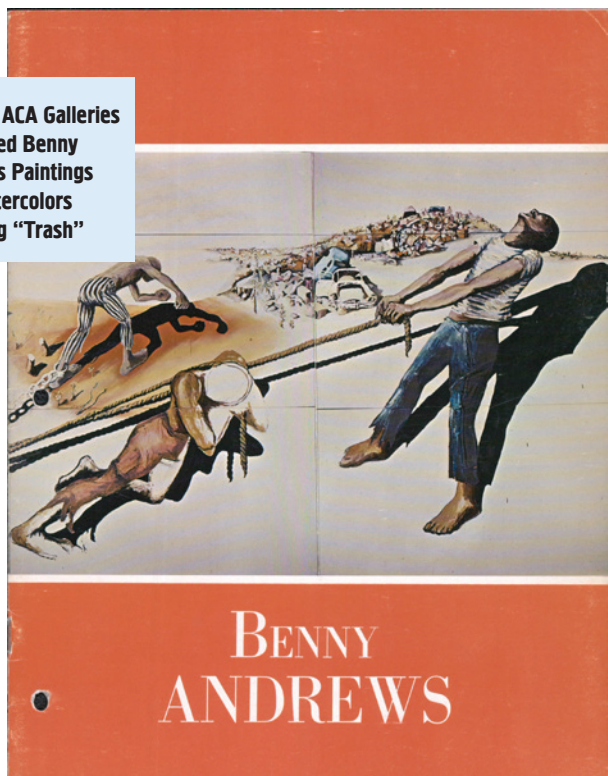
TRASH
1971

In 1971, Benny Andrews received a grant from the New York State Council on the Arts to create *Trash*, the second monumental painting of *The Bicentennial Series*. While Andrews was working on *Trash*, prisoners at Attica Correctional Facility in upstate New York rioted in protest of their treatment and living conditions. The inmates held control over the prison for four days before the facility was violently retaken by police. Andrews was so moved by this rebellion, in particular by the prisoners' list of demands, that he created a prison art program for inmates. The program was initiated under the auspices of the BECC in November of 1971, when Andrews taught his first class at the Manhattan House of Detention (aka “the Tombs”). It then expanded beyond New York and continued through the late 1980s.

In notes published in the 1972 ACA Gallery exhibition catalogue, Andrews wrote, “Events happened to help me with the things that I was trying to get together. The whole scene at Attica State Prison came down, and it was literally upon me at the time that I was looking for a symbol of Blackness that could be depicted, to counterbalance all the symbols of Whiteness that I'd come up with in the painting until then.”¹ In *Trash*, Andrews broadened his narrative framework from rural Georgia to America as a whole, making twenty-four oil and collage on canvas paintings and twenty-three pen and ink on paper studies. The final oil and collage on canvas, ten feet high by twenty-eight feet wide, depicted three African-American prisoners dragging a parade of grotesque imagery—the symbolic edifices of American culture—to a junk yard. In a 1984 essay for Bucknell University's exhibition catalogue *Since the Harlem Renaissance: 50 Years of Afro-American Art*, Andrews explained, “The series could be seen as a political statement, but I tried to do it on a much higher level. *Trash* wasn't about just Attica, but about the failure of American institutions, such as the church and the government, to respond to massacre. I called it taking all the American values to the trash, and I tried to present it in an artistic way.”² Andrews's statement echoes the sentiments expressed by Gaither in his 1972 essay: “[*Trash*] attacks institutions such as the military, organizations and societies such as the Klan and the Minutemen, but more than this it indicts the ideas which manifest themselves in these peculiarly anti-human structures and associations; ideas such as racism, sexism and militarism.”³

The force of Andrews's political content was matched by his powerful handling of the paint and collage materials, a combination that provoked an overwhelming, visceral response in the viewer. Responding to the impact of Andrews's work, fellow artist and friend Raphael Soyer wrote in the ACA catalogue, “It shocked and repelled some of us [artists], but looking at it long, one felt Andrews's deep pity for the battered and exploited, and his deep-seated anger at a society which is guilty of such cruelty and finds such cruelty profitable. This anger, this hatred of bigotry, and this compassion, lend vigor and immediacy to his work. It rings true...”⁴

In 1972, ACA Galleries presented Benny Andrews Paintings and Watercolors including “Trash”



“TRASH WASN'T ABOUT JUST ATTICA, BUT ABOUT THE FAILURE OF AMERICAN INSTITUTIONS, SUCH AS THE CHURCH AND THE GOVERNMENT, TO RESPOND TO MASSACRE. I CALLED IT TAKING ALL THE AMERICAN VALUES TO THE TRASH, AND I TRIED TO PRESENT IT IN AN ARTISTIC WAY. I SUPPOSE THAT THE WORKS ARE POLITICAL, BUT I TRY TO APPROACH THEM AS A FINE ARTIST. I FEEL THAT IT IS MORE ABOUT EXPRESSING MY EMOTIONS. I FEEL THAT AN ARTIST HAS VERY LITTLE EFFECT ON WHAT TAKES PLACE IN A SOCIETY IN TERMS OF POLITICAL INFLUENCE. I FOUND OUT FROM MY EXPERIENCES AS A PERSON IN THE ART WORLD THAT I COULD HAVE EASILY BECOME MUCH MORE EFFECTIVE POLITICALLY HAD I CHOSEN TO ACCEPT SOME OF THE OTHER OPPORTUNITIES THAT WERE OFFERED ME, OPPORTUNITIES OTHER THAN PAINTING. IN OTHER WORDS, I JUST STEPPED DOWN AS BEING DIRECTOR OF THE VISUAL ARTS PROGRAM OF THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS, AND IF I REALLY WANTED TO STAY POLITICALLY AND SOCIALLY INFLUENTIAL I WOULD HAVE STAYED IN THAT JOB.”

- 1 Benny Andrews, “Notes on Doing “Trash,”” *Benny Andrews Paintings and Watercolors including Trash*, 1.
- 2 Benny Andrews, “Benny Andrews,” *Since the Harlem Renaissance: 50 Years of Afro-American Art* (Lewisburg, PA: The Center Gallery of Bucknell University, 1984), 11.
- 3 Edmund Barry Gaither, “Comments on *Trash*,” *Benny Andrews Paintings and Watercolors including Trash*, (New York: ACA Galleries, 1972), 6.
- 4 Raphael Soyer, “I want to be an artist my way.” *Benny Andrews Paintings and Watercolors including Trash*, 3.



Trash | 1971

oil on twelve linen canvases with painted fabric and mixed media collage
120 x 336 inches / 304.8 x 853.44 cm, overall
The Studio Museum in Harlem; gift of Mr. and Mrs. Stanley Katz,
New York (81.14.1a-l)



Liberty #6 (Study for Trash) | 1971

oil on canvas with painted fabric collage
78 x 39 ¼ x ¼ inches / 198.1 x 101.0 x 0.6 cm, signed



58



Composition #9 for Trash | 1971
 india ink on paper, 24 x 18 inches / 61.0 x 45.7 cm, signed

59



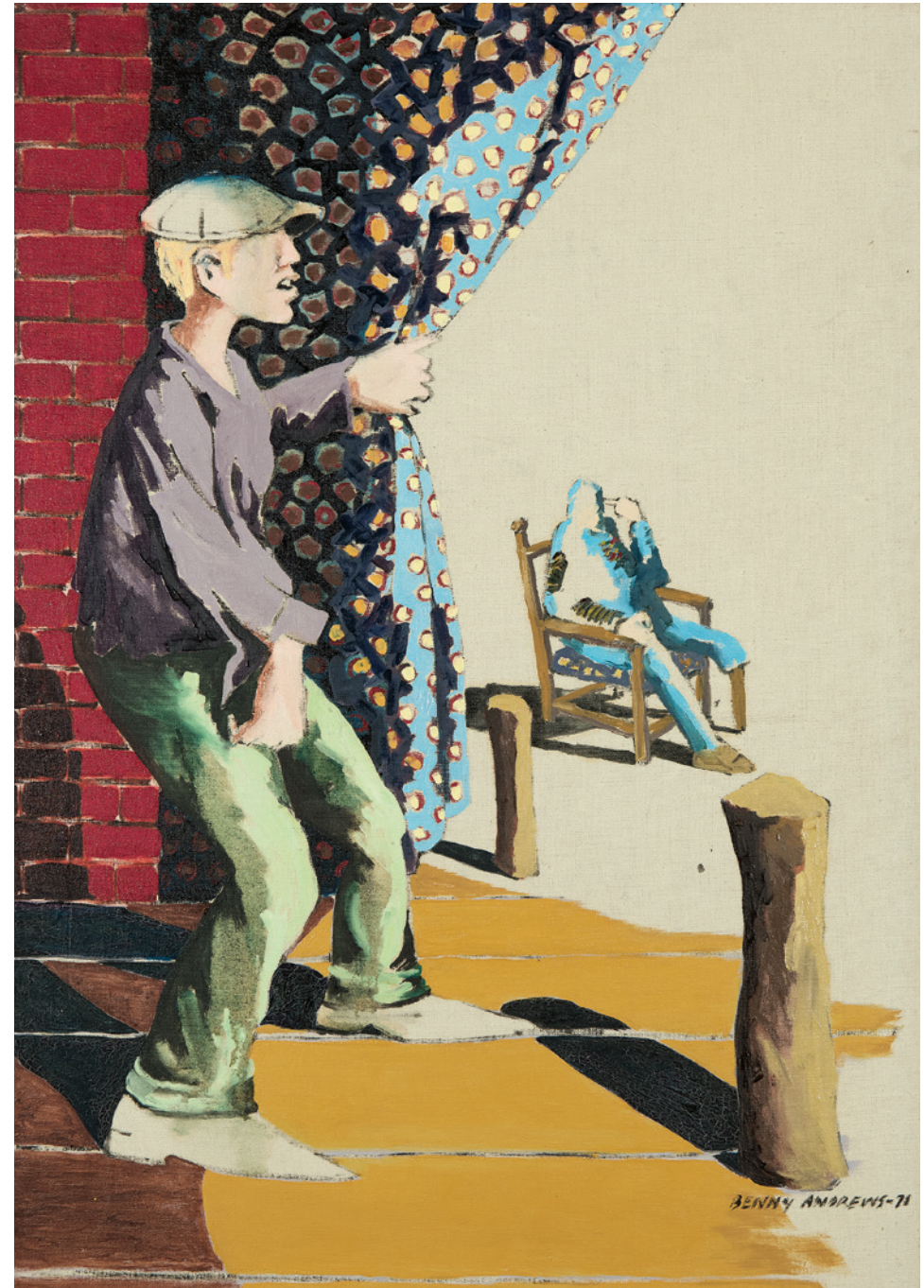
Liberty (Study #2 for Trash) | 1971
 oil on linen, 34 x 22 inches / 86.4 x 55.9 cm, signed

War Bitch (Study #2 for Trash) | 1971
oil on linen, 34 x 24 inches / 86.4 x 61.0 cm, signed

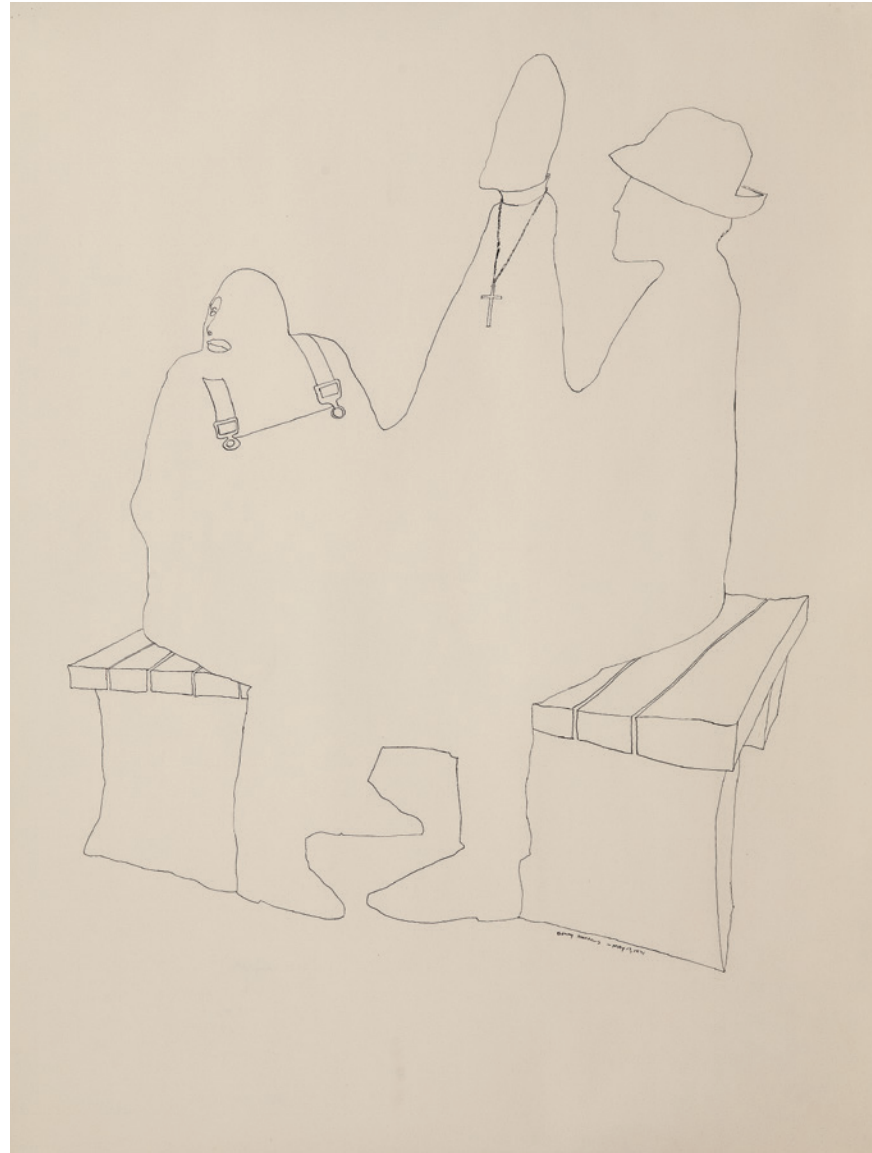


White (Study for Trash) | 1971

oil on linen, 34 x 24 inches / 86.4 x 61.0 cm, signed

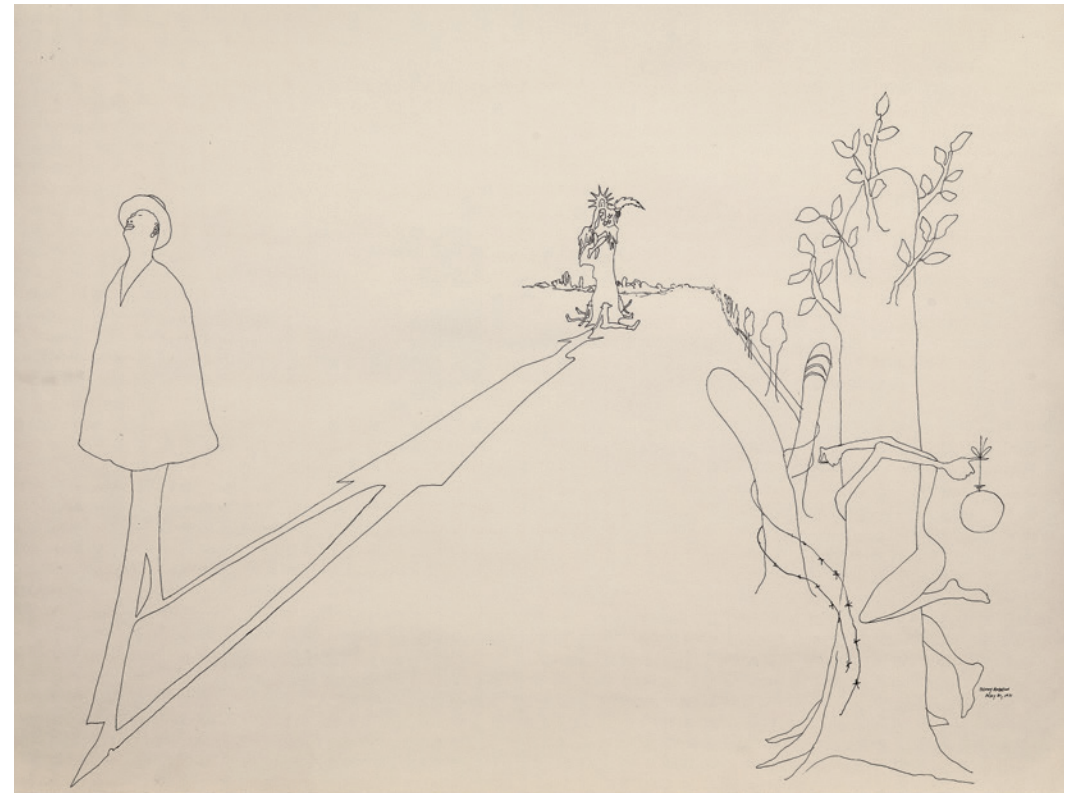


64



Chessmen #2 (Study for Trash) | 1971
india ink on paper, 24 x 18 inches / 61.0 x 45.7 cm, signed

65



Composition #8 for Trash | 1971
india ink on paper, 18 x 24 inches / 45.7 x 61.0 cm, signed

Puller (Study #1 for Trash) | 1971
oil on linen, 18 x 12 inches / 45.7 x 30.5 cm, signed



CIRCLE

CIRCLE 1972

When Benny Andrews began his third painting for *The Bicentennial Series*, *Circle*, he had initially planned it to be a thematic point of contrast with *Symbols* and *Trash*, works that focused on the evils of American society, by painting his vision of utopia. Andrews was still active in the BECC, and he had also joined Artists and Writers Protest Against the War in Vietnam. In 1972, he co-edited *The Attica Book*, a monograph that featured works by artists and poets politically involved in the civil rights and anti-war movements. As he continued to teach in the Prison Art Program, Andrews realized that his vision of an ideal society would have to wait—he was still too involved with social and political injustice. As he explained in his journal entry dated June 2, 1972, “I sit here in my studio with my drawings and paintings for this elusive ‘Utopia’ and just doodle. From a distance though I have gotten my teeth into it, hell I don’t know what part I have hold of, but I have an inkling of something going. I can’t get my mind off the Bronx prison though... I got this letter from one of the inmates named George Smith, and he had been in the classes there for over a month while he was waiting to be sentenced for carrying or having possession of a weapon. ... Well, dammit last week he didn’t show up for the class and instead sent this letter; *Hi Benny, I got seven years with no consideration. My background didn’t warrant that many. Believe me this lawyer I had just took my family’s money for nothing. I’ve gone to the hospital, I may not be back, if you can check and I am there, would you come by, my family needs some legal help. I got a letter from Congressman Rangel in reference to an investigation of my case. I am innocent. Love, George Smith.* Like I say, I’m having a hell of a time doing a painting called Utopia.”¹

Andrews made twenty-three oil and collage on canvas paintings and forty pen and ink on paper studies for *Circle*. The imagery in the studies evolved from many serene and sexless figures sitting nude in a circle, to a transformed stove that his mother had leveraged to pay for her son’s education, to the scenes of cruelty present in the final painting. *Circle*, ten feet high by twenty-four feet wide, featured a tortured man tied to a bed. A mechanical bird, reminiscent of a stove pipe, is harnessed by a circling crowd of women who surgically remove watermelons from his bound body. In conversations with critics about the painting, Andrews stayed silent on the personal intent behind his symbolism. As he told Ruth Bowman in a 1973 interview for WNYC, “The work should mean something for the individual looking at it. ...I’ve learned that the less I say about what I meant, the better it is for the viewer.”² As a result, his surreal imagery received diverse interpretations from art critics. James Mellow wrote in *The New York Times*, “*Circle*—if I read it correctly—concerns itself partly with the vicious circle of white myths about the black man. In the painting, a black man is stretched out in crucified form on a rundown bed—that symbol of prowess.”³ Another *Times* critic, Helen Harrison noted, “In *Circle* he (a single male figure—the artist himself) acts the part of bound Prometheus, whose punishment for being human and vulnerable is to be eviscerated by a huge predatory bird.”⁴ Writing for *The Syracuse New Times*, Mary Campbell observed, “the imagery is rich: charmed circle, Christ figure, boxing ring, and the colors—olive green, the black shadows, and the touches of red—subtly refer to Afro liberation colors. His landscape here is a psychological one.”⁵ Finally, Mimi Crossley wrote in *The Houston Post*, “it began as a work on black liberation but ended as a critical look at female sexism among members of his race. ... At first, the painting seems to be about a man surrounded by women who have put him on the rack and plucked a watermelon-shaped heart from his body; yet the women are just as shackled as he by the roles they are forced to play.”⁶

1 Benny Andrews, unpublished journal entry, June 2, 1972.

2 Benny Andrews, Interview by Ruth Bowman, *Views on Art*, WNYC, May 1, 1973.

3 James R. Mellow, “A Black Artist’s Ideas Put Into Allegory,” *The New York Times*, (May 5, 1973), 33.

4 Helen A. Harrison, “A Black’s Odyssey Vividly Portrayed,” *The New York Times*, (March 9, 1980), L119.

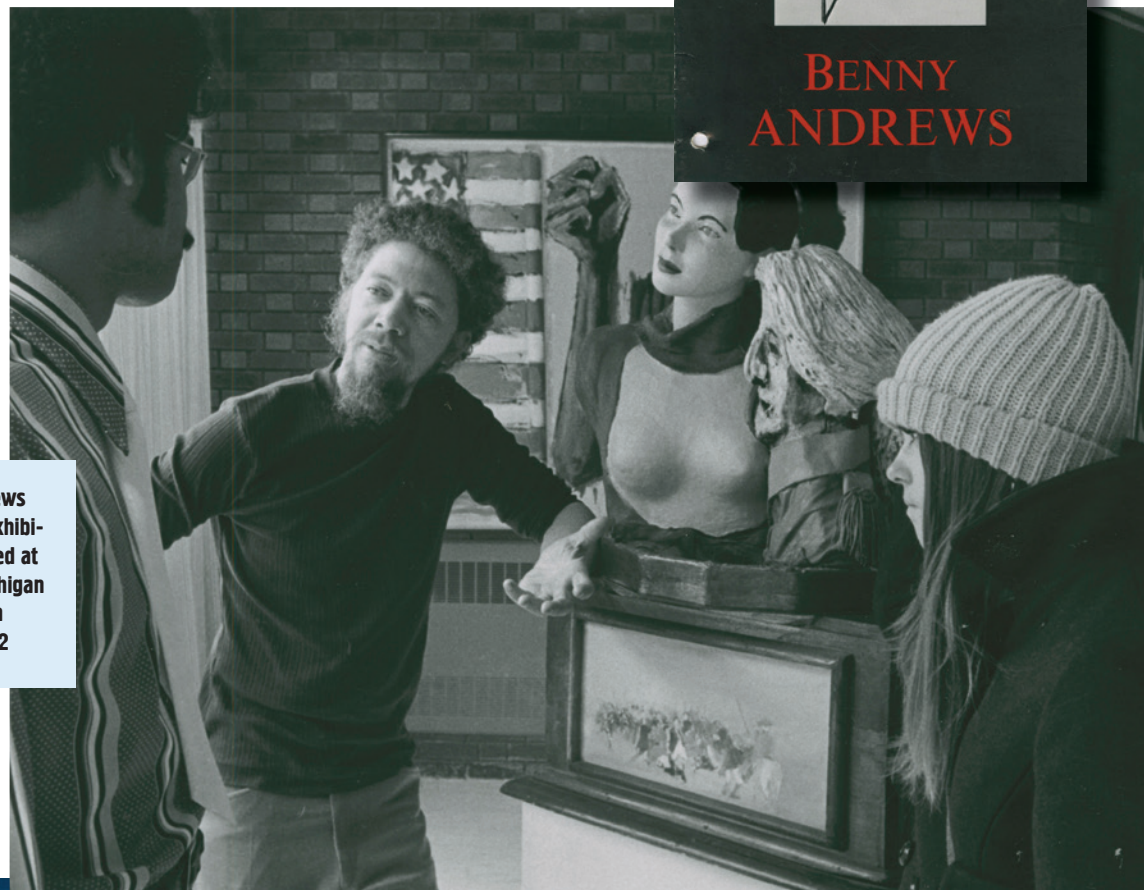
5 Mary S. Campbell, “Black Art for the Bicentennial,” *The Syracuse New Times*, (August 10, 1975).

6 Mimi Crossley, “Art: Gallery Roundup,” *The Houston Post*, (November 3, 1977), 12-B.

In 1973, ACA Galleries presented Benny Andrews: “Circle” Paintings and Drawings



BENNY
ANDREWS



Benny Andrews at his solo exhibition presented at Western Michigan University on March 5, 1972

Photo by Robert Maxwell for Kalamazoo Gazette

“I’M INVOLVED IN A MAJOR ATTEMPT TO MAKE A STATEMENT ABOUT OUR POINT OF VIEW OF THIS COUNTRY, THE BLACK PEOPLE, AND IT’S IMPORTANT THAT I MAINTAIN THE MOMENTUM THAT I HAVE. I DON’T KNOW WHERE I’M GOING TO END UP IN THIS THING, IN FACT I DON’T EVEN KNOW WHERE IN THE HELL I’M GOING WITH THE DAMN PAINTINGS. ... I DO KNOW THAT I’M INTO SOMETHING THAT IS MINE, AND IF I GET MY CHANCES I’LL SHOW SOMETHING THAT WON’T BE TRITE OR COMMONPLACE, IT’LL BE A CONTRIBUTION.”

BENNY ANDREWS: THE BICENTENNIAL SERIES

In 1975, The High Museum of Art in Atlanta presented Benny Andrews: The Bicentennial Series



Circle | 1973

oil on twelve linen canvases with painted fabric and mixed media collage
120 x 288 inches / 304.8 x 731.5 cm, overall
Collection of the Estate of Benny Andrews



Circle Study #11 | 1972
oil on canvas with painted fabric collage
55 3/4 x 48 x 1/2 inches / 141.6 x 121.9 x 1.3 cm, signed



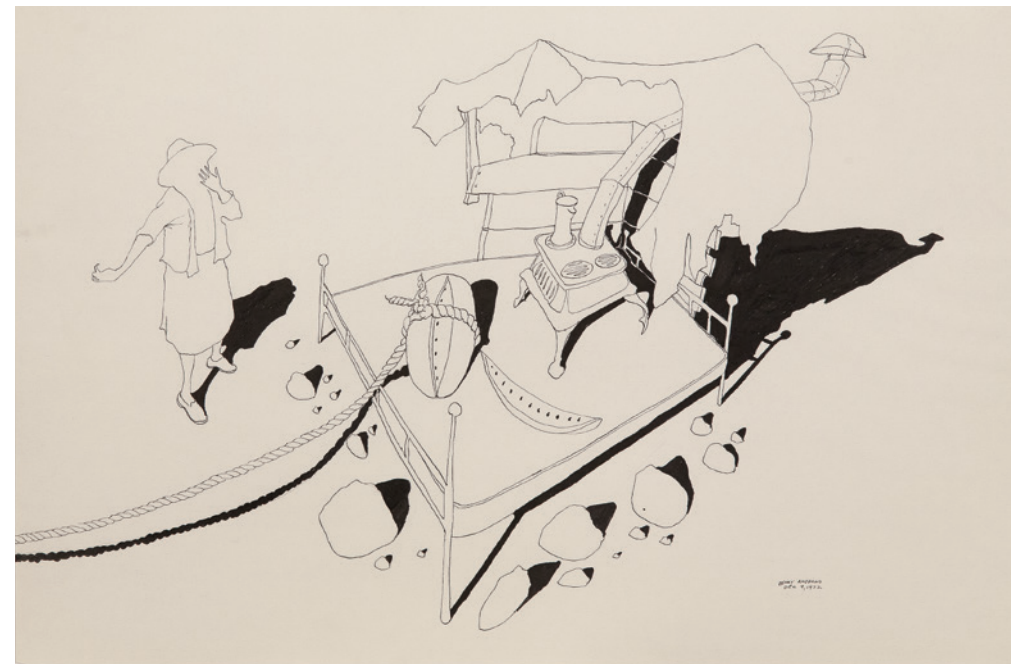
Circle Study #22 | 1973

oil on linen with painted fabric collage
56 x 34 x 3/4 inches / 142.2 x 86.4 x 1.9 cm, signed





Circle Study #46 | 1973
india ink on paper, 17 7/8 x 11 1/2 inches / 45.4 x 29.2 cm, signed



Circle Study #32 | 1972
india ink on paper, 12 x 18 inches / 30.5 x 45.7 cm, signed

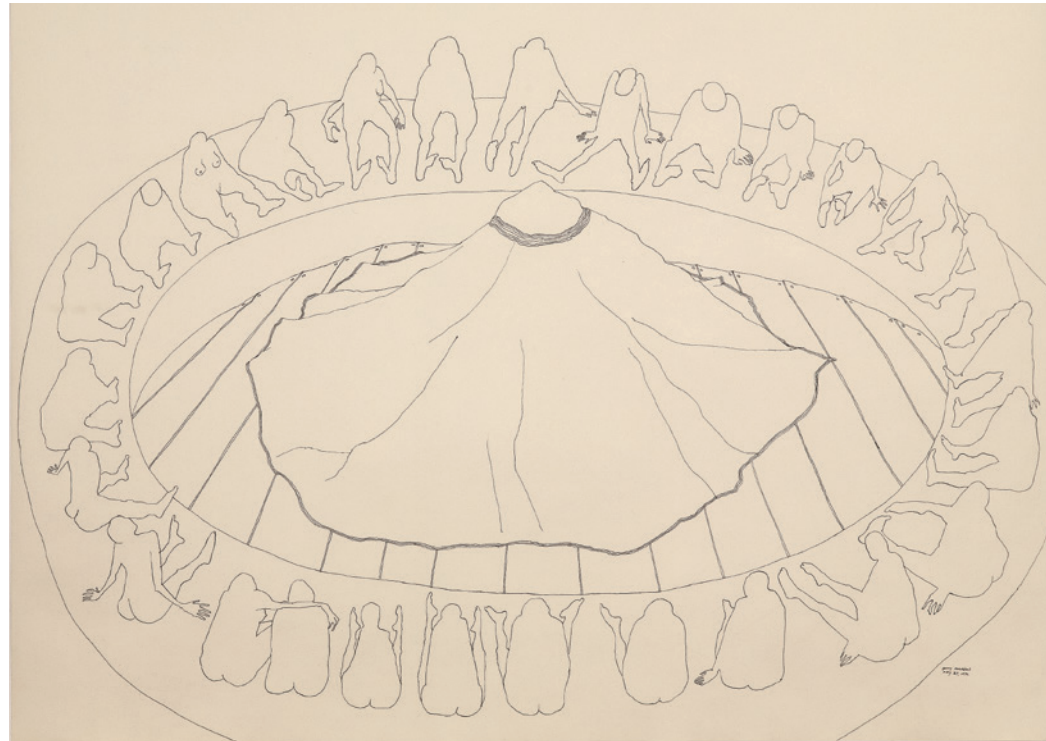
Circle Study #42 | 1972

india ink on paper

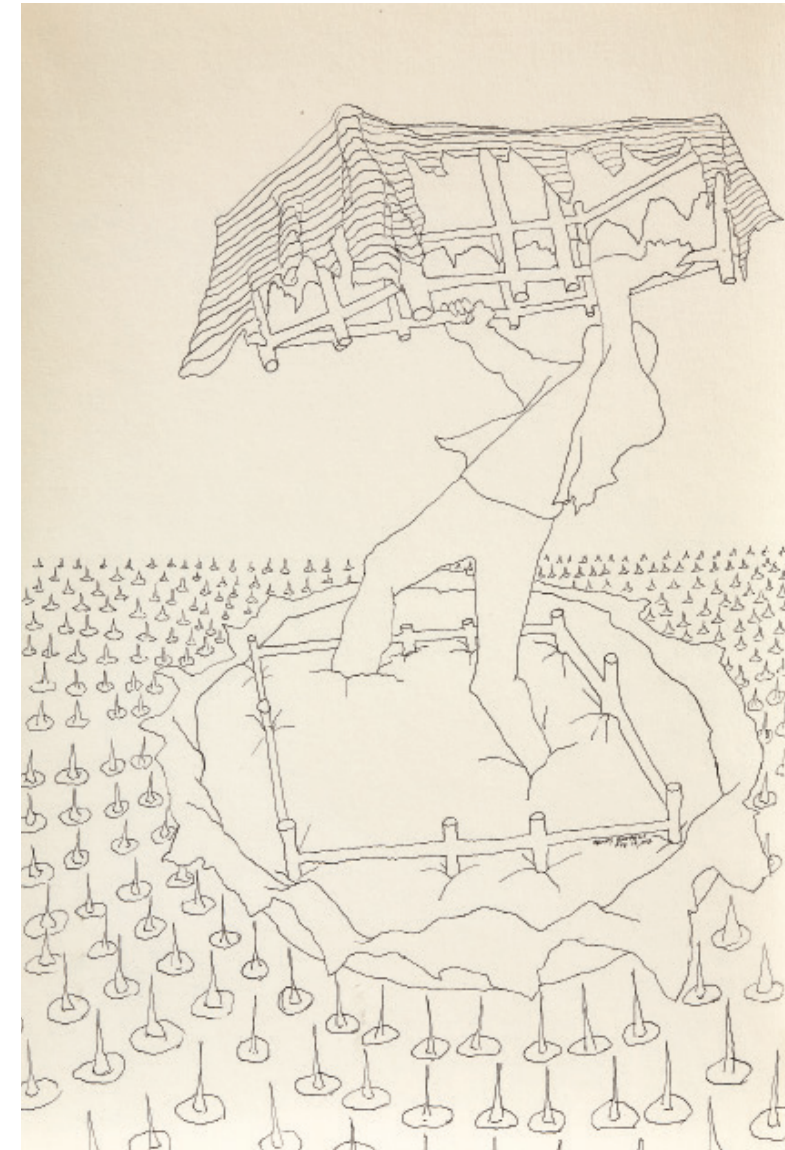
18 x 24 inches / 45.7 x 61 cm, signed

Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY





Circle Study #7 | 1972
india ink on paper, 18 x 24 inches / 45.7 x 61.0 cm, signed



Circle Study #15 | 1972
india ink on paper, 18 x 12 inches / 45.7 x 30.5 cm, signed

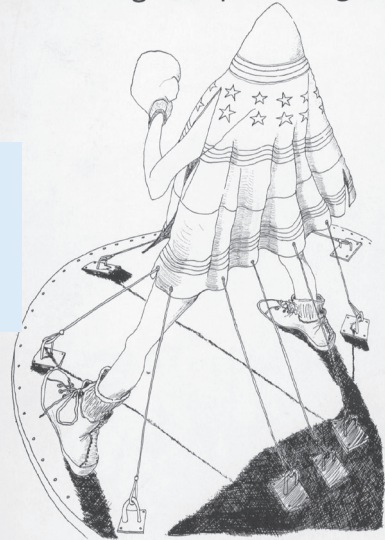
Circle Study #10 | 1972

oil on canvas with painted fabric collage
48 x 42 x ¼ inches / 121.9 x 106.7 x 0.6 cm, signed



SEXISM

Benny Andrews drawings & paintings



June 7th-August 28th

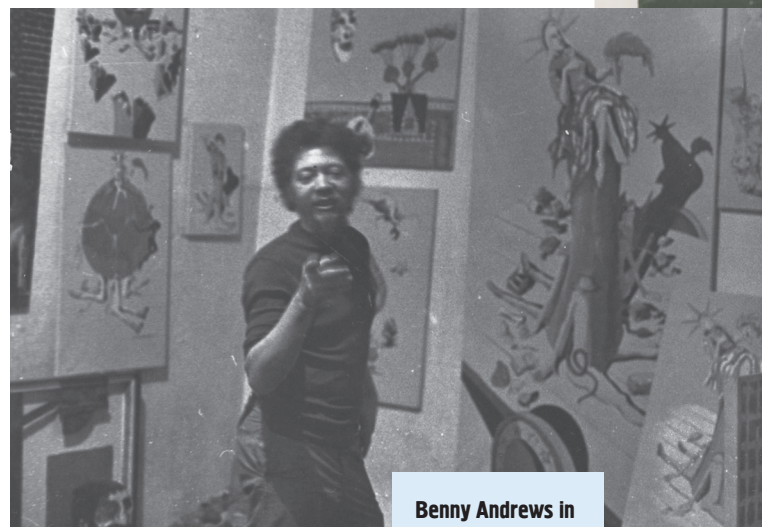
The CRT's Craftery Gallery
a creative environment for the arts
1445 Main Street Hartford, Connecticut

In 1981, The CRT's Craftery Gallery presented Benny Andrews: Drawings and Paintings

Dana Chandler photographing Benny Andrews working in his studio, December 1971



Photo Credit: Reginald Gammon



Benny Andrews in his Beekman Street studio, Fall 1971

Photo Credit: Reginald Gammon

"I USE COLLAGE, SOMETIMES CRUDELY, SOMETIMES NOT, I PAINT MOSTLY UGLY, MOSTLY NOT PRETTY, SOMETIMES BEAUTIFUL, SOMETIMES VAGUE, SOMETIMES SPECIFIC, SOMETIMES SOPHISTICATED, MIXED WITH CRUDITIES, IRONIES, PASSION, AND COLDNESS...ALL OF WHICH IS AN ATTEMPT TO REFLECT THE REALITIES OF LIFE, A COMBINATION OF MOSTLY IS'S AND MOSTLY ISN'T'S BUT NEVER SPECIFICALLY IS OR ISN'T."

SEXISM 1973-1974

In 1973, a MacDowell Colony Residence Fellowship enabled Benny Andrews to begin work on the fourth large-scale *Bicentennial Series* painting. At the MacDowell Colony located in Peterborough, New Hampshire, Andrews reflected on his political involvement with feminist groups. The BECC had introduced Andrews to many feminist activists, including Lucy Lippard, who would later join Andrews in organizing a protest against the Whitney Museum of American Art for their plan to celebrate the Bicentennial with an exhibition of John D. Rockefeller III's private collection, a selection of art that ignored the work of dissidents, women, and minorities. Because of his friendships with activist women, who like Andrews sought adequate representation in the nation's cultural institutions, Andrews decided to focus his fourth painting of the *The Bicentennial Series* on the issue of sexism.

In this new body of studies, Andrews honed his ability to mix humor with the absurd and grotesque. In a journal entry dated January 11, 1974, the artist wrote, "Out of the corner of my eye, as I work, I can sense the power of the surrealism and the harsh color of the overall painting... I've been looking at a line of little phallic men in the penis boats and a crinkle comes across my face... I have this thing in me to see a strange kind of humor in things... Not always funny-funny but amusing..."¹ After Andrews completed twenty-seven oil and collage on canvas paintings and forty-six pen and ink on paper studies, the final oil and collage painting, *Sexism* (ten feet high by twenty-four feet wide), depicts a woman at its center standing isolated atop a stained mattress. The sheet that had at one point restrained her has now become a shroud. She is freed, but a succession of floating phallic shapes approach her from the left, while to the right, sexually explicit topiaries inhabit a gory island reminiscent of Hieronymus Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. In her review of the *The Bicentennial Series* for *The New York Times*, Helen Harrison wrote, "Involvement with feminist groups gave Mr. Andrews insights into his own attitudes, but, as usual, the resulting artistic expression of his awareness was both complex and provocative. ...The over-assertion of both male and female sexuality is shown to have disastrous human consequences."²

Sexism was first exhibited in *Benny Andrews: The Bicentennial Series* at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, Georgia in 1975. This exhibition—the first major one to cover multiple years of the series—traveled to the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York and to the Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists in Dorchester, Massachusetts. It included studies for *Symbols*, *Trash*, *Circle*, and *Sexism* as well as the four final works.

1 Benny Andrews, unpublished journal entry, January 11, 1974.

2 Helen A. Harrison, "A Black's Odyssey Vividly Portrayed," *The New York Times*, (March 9, 1980), LI19.



Sexism | 1973

oil on eight canvases with painted fabric and mixed media collage
124 x 288 inches / 315.0 x 731.5 cm, overall
Collection of the Estate of Benny Andrews



Sexism Study #24 | 1971

oil on canvas with painted fabric collage and rope
96 x 50 ½ x 2 inches / 243.8 x 128.3 x 5.1 cm, signed



Sexism Study #15 | 1973

oil on linen, 27 1/2 x 25 inches / 69.8 x 63.5 cm, signed





Sexism Study #22 | 1973

oil on five stretched canvas panels, 30 x 90 inches / 76.2 x 228.6 cm, signed

Sexism Study #8 | 1973

oil on linen
24 x 22 inches / 61.0 x 55.9 cm, signed



Sexism Study #5 | 1973

oil on linen with painted fabric collage
25 3/8 x 17 1/4 x 5/8 inches / 64.5 x 43.8 x 1.6 cm, signed





Sexism Study #22 | 1973
 india ink on paper, 17 3/4 x 11 3/4 inches / 45.1 x 29.8 cm, signed



Sexism Study #35 | 1973
 india ink on paper, 18 x 12 inches / 45.7 x 30.5 cm, signed

Sexism Study #25 | 1973

india ink on paper, 18 x 23 ¾ inches / 45.7 x 60.3 cm, signed



Sexism Study #13 | 1973

oil on linen with painted fabric collage
37 1/8 x 27 1/4 x 1/8 inches / 94.3 x 69.2 x 0.3 cm, signed



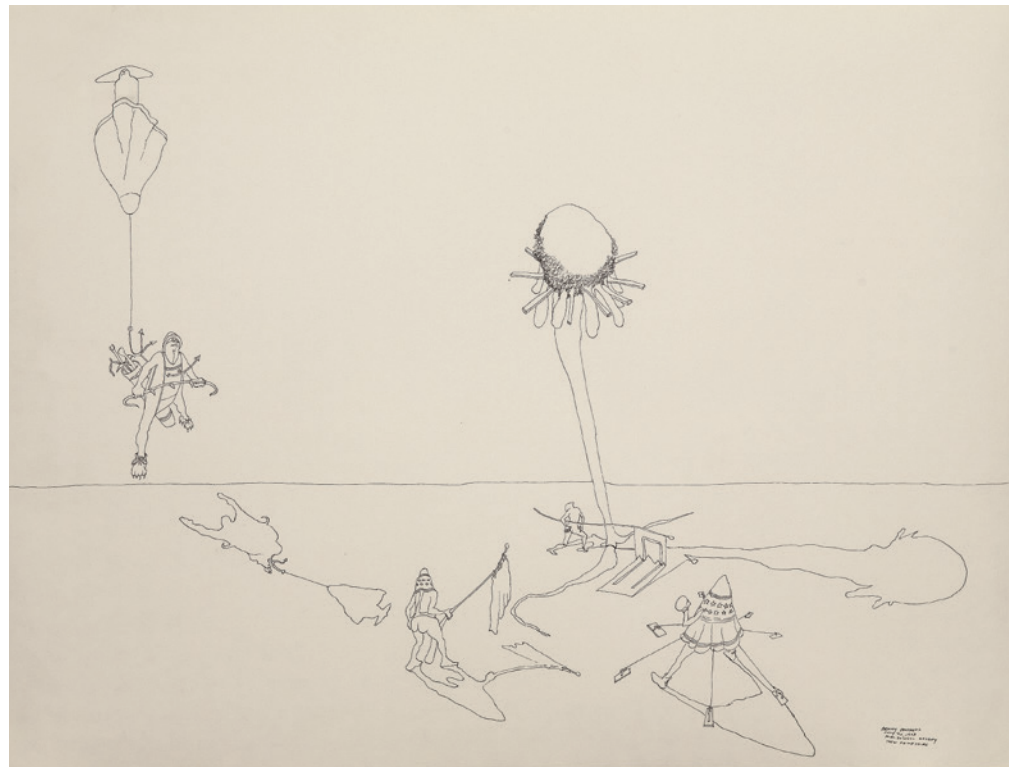


Sexism Study #11 | 1973
 india ink on paper, 24 x 18 inches / 61.0 x 45.7 cm, signed



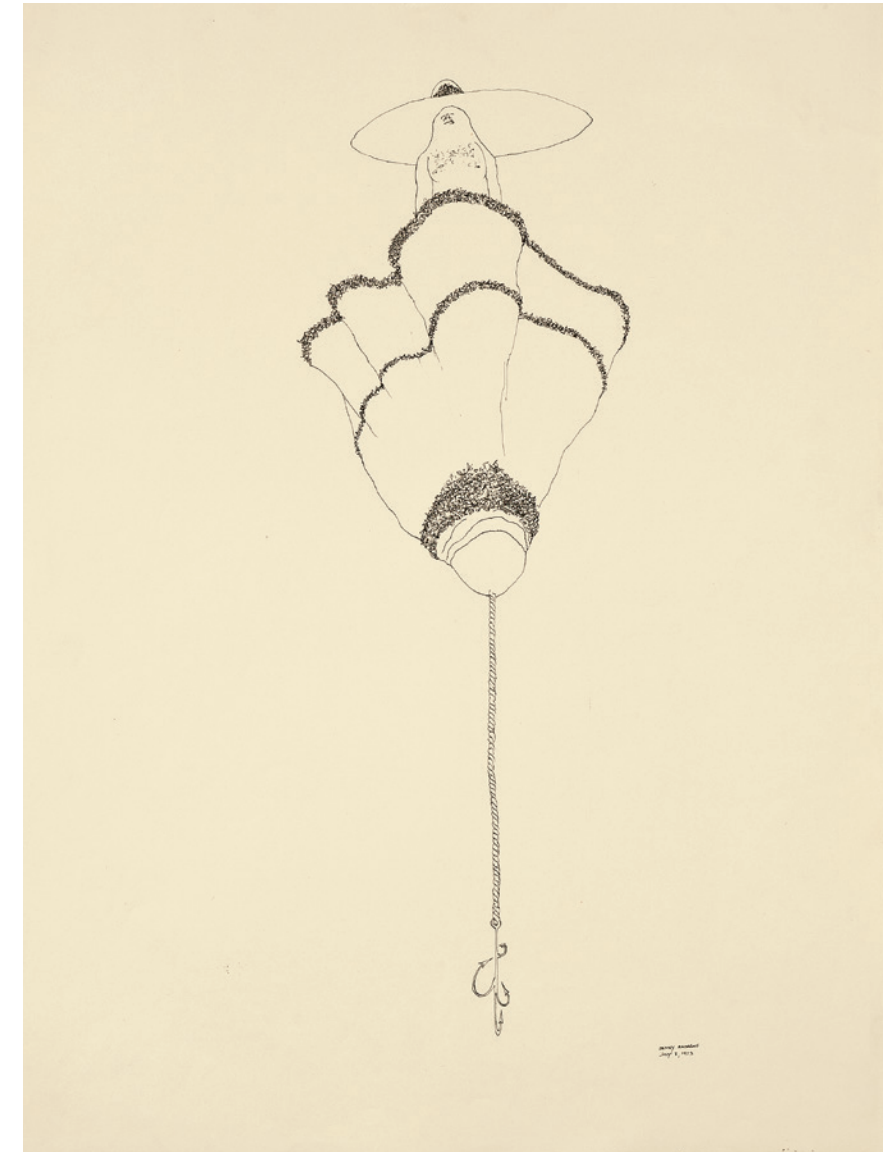
Sexus (Sexism Study #21) | 1973
 india ink on paper, 18 x 23 3/4 inches / 45.7 x 60.3 cm, signed

110



Sexism Study #28 | 1973
india ink on paper, 18 x 23 3/4 inches / 45.7 x 60.3 cm, signed

111

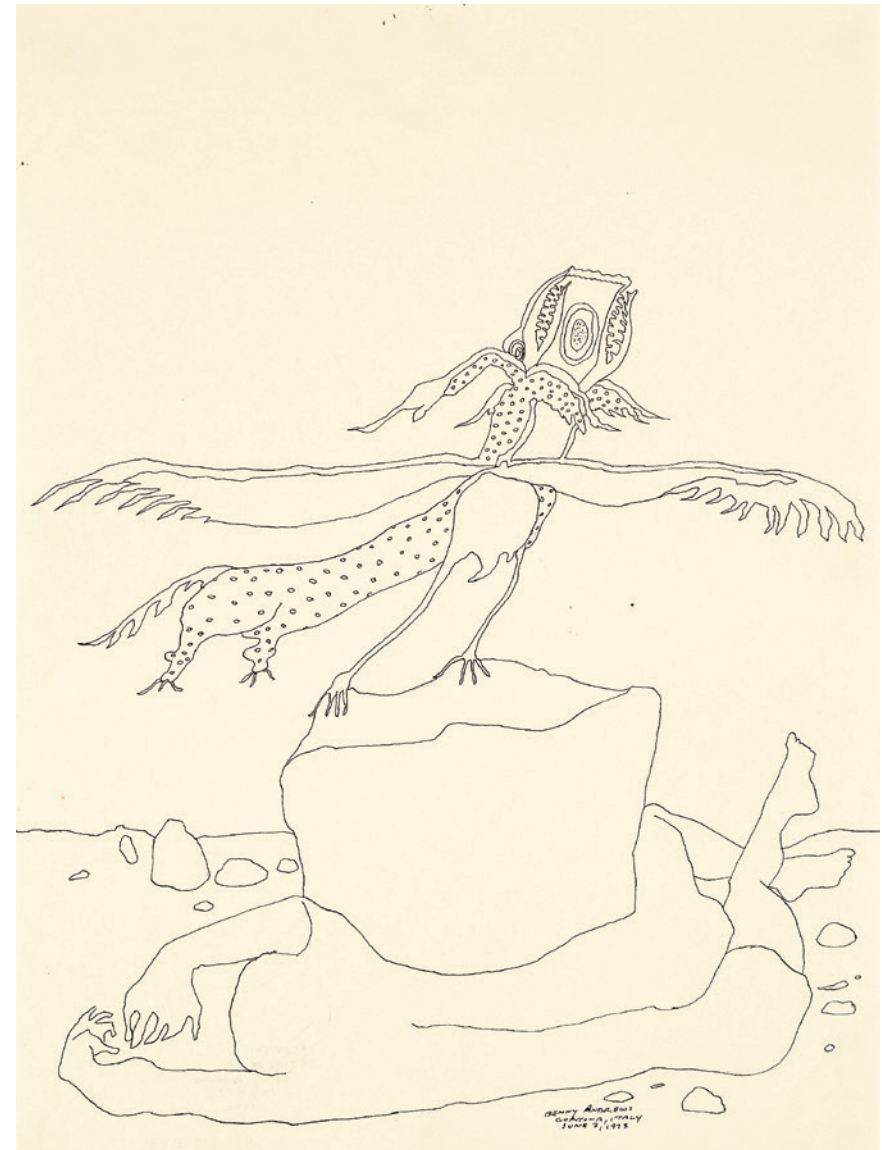


Sexism Study #18 | 1973
india ink on paper, 24 x 18 inches / 61.0 x 45.7 cm, signed



Sexism Study #44 | 1973

india ink on paper, 14 ¼ x 22 ⅝ inches / 36.2 x 57.5 cm, signed



Sexism Study #4 | 1973

india ink on paper, 14 ⅜ x 10 ⅝ inches / 36.5 x 27.0 cm, signed

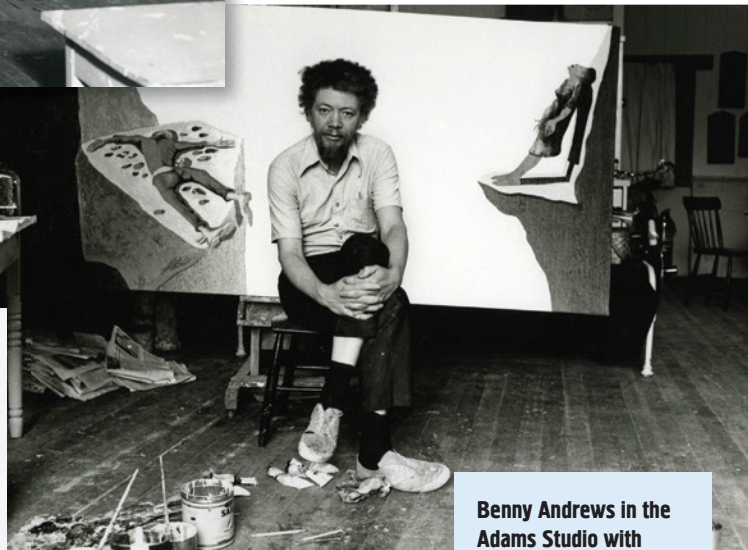
WAR

WAR 1974



Benny Andrews discussing his work with guests in the Adams Studio during tours on Medal Day, 1974

Photograph by Bernice B. Perry, Courtesy of The MacDowell Colony, Peterborough, NH



Benny Andrews in the Adams Studio with War Study #14, 1974

Photograph by Bernice B. Perry, Courtesy of The MacDowell Colony, Peterborough, NH



DURING HIS SUMMER residence at the MacDowell Colony artist Benny Andrews began work on the fifth of six large paintings which he is creating for the Bicentennial. He stands in front of one of his studios. Photograph by Mary Ellen Andrews.

For Bicentennial Painting Series To Symbolize Horrors And False Virtues

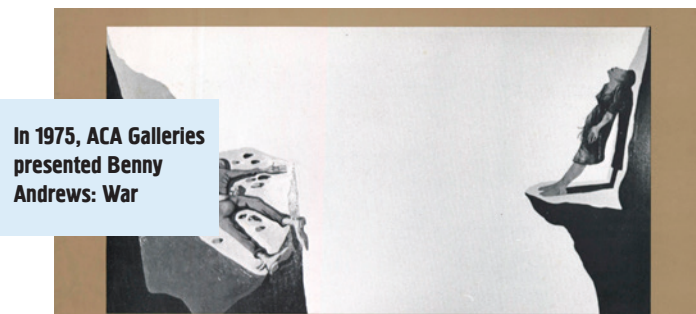
“For Bicentennial: Painting Series to Symbolize Horrors and False Virtues,” by John Fensterwald, published in The Ledger, Peterborough, NH, September 10, 1974

In his early studies the vehement repugnance of war is clear. A soldier, wearing a putrid realism of battle on his uniform and expressing his rage in his face, carries a dead buddy on his back. Later a mother and her dead son appeared to his studies a direct, less literal question—a mother and dead son. At first they were ill figures on the canvas, modeled by other complex ones. Gradually, however, in succeeding studies, they in size and importance as other images faded and so to merge into solid blocks.

The ultimate thing is an exact relationship,” he says, “the idea is the mother and son, since we use visual symbols, I use the mother’s lower son.” The two are equally separated, and this is exact. She is not directly ang at the body, but up, or from the ground. It is the kind of loss which we at the heart, slowly and steadily.

“I WANT to make a statement dealing with the horrors of war,” Mr. Andrews said. This is an early study which he painted this summer. Photograph by John Fensterwald.

“I ALWAYS DRAW UPON THE ESSENCE OF MY DREAMS, IMPRESSIONS AND THE PEOPLE OF MY DOWN-HOME DAYS. THAT DOESN'T MEAN I COPY OR PAINT THEM LITERALLY, IT MEANS THAT THEY ARE THE FOUNDATIONS OF MY WORKS. THIS IS THE CRUX OF THE STATEMENT THAT ‘I FEEL VERY AMERICAN.’”



In 1975, ACA Galleries presented Benny Andrews: War

Benny Andrews
“WAR”—March 18-April 5, 1975

A veteran of the Korean War and an advocate for peace in Vietnam, Benny Andrews devoted his fifth work for the *The Bicentennial Series* to the topic of war. Considering Andrews’s motivation for this particular body of work, J. Richard Gruber explains, “War was completed during a time when the nation was caught up in the growing conflict over the extent and nature of America’s involvement in the Vietnam war. In these years there was growing pain and outrage over the losses of American lives in Vietnam, many of them black soldiers’ lives, and there were countless questions about the wisdom and vision of the nation’s leadership, particularly in its dedication to the course of the war.”¹ However, as Gruber notes, Andrews’s motives extended beyond the sense of crisis surrounding the war in Vietnam. Andrews explained these wider concerns at length in an interview with *Ataraxia*: “I’d gotten so sick of the Vietnam war being listed as the war. And I was strongly influenced by the books *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *The Naked and the Dead*. And I wanted to go beyond being so literal, but to take the essence of something that had more to do with the idea of it, in terms of the horrors of this kind of thing.”²

A second MacDowell Fellowship enabled Andrews to concentrate on this work. At the colony, he created many studies focused on one specific childhood memory, and in his statement for the 1975 War exhibition at the ACA Gallery, he explicitly laid out the significance of this imagery: “I’d always wanted to do a work that included my mother. ... I remember when I was a child, we’d be out in the fields working on cotton, in the late evening with the sun headed over towards the east, and down, it’d sometimes rollover the tops of clouds making them look bloody red. One time while this kinda thing took place during WWII, all my brothers, sister, our mother, and other folks were working the cotton. ... On that day, my mother stopped working too and leaned on her hoe and started talking about the horrors of war. ‘The skies will be covered with blood, and the sun will be blocked out of sight because of the waves of airplanes coming to kill ...’ Some of us got scared, even cried... it looked like the red clouds turned redder, the more my mother talked about war. ... We were way out there in that huge ocean of a cotton field, crying and singing about a war that was ‘over there’ as folks would say. Now that I think back about it though, I realize that there were only children and women out in the fields that day, because all of the men were ‘over there’ too. ... I could feel the horribleness of that distance, and the closeness of death that war brought.”³

Unlike its predecessors in the series, *War* did not become a single, monumental painting. Instead, Andrews produced seventeen oil and collage on canvas and twenty-nine pen and ink on paper studies, using this body of work to stand as his overall statement on *War*. Many of these artworks depicted a grieving woman separated by blank canvas from a dying soldier. In a review for the *Peterborough Ledger*, John Fensterwald wrote, “Benny Andrews points to the vast, blank portion of the canvas, the portion that separated the two cliffs and the two people from each other, ‘I’ve achieved this abyss, this starkness in the white area,’ he says. For the moment he is pleased with the painting. ... In his early studies the vehement repugnance of war was clear. A soldier, wearing the putrid realities of battle on his uniform and expressing its terrors in his face, carries a dead buddy on his back. Later there appeared to his studies a less direct, less literal representation—a mother and her dead son. At first they were small figures on the canvas, surrounded by other complex images. Gradually, however, in each succeeding study, they grew in size and importance as the other images faded and began to merge into solid blocks of color.”⁴

1 J. Richard Gruber, *American Icons: From Madison to Manhattan, the Art of Benny Andrews, 1948–1997* (Augusta: Morris Museum of Art, 1997), 168-69.
2 Ibid.
3 Benny Andrews, “Doing War,” *Benny Andrews: War* exhibition publication (New York: ACA Galleries, 1975), 1.
4 John Fensterwald, “For Bicentennial: Painting Series to Symbolize Horrors and False Virtues,” *The Peterborough Ledger*, (September 10, 1974), 2.



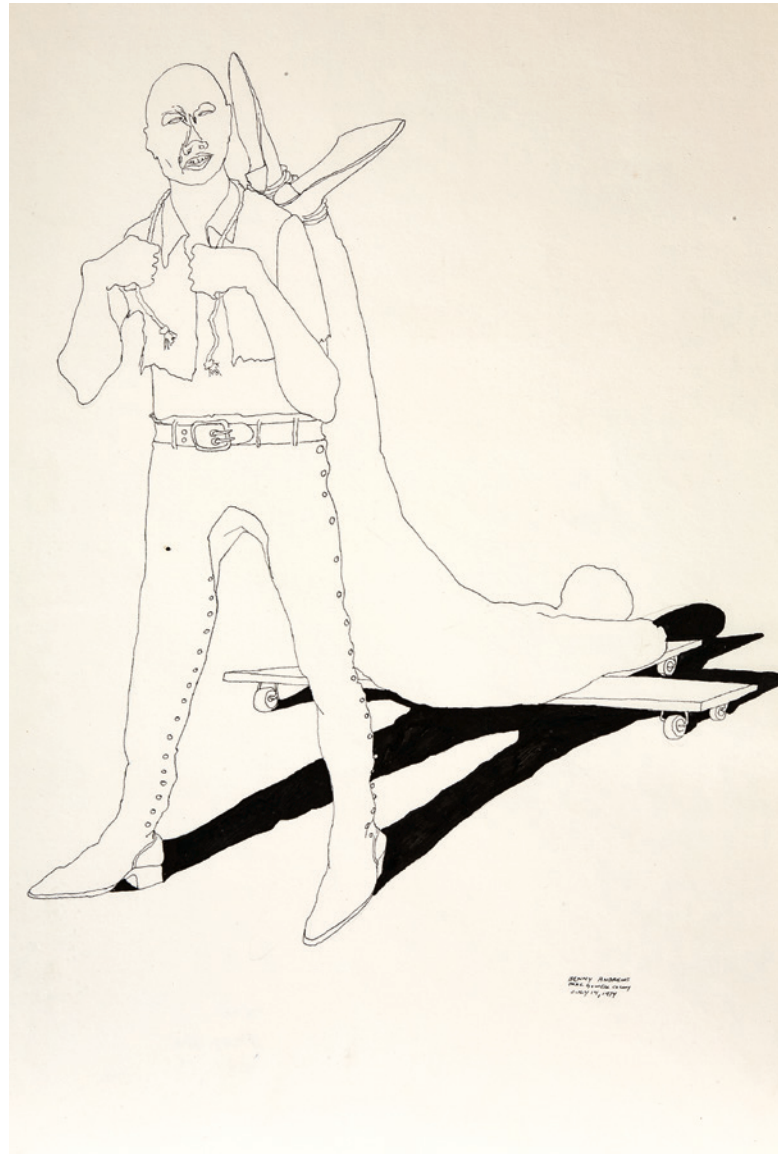
War Study #3 | 1974

oil on two stretched linen panels with painted fabric collage
35 x 49 x 1 inches / 88.9 x 124.5 x 2.5 cm, signed

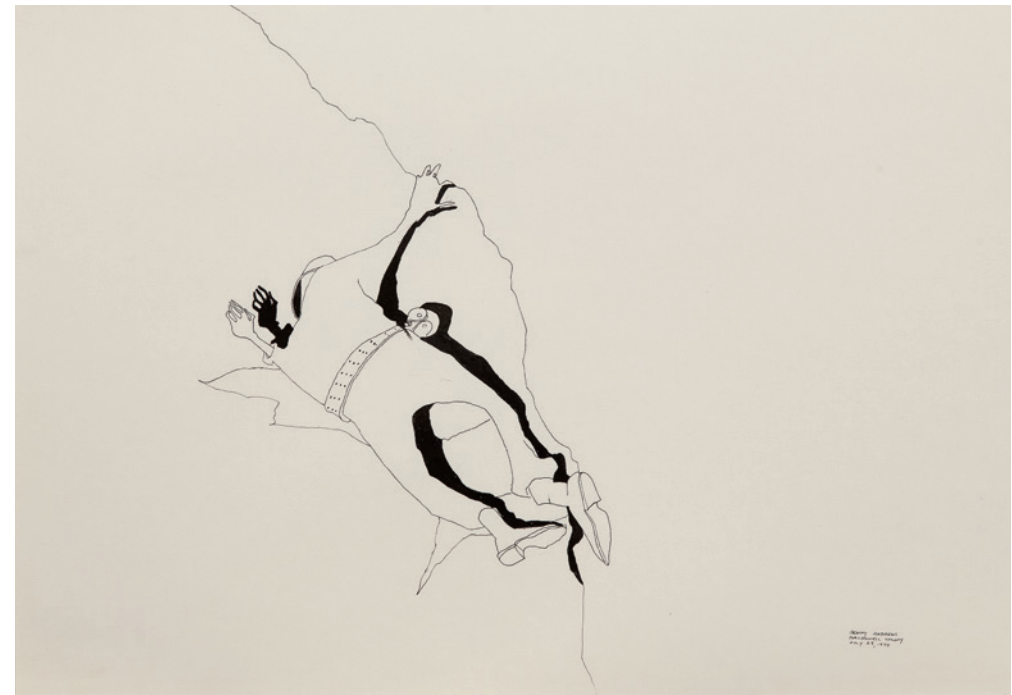
War (Study #1) | 1974

oil and graphite on canvas with painted fabric collage
34 x 25 x 1¼ inches / 86.4 x 63.5 x 3.2 cm, signed





War Study #2 | 1974
 india ink on paper, 17 7/8 x 12 inches / 45.4 x 30.5 cm, signed



War Study #18 | 1974
 india ink on paper, 12 1/2 x 18 inches / 31.8 x 45.7 cm, signed

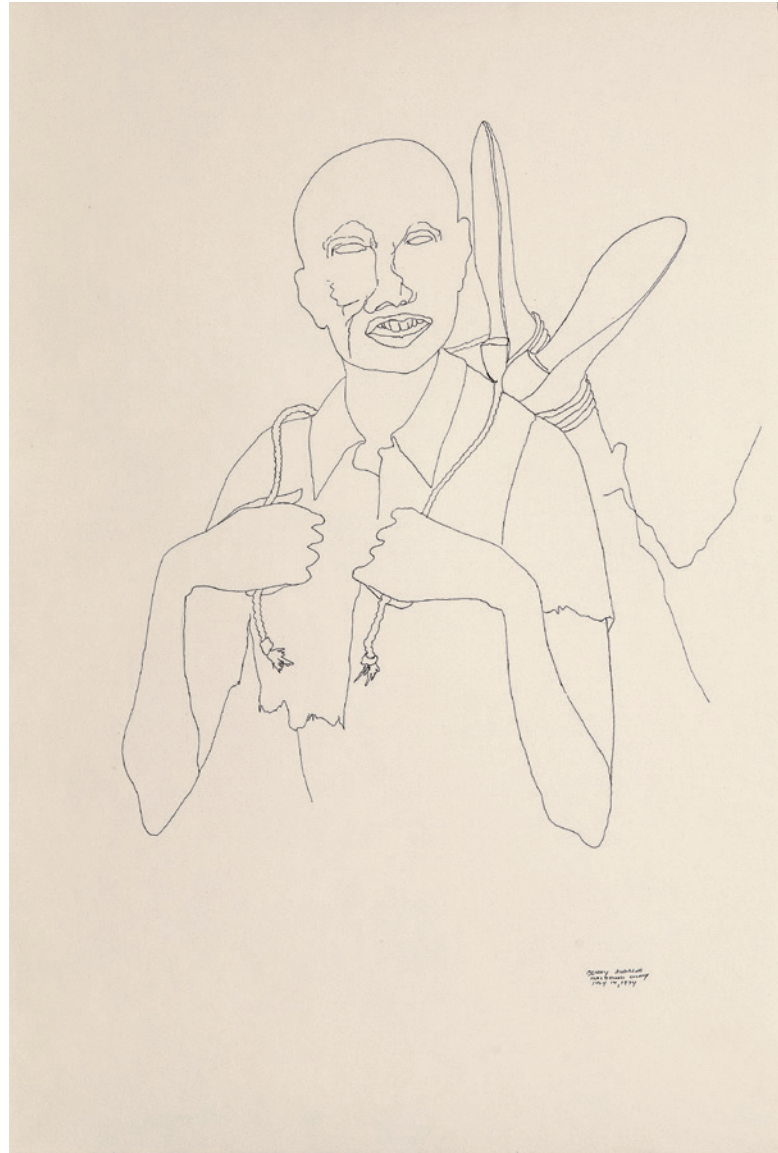
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War Study #5 | 1974

india ink on paper

17 7/8 x 12 inches / 45.4 x 30.5 cm, signed





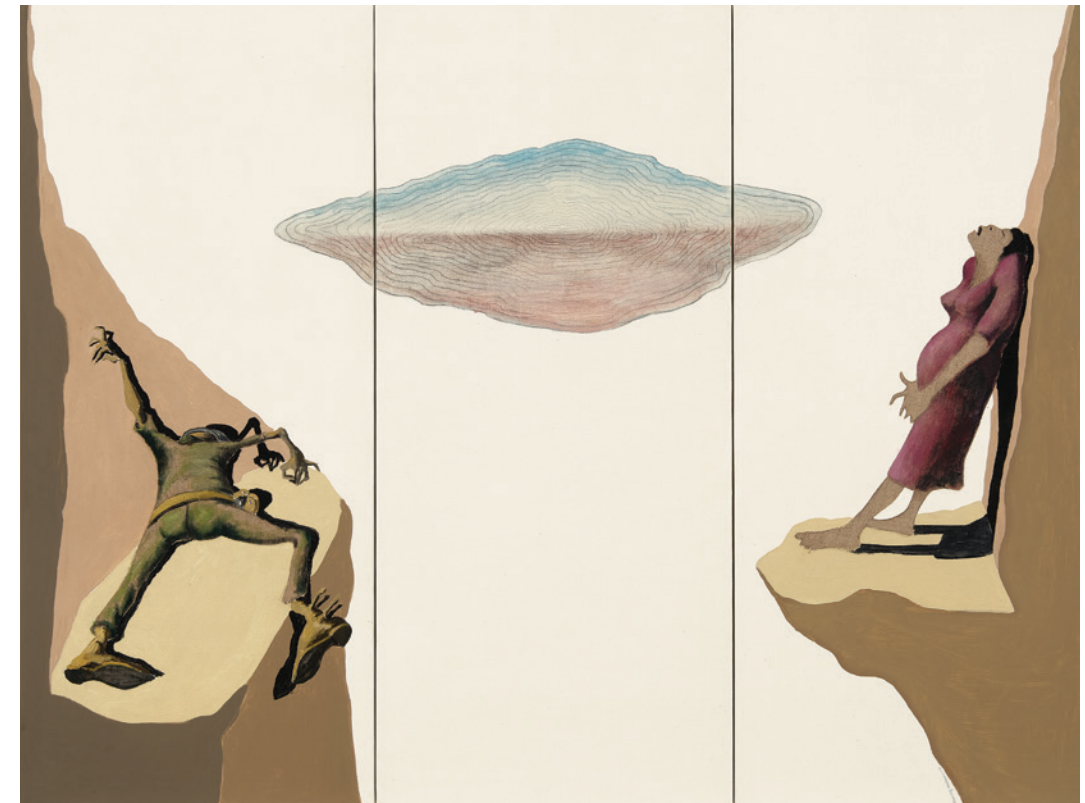
Study #1 (For War) | 1974
 india ink on paper, 17 7/8 x 12 inches / 45.4 x 30.5 cm, signed



Study #8 (For War) | 1974
 india ink on paper, 17 7/8 x 12 inches / 45.4 x 30.5 cm, signed

War Study #14 | 1974

oil and ink on three stretched canvas panels with painted fabric collage
34 x 45 x 1/8 inches / 86.4 x 114.3 x 0.3 cm, signed





War Study #15 | 1974
india ink on paper, 18 x 11 ¼ inches / 45.7 x 28.6 cm, signed



War Study #13 | 1974
india ink on paper, 12 x 17 ¾ inches / 30.5 x 45.4 cm, signed

Poverty (Study #1-A for War) | 1974
oil on linen with painted fabric collage with rope
100 x 48 x 2 inches / 254.0 x 121.9 x 5.1 cm, signed



UTOPIA



Utopia | 1975

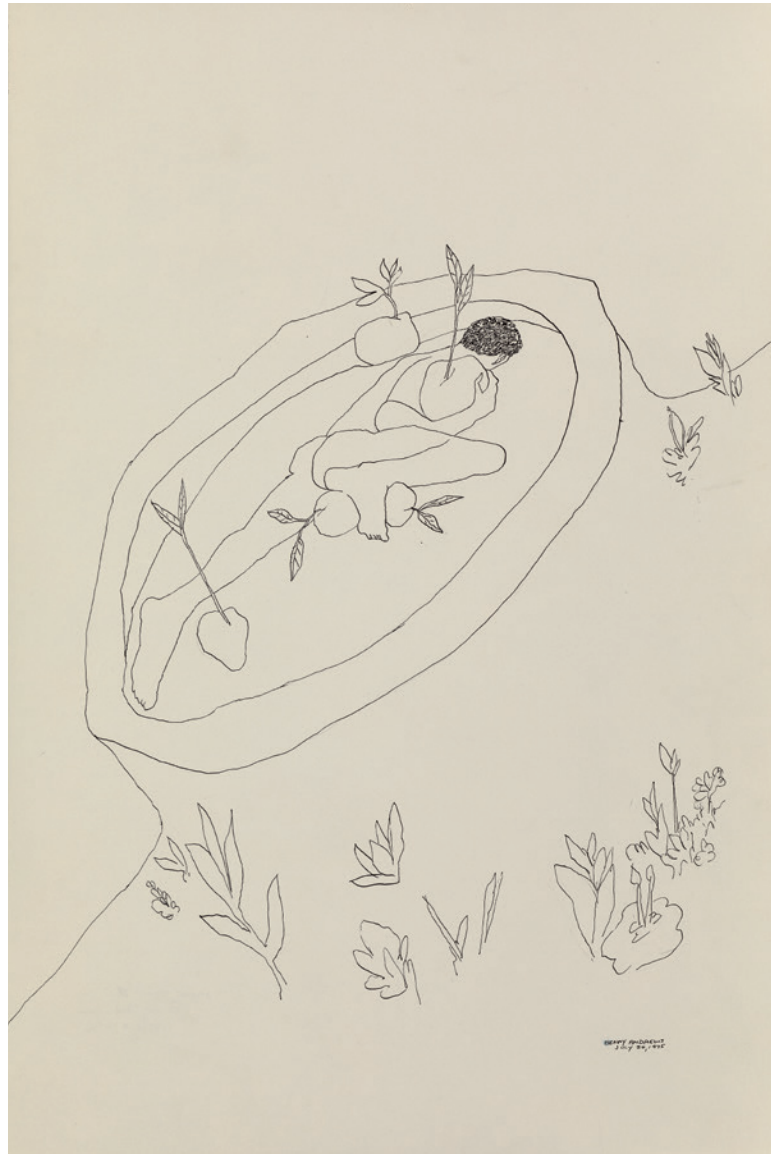
oil on eight canvases with painted fabric and mixed media collage
128 x 240 inches / 325.1 x 609.6 cm, overall
Collection of the Estate of Benny Andrews



Utopia Study #18 | 1975

ink, graphite, spray enamel and collage on paper
17 7/8 x 12 inches / 45.4 x 30.5 cm, signed





Utopias Study #17 | 1975
 india ink on paper, 17 7/8 x 12 inches / 45.4 x 30.5 cm, signed



Utopias Study 5-C | 1975
 india ink on paper, 12 x 17 7/8 inches / 30.5 x 45.4 cm, signed



Utopias Study #7 | 1975
 ink, graphite, spray enamel and collage on paper, 17 7/8 x 24 inches / 45.4 x 61.0 cm, signed



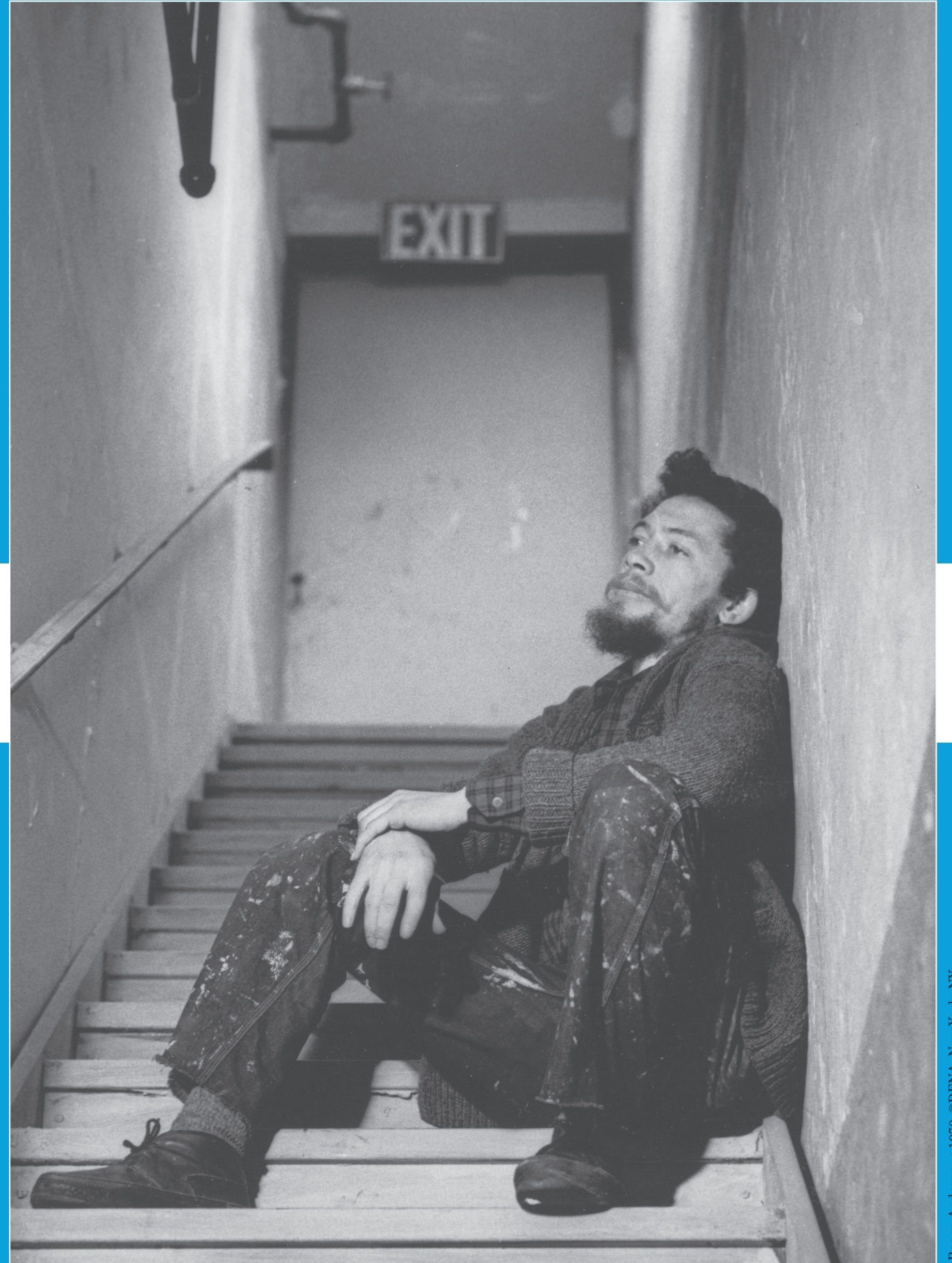
Utopias Study #16 | 1975
 ink, graphite, spray enamel and collage on paper, 17 7/8 x 24 inches / 45.4 x 61.0 cm, signed

Utopias Study #8 | 1975

oil on linen with painted fabric collage
40 x 60 inches / 101.6 x 175.3 cm, signed

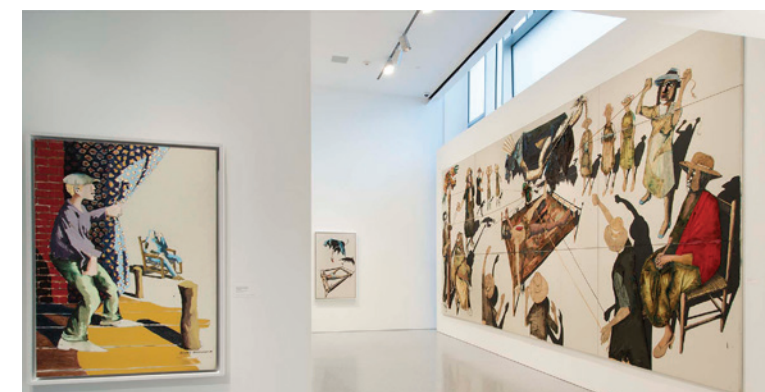
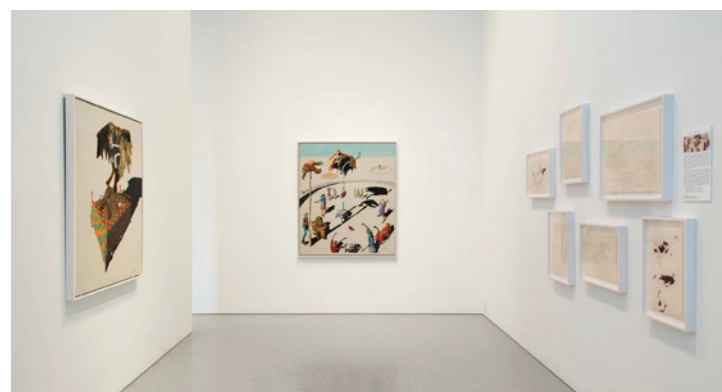


BENNY ANDREWS
(1930-2006)



BENNY ANDREWS The Bicentennial Series

MICHAEL ROSENFELD GALLERY
NOVEMBER 8, 2016 – JANUARY 21, 2017



Commemorative Pins

On the occasion of *Benny Andrews: The Bicentennial Series*, Michael Rosenfeld Gallery produced four limited edition pins with artist text.



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Matana Roberts Performs

“It’s all a damn game”

**A live conceptual acoustic sound quilt for brass choir, in honor of Benny Andrews
Saturday, November 12, 2016 at 4:00 pm
Michael Rosenfeld Gallery**



Photograph by Paula Court, Courtesy of the Artist

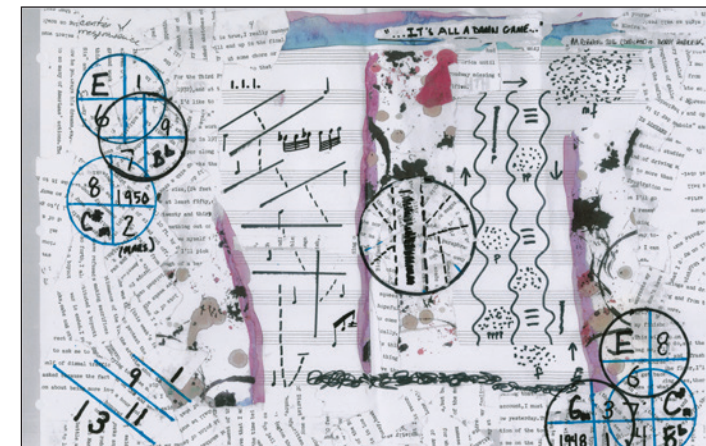
Matana Roberts, 2015

In conjunction with *Benny Andrews: The Bicentennial Series*, dynamic saxophonist, composer, improviser and mixed media sound conceptualist Matana Roberts presented “It’s all a damn game,” a commissioned responsive work to Andrews’ masterpiece *Circle* (1971).

Defined as a “major talent” and “the spokeswoman for a new, politically conscious and refractory Jazz scene,” Matana Roberts is internationally renowned for her multi-disciplinary work that includes dance, poetry, and theater. Chicago-raised and New York City-based, Roberts received her essential training from free arts programs in the American public school system. In the early 2000s, she made two records as a core member of Sticks and Stones quartet and she has since gone on to release a diverse body of solo and ensemble work under her own name. To date, she is perhaps best known for her acclaimed Coin Coin project, a multi-chapter work of “panoramic sound quilting” that aims to expose the mystical roots and the intuitive spirit-raising traditions of American creative expression. In 2014, Matana received the Doris Duke Impact Award and the Herb Alpert Award in the Arts.

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Matana Roberts’ drawing and notes for “It’s All a Damn Game,” based on Benny Andrews’ journal entries



Matana Roberts – saxophone, composition, conduction, Darius Jones – saxophone, Andrew D’Angelo – saxophone, Evan Rapport – saxophone, Paula Henderson – saxophone, Ras Moshe – saxophone, Craig Shenker – saxophone

What to See in New York City Galleries This Week

By HOLLAND COTTER

Michael Rosenfeld Gallery
100 11th Avenue, at 19th Street, Chelsea
Through Jan 7

Benny Andrews once said the poles of his life were defined by two places, the rural South and New York City, America then and now. He was born in pre-civil-rights Georgia in 1930 to a sharecropper family. He spent most of his career as an artist in New York, where he died in 2006. Much of that career was shaped by political activism devoted to the proposition that black lives and African-American art more than just mattered: They defined what “American” means.

Mr. Andrews would, no doubt, have had strong views on the recent presidential election, with the currents of racism and misogyny brought right to the cultural surface. And in a sense he expressed those perspectives some 40 years ago in six thematic groups of impassioned works that he titled “The Bicentennial Series,” selections from which are on view together, for the first time, at Michael Rosenfeld Gallery.

Produced from 1971 to 1976, each thematic group is made of dozens of ink studies and oil sketches that (with one exception) culminated in monumental multipanel murals. In the introductory group, represented in the show by ink studies only, Mr. Andrews looked back to his Georgia childhood with tableaus that mixed family portraits and Ku Klux Klan figures. Thereafter, the work turns allegorical and surreal. The second group, done at the time of the Attica prison rebellion, includes an oil study of the Statue of Liberty being hauled off to a junk heap. In one later painting, a dark-skinned man is tied down, as if crucified, to a brass bed that suggests a boxing ring. In another, light-skinned, phallus-shaped male hunters track down female prey.

For all the mural-size pictures — the show contains one — Mr. Andrews used a distinctive technique involving applying pigment-soaked cloth and paper to canvas. The results, with their mix of academic painting and vernacular craft, carve out a space for work that asserts a black identity within the art historical continuum. Mr. Andrews titled the last of his six thematic groups “Utopia.” It depicts a weird candy-colored landscape with no figures at all: The human presence and any social ideal are, clearly, mutually exclusive. This is the message of the “Biennial Series” as a whole: Far from being a fantasia on what makes America great, it’s a vision — as the election was — on what makes America America.



Benny Andrews (1930-2006), *Circle Study #11*, 1972, oil on canvas with painted fabric collage, 55 3/4" x 48" x 1/2" / 141.6 x 121.9 x 1.3 cm, signed

The Listings: A Critical Guide to Culture in New York

By HOLLAND COTTER

Michael Rosenfeld Gallery
100 11th Avenue, at 19th Street, Chelsea
Thru Jan 21

Born in Georgia to a sharecropper family, Mr. Andrews (1930-2006) spent most of his career as an artist and activist in New York City. He would have had strong views on the resurgent racism and sexism of this election year. And he basically expressed those views some 40 years ago in six fantastically caustic groups of paintings and drawings called “The Bicentennial Series,” excerpts from which are on view together for the first time. Truly art for now.



Benny Andrews (1930-2006), *Sexism Study #15*, 1973, oil on linen, 27 1/2" x 25" / 69.8 x 63.5 cm, signed and dated

Checklist of the Exhibition

The paintings in the exhibition were executed on primary supports of canvas or paper, and they display a range of complexity in terms of their media and structure. Some of the paintings are more straightforward in terms of their technique, having been executed with oil on canvas. In most of the paintings, however, Andrews augmented his painter's palette by employing in varying degrees, drawing media, sprayed paint, and non-conventional materials including but not limited to fabrics, paper, rope, and cut, torn, and distressed fragments of painted canvas. The fabric elements are sometimes pieces utilized for their particular color, pattern and texture, and sometimes they function within the composition in their original form; entire shirts for example. Elsewhere they are purposefully and precisely manipulated, arranged, and affixed with different adhesives and fasteners, and then partially or completely stained and painted, often to create strong sculptural relief.

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SYMBOLS



American and Mother (Study for Symbols), 1970
india ink on paper
18 x 24 inches / 45.7 x 61.0 cm
signed and dated



Study of Guitarists for Symbols, 1970
india ink on paper
24 x 18 inches / 61.0 x 45.7 cm
signed and dated



Bride (Study for Symbols), 1970
india ink on paper
18 x 12 1/8 inches / 45.7 x 30.8 cm
signed and dated



Symbol Study #31, 1970
india ink on paper
13 5/8 x 17 inches / 34.6 x 43.2 cm
signed and dated



Cargo (Study for Symbols), 1970
india ink on paper
17 1/4 x 12 1/8 inches / 43.8 x 30.8 cm
signed and dated



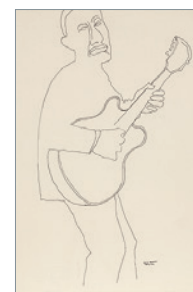
Symbols Study #37, 1970
india ink on paper
17 x 13 5/8 inches / 43.2 x 34.6 cm
signed and dated



Groom (Study for Symbols), 1970
india ink on paper
18 x 12 1/4 inches / 45.7 x 31.1 cm
signed and dated



Trio (Study for Symbols), 1970 india ink on paper
18 x 12 1/4 inches / 45.7 x 31.1 cm
signed and dated



Strummer (Study for Symbols), 1970
india ink on paper
18 x 12 inches / 45.7 x 30.5 cm
signed and dated



Woman (Study from Symbols), 1970
india ink on paper
18 x 12 1/4 inches / 45.7 x 31.1 cm
signed and dated

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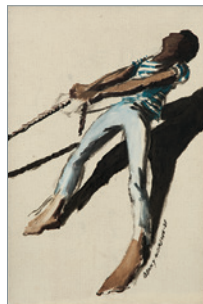
TRASH



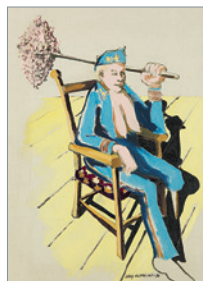
Liberty (Study #2 for Trash), 1971
oil on linen
34 x 22 inches / 86.4 x 55.9 cm
signed and dated



Liberty #6 (Study for Trash), 1971
oil on canvas with painted fabric
collage
78 x 39 3/4 x 1/4 inches / 198.1 x
101.0 x 0.6 cm
signed and dated



Puller (Study #1 for Trash), 1971
oil on linen
18 x 12 inches / 45.7 x 30.5 cm
signed and dated



War Bitch (Study #2 for Trash),
1971
oil on linen
34 x 24 inches / 86.4 x 61.0 cm
signed and dated



White (Study for Trash), 1971
oil on linen
34 x 24 inches / 86.4 x 61.0 cm
signed and dated



Chessmen #2 (Study for Trash), 1971
india ink on paper
24 x 18 inches / 61.0 x 45.7 cm
signed and dated



Composition #8 for Trash, 1971
india ink on paper
18 x 24 inches / 45.7 x 61.0 cm
signed and dated



Composition #9 for Trash, 1971
india ink on paper
24 x 18 inches / 61.0 x 45.7 cm
signed and dated

CIRCLE



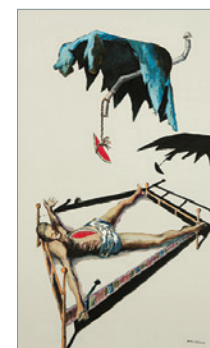
Circle (Bicentennial Series), 1973
oil on twelve linen canvases with
painted fabric and mixed media
collage
120 x 288 inches / 304.8 x 731.5 cm



Circle Study #10, 1972
oil on canvas with painted fabric
collage
48 x 42 x 1/4 inches /
121.9 x 106.7 x 0.6 cm
signed and dated



Circle Study #11, 1972
oil on canvas with painted fabric
collage
55 3/4 x 48 x 1/2 inches /
141.6 x 121.9 x 1.3 cm
signed and dated



Circle Study #22, 1973
oil on linen with painted fabric
collage
56 x 34 x 3/4 inches /
142.2 x 86.4 x 1.9 cm
signed and dated



Circle Study #7, 1972
india ink on paper
18 x 24 inches / 45.7 x 61.0 cm
signed and dated



Circle Study #15, 1972
india ink on paper
18 x 12 inches / 45.7 x 30.5 cm
signed
and dated



Circle Study #18, 1972
india ink on paper
18 x 12 inches / 45.7 x 30.5 cm
signed and dated



Circle Study #32, 1972
india ink on paper
12 x 18 inches / 30.5 x 45.7 cm
signed and dated



Circle Study #33, 1972
india ink on paper
12 x 18 inches / 30.5 x 45.7 cm
signed and dated



Circle Study #46, 1973
india ink on paper
17 7/8 x 11 1/2 inches / 45.4 x 29.2 cm
signed and dated

SEXISM



Sexism Study #13, 1973
oil on linen with painted fabric
collage
37 1/8 x 27 1/4 x 1/8 inches /
94.3 x 69.2 x 0.3 cm
signed and dated



Sexism Study #8, 1973
oil on linen
24 x 22 inches / 61.0 x 55.9 cm
signed and dated



Sexism Study #27, 1973
india ink on paper
18 x 12 inches / 45.7 x 30.5 cm
signed and dated



Sexus (Sexism Study #21), 1973
india ink on paper
18 x 23 3/4 inches / 45.7 x 60.3 cm
signed and dated



Sexism Study #15, 1973
oil on linen
27 1/2 x 25 inches / 69.8 x 63.5 cm
signed and dated



Sexism Study #4, 1973
india ink on paper
14 3/8 x 10 5/8 inches / 36.5 x 27.0 cm
signed and dated



Sexism Study #28, 1973
india ink on paper
18 x 23 3/4 inches / 45.7 x 60.3 cm
signed and dated



Sexism Study #35, 1973
india ink on paper
18 x 12 inches / 45.7 x 30.5 cm
signed and dated



Sexism Study #22, 1973
oil on five stretched canvas panels
30 x 90 inches / 76.2 x 228.6 cm
signed and dated



Sexism Study #11, 1973
india ink on paper
24 x 18 inches / 61.0 x 45.7 cm
signed and dated



Sexism Study #44, 1973
india ink on paper
14 1/4 x 22 5/8 inches / 36.2 x 57.5 cm
signed and dated



Sexism Study #24, 1973
oil on canvas with painted fabric
collage and rope
96 x 50 1/2 x 2 inches /
243.8 x 128.3 x 5.1 cm
signed and dated



Sexism Study #18, 1973
india ink on paper
24 x 18 inches / 61.0 x 45.7 cm
signed and dated



Sexism Study #5, 1973
oil on linen with painted fabric
collage
25 3/8 x 17 1/4 x 5/8 inches /
64.5 x 43.8 x 1.6 cm
signed and dated



Sexism Study #25, 1973
india ink on paper
18 x 23 3/4 inches / 45.7 x 60.3 cm
signed and dated

WAR



Poverty (Study #1-A for War), 1974
oil on linen with painted fabric
collage with rope
100 x 48 x 2 inches /
254.0 x 121.9 x 5.1 cm
signed and dated



War (Study #1), 1974
oil and graphite on canvas with
painted fabric collage
34 x 25 x 1 ¼ inches /
86.4 x 63.5 x 3.2 cm
signed and dated



War Study #3, 1974
oil on two stretched linen panels
with painted fabric collage
35 x 49 x 1 inches /
88.9 x 124.5 x 2.5 cm
signed and dated



War Study #14, 1974
oil and ink on three stretched
canvas panels with painted fabric
collage
34 x 45 x ½ inches / 86.4 x 114.3 x
0.3 cm
signed and dated



*Benny Andrews (1930-2006)
Study #1 (for War)*, 1974
india ink on paper
17 ⅞ x 12 inches / 45.4 x 30.5 cm
signed and dated



Study #8 (For War), 1974
india ink on paper
17 ⅞ x 12 inches / 45.4 x 30.5 cm
signed and dated



War Study #2, 1974
india ink on paper
17 ⅞ x 12 inches / 45.4 x 30.5 cm
signed and dated



War Study #5, 1974
india ink on paper
17 ⅞ x 12 inches / 45.4 x 30.5 cm
signed and dated



War Study #13, 1974
india ink on paper
12 x 17 ⅞ inches / 30.5 x 45.4 cm
signed and dated



War Study #15, 1974
india ink on paper
18 x 11 ¼ inches / 45.7 x 28.6 cm
signed and dated



War Study #18, 1974
india ink on paper
12 ½ x 18 inches / 31.8 x 45.7 cm
signed and dated

UTOPIA



Utopias Study #8, 1975
oil on linen with painted fabric
collage
40 x 60 inches / 101.6 x 152.4 cm
signed and dated



Utopias Study #7, 1975
ink, graphite, spray enamel and
collage on paper
17 ⅞ x 24 inches / 45.4 x 61.0 cm
signed and dated



Utopias Study #16, 1975
ink, graphite, spray enamel and
collage on paper
17 ⅞ x 24 inches / 45.4 x 61.0 cm
signed and dated



Utopias Study #17, 1975
india ink on paper
17 ⅞ x 12 inches / 45.4 x 30.5 cm
signed and dated



Utopias Study #18, 1975
ink, graphite, spray enamel and
collage on paper
17 ⅞ x 12 inches / 45.4 x 30.5 cm
signed and dated



Utopias Study 5-C, 1975
india ink on paper
12 x 17 ⅞ inches / 30.5 x 45.4 cm
signed and dated

BENNY ANDREWS

Selected Museum Collections

Albany Museum of Art, Albany, GA
Arkansas Arts Center, Little Rock, AK
Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL
Arts & Science Center for Southeast Arkansas, Pine Bluff, AK
William Benton Museum of Art, University of Connecticut, Storrs Mansfield, CT
Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, AL
Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY
The Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, OH
California African American Museum, Los Angeles, CA
Michael C. Carlos Museum, Emory University, Atlanta, GA
The Columbus Museum, Columbus, GA
Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, VA
David C. Driskell Center, University of Maryland, College Park, MD
Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, MI
Georgia Museum of Art, Athens, GA
Gibbes Museum of Art, Charleston, SC
Grey Art Gallery, New York University, New York, NY
Guilford College Art Gallery, Greensboro, NC
The Harvey B. Gantt Center for African American Arts & Culture, Charlotte, NC
Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY
High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA
Hirschhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC
Hofstra University Museum, Hempstead, NY
Housatonic Museum of Art, Housatonic Community College, Bridgeport, CT
Hunter Museum of American Art, Chattanooga, TN
James E. Lewis Museum of Art, Morgan State University, Baltimore, MD
The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, FL
Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, NE
Maier Museum of Art, Randolph College, Lynchburg, VA
Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, Memphis, TN
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY
Mobile Museum of Art, Mobile, AL
Morris Museum of Art, Augusta, GA
The Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia, Atlanta, GA
Museum Overholland, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
Museum of Contemporary Art, La Jolla, CA
Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY
The National Academy Museum and School, New York, NY
National Center for Civil and Human Rights, Atlanta, GA
National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC
National Museum of African American History and Culture, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC
Newark Museum, Newark, NJ
New Jersey State Museum, Trenton, NJ
Ogden Museum of Southern Art, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, LA

Ohara Museum of Art, Kurashiki, Japan
Ohio University Art Gallery, Columbus, OH
The Palm Springs Museum of Art, Palm Springs, CA
Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia, PA
San Jose Museum of Art, San Jose, CA
Slater Memorial Museum, Norwich Free Academy, Norwich, CT
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC
Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS
Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY
The Tubman African American Art Museum, Macon, GA
Ulrich Museum of Art, Wichita State University, Wichita, KS
University of Wyoming Art Museum, Laramie, WY
Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT
Wichita Art Museum, Wichita, KS
Zora Neal Hurston National Museum of Fine Arts, Orlando, FL

**To learn more about the artist, please visit www.michaelrosenfeldart.com
or www.bennyandrews.com**

Credits

Exhibition Coordinators	halley k harrisburg Hooper Turner
Exhibition Registrar	Hooper Turner
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Essay Editors	Jessica Scarlata Valentina A. Spalten
Catalogue Design and Editor	halley k harrisburg
Catalogue Photography	Rodrigo Lobos Joshua Nefsky
Digital Image Manager	Marjorie VanCura
Color Imaging and Processing	Image Studio
Catalogue Art Direction and Production	CP Design
Catalogue Typeface	Hermes, Century Schoolbook
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Michael Rosenfeld Gallery represents the Estate of Benny Andrews and this exhibition has been organized with their cooperation.

Michael Rosenfeld Gallery extends our gratitude to Mr. Pellom McDaniels III for his thoughtful scholarship on Benny Andrews and his long-standing commitment to the artist's legacy.

Photography, research, and rights of reproduction were generously provided by Anthony Barboza; Martin Bush, Director of the Ulrich Museum of Art at Wichita State University, Wichita, KS and Museum Registrar Stephanie Teasley, Registrar; The Studio Museum in Harlem staff including Lauren Haynes, former Associate Curator of Permanent Collection and Sasha Mendez, Collections Fellow; Kyle Williams, Estate Manager and Archivist, Andrews Humphrey Family Foundation.

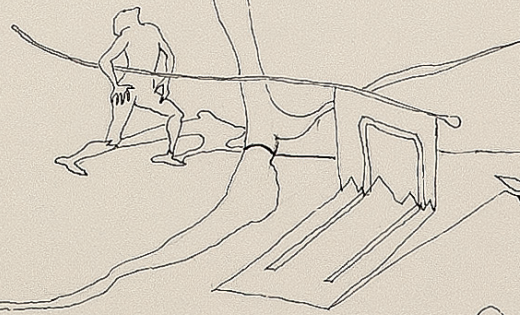
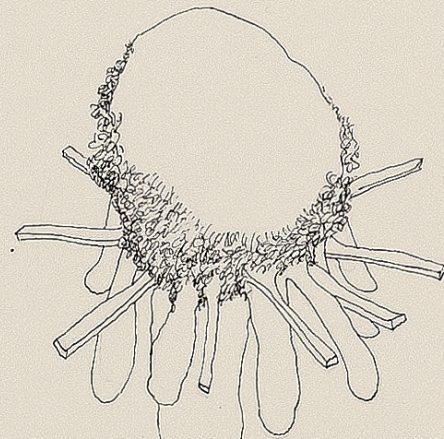
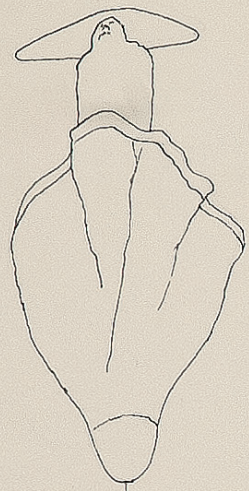
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New York, NY 10011
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michaelrosenfeldart.com



Gallery Hours: Tuesday through Saturday, 10:00-6:00pm

On the cover: *Sexism Study #15*, 1973, oil on linen, 27 ½ x 25 inches / 69.8 x 63.5 cm signed and dated
On the front endpaper: *Composition #8 for Trash*, 1971, india ink on paper, 18 x 24 inches / 45.7 x 61.0 cm, signed and dated
On the back endpaper: *Sexism Study #23*, 1973, india ink on paper, 18 x 23 ¼ inches / 45.7 x 60.3 cm, signed





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