

BENNY ANDREWS

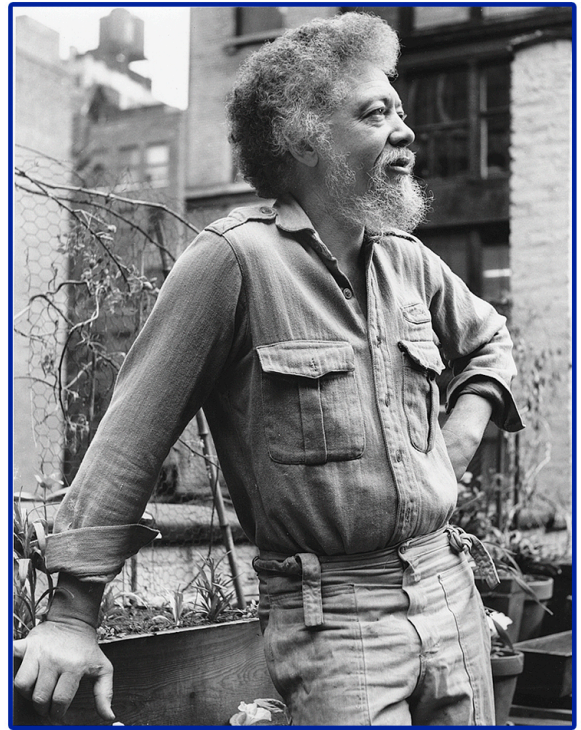
"I express myself best artistically somewhere between the ideas in my head and the tip of my brush, because none of my finished canvases or any oral statements I am able to make are completely artistically successful. Therefore, I am destined to spend my life pushing my feelings toward the canvas and pulling them toward my mouth in order to satisfy this insatiable need to express myself."

One of ten children in a family of sharecroppers, **Benny Andrews** (1930-2006) was born in rural Georgia and devoted his career to championing African Americans and their stories. In 1948, Andrews graduated from high school and with a 4-H Club scholarship enrolled in Georgia's Fort Valley State College. He joined the United States Air Force, served in the Korean War, and attained the rank of staff sergeant before receiving an honorable discharge in 1954. Funding from the GI Bill enabled him to enroll at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, but his divergent aesthetic interests and the fact that he was one of only nine black students left him feeling alienated from the institution. In 1958, he completed his bachelor of fine arts degree and promptly moved to New York City.

In New York, Andrews moved into a three-room tenement on Suffolk Street. During the day, Andrews painted at home and cared for his son; in the evenings, Andrews sketched the denizens of the Lower East Side in nearby cafes and jazz clubs. During these years, he developed a "rough collage" technique that combined rugged scraps of paper and cloth with paint on canvas. As Andrews explained, "I started working with collage because I found oil paint so sophisticated, and I didn't want to lose my sense of rawness." In 1959, he created *Beggar Man*, one of the earlier instances of this new style.

By the 1960s, Andrews had mastered this technique, and in 1962, Bella Fishko invited Andrews to become a member of the Forum Gallery, which gave him his first solo exhibition in the city. Additional solo exhibitions followed in 1964 and 1966, and Andrews's work was included in shows at the Philadelphia Academy of Art and the National Institute of Arts in New York. In 1965, with funding from a John Hay Whitney Fellowship, Andrews traveled to Georgia and began working on his *Autobiographical Series*. He had a solo exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 1971. In 1975, his *Bicentennial Series* was the subject of a traveling exhibition, and in 1977, Andrews was included in the *Tenth International Print Biennial Exhibition* at the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, Japan, where he also received the Ohara Museum Prize.

Andrews continued to paint, exhibit, travel, write, and teach into his seventies. During his lifetime, he lectured extensively at universities throughout the United States, was a visiting critic at such prestigious institutions as Yale University, and received artist's residency fellowships as well as numerous grants. In 1997, Andrews became a member of the National Academy of Design.



Benny Andrews in 1982; Photograph by Kathy Morris

A self-described "people's painter," Andrews focused on figurative social commentary depicting the struggles, atrocities, and everyday occurrences in the world, but he was not satisfied to use art as a substitute for action. In 1968, he began a career at Queens College, City University of New York, where he was part of the college's SEEK (Search for Education, Elevation and Knowledge) program, designed to help students from underserved areas prepare for college. In 1969, he became a founding member of the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition (BECC), which formed coalitions with other artists' groups, protested the exclusion of women and men of color from institutional and historical canons, and advocated for greater representation of black artists, curators, and intellectuals within major museums. In 1971, the art classes Andrews had been teaching at the Manhattan Detention Complex ("the Tombs") became the cornerstone of a major prison art program initiated under the auspices of the BECC that expanded across the country. In 1976, he became the art coordinator for the Inner City Roundtable of Youths (ICRY)—an organization comprised of gang members in the New York metropolitan area who seek to combat youth violence by strengthening urban communities. From 1982 to 1984, he directed the Visual Arts Program, a division of the National Endowment for the Arts (1982-84), and shortly before his death in 2006, Andrews was working on an art project in the Gulf Coast with children displaced by Hurricane Katrina. In 2002, the Benny Andrews Foundation was established to help emerging artists gain greater recognition and to encourage artists to donate their work to historically black museums.

In 2008, Michael Rosenfeld Gallery became the representative of the Benny Andrews Estate; in 2013 they present *Benny Andrews: There Must Be A Heaven*, the first comprehensive retrospective since the artist's death. The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated color catalogue with an essay by Dr. Lowery Stokes Sims and a foreword by Congressman John Lewis.



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