WATERMELON WOUND: A SHOW BY BENNY ANDREWS DEALS WITH POLITICAL ANGST AND ANXIETY

Through January 21, at Michael Rosenfeld, New York

From its opening on October 12 through the first dreadful weeks of what appears to be President-elect Trump's diminished United States, this show provides a 40-year example of how one politically engaged artist dealt with rage and anxiety over what he saw as his nation's profound failures. To that extent, the exhibition acts as something of a breather as well.

Benny Andrews (1930-2006) began his now famous “Watermelon Series” in 1970. His entirely sound assertion was that a biennial celebration conceived under the Nixon administration would largely overlook the two ceremonies since the signing of the Declaration of Independence in African-Americas had experienced them. As Andrews wrote in Diane W. Schuler in Bureaucratic America Of Worldfwide News in 1975, “The only statement that would represent us as a group would be that once we were slaves, but now we’re not.”

Between 1970 and 1975, he tackled his overarching theme—Symbols, “Trash,” “Cure,” “Bouquet,” “War,” and “Utopia”—in drawings and studies of various sizes. All but “War” avoided a high didactic painting.

The only one of the large paintings included in this exhibition is the swirling “Watermelon” (1973) that stands ten feet high and is painted and collaged on 12 roughly connected sections. Both physically and metaphorically, it moves over everything else in the show with its depiction of a man nailed to a cross covered in an Indian blanket, surrounded by 12 women and a man who stands behind a tree. The figure on the ground appears to be a gapping wound in his chest, although no closer examination it turns out to be a offering of watermelon. Above him is a horrific map and a stereotypic kind that burns its victims and hangs behind it a mangled examination that might be the man’s face. The picture’s imagery suggests a complex personal, existential, and political journey that Andrews has always been reluctant to spell out, believing it best left to the viewer.

If Andrews’s iconography can be opaque, the passion he brings to his subjects is unmistakable. It appears in his handling of materials, which, somewhat unusually, becomes less cynical as he develops his ideas from drawings and collages into finished paintings. His rich drawings are caricature-like but delightfully rendered, whose the pieces to which he combines caricature with text and curiously collaged fabric. Lengths of rope and roughly handled paint are generally swirling.

Though he has acknowledged that his “biennial series” could be seen as a political statement, he is most interested in achieving the thematic and historical roots of immediate experience. This is why his work is so accessible to us now.