



Subscribe
Give a Gift
Premium
Back Issues
Digital Editions

NEWS

MARKET

REVIEWS

RETROSPECTIVE

ARTISTS

THE TOP 200 COLLECTORS

AUCTIONS

REVIEWS

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

BY Robert Ayers POSTED 01/05/17 12:31 PM

Through January 21, at Michael Rosenfeld, New York

Share Tweet Pin Share



Benny Andrews, *Circle*, 1973, oil on twelve linen canvases with painted fabric and mixed media collage, 10 feet x 24 feet, installation view.

JOSHUA NEFSKY/COURTESY MICHAEL ROSENFELD GALLERY LLC, NEW YORK, NY

From its opening on election day through the first dreadful weeks of what appears to be President-elect Trump's diminished United States, this show provides a 40-year-old 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 beacon as well.

Benny Andrews (1930–2006) began his monumental "Bicentennial Series" in 1970. His entirely sound assumption was that a bicentennial celebration conceived under the Nixon administration would largely overlook the two centuries since the signing of the Declaration of Independence as African-Americans had experienced them. As Andrews was quoted by Diane Weathers in *Encore: American & Worldwide 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 six overarching themes—"Symbols," "Trash," "Circle," "Sexism," "War," and "Utopia"—in drawings and studies of various sizes. All but "War" resulted in a huge climactic painting.

The only one of the large paintings included in this exhibition is the nightmarish *Circle* (1973). It stands ten feet high and is painted and collaged on 12 roughly connected canvases. Both physically and metaphorically, it towers over everything else in the show with its depiction of a near-naked man lying spread-eagle on a filthy mattress, surrounded by 13 women and a man who hides behind a tree. The figure on the ground appears to have a gaping wound in his chest, although on closer examination it turns out to be a slice of watermelon. Above him is a horrific tarp and a stovepipe bird that beats its wings and drags behind it a mangled watermelon that might be the man's heart. The picture's imagery suggests a complex personal symbolism, but Andrews has always been reluctant to spell it 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 refined as he develops his ideas from drawings and studies into finished paintings. His ink drawings are caricature-like but delightfully rendered, whereas the pieces in which he combines caricature with torn and unevenly collaged fabric, lengths of rope, and roughly handled paint are genuinely unsettling.

Though he has acknowledged that his "Bicentennial Series" could be seen as a political statement, he is most interested in addressing the thematic and historical roots of immediate experience. This is why his work is so accessible to us now.

Copyright 2017, Art Media ARTNEWS, llc. 110 Greene Street, 2nd Fl., New York, N.Y. 10012. All rights reserved.

ARTICLE TAGS

BENNY ANDREWS

MICHAEL ROSENFELD

SEARCH ART AUCTIONS PRICE DATABASE



EPSON FINE ART PAPERS
PRINT YOUR LEGACY

Signature Worthy
An Industry Standard.

All-New Legacy
For Fine Art Resale.

BUY NOW

EPSON EXCEED YOUR VISION

TOP POSTS



NEW YORK GALLERY MURRAY GUY WILL CLOSE



SCOTT INDRISEK OUT AS MODERN PAINTERS EDITOR-IN-CHIEF, AS LOUISE BLOUIN MEDIA SEES PROMINENT DEPARTURES



BERLIN ART DEALER BARBARA WEISS DIES AT 56



A CONNOISSEUR OF STRANGENESS: THOMAS STRUTH ON HIS 'NATURE AND POLITICS' EXHIBITION AT THE HIGH MUSEUM OF ART IN ATLANTA



ARTSPACE LAYS OFF NEARLY ALL EMPLOYEES, ROLLING ONLINE ART MARKET LANDSCAPE [UPDATED]

ARTNEWS Today

Sign up to receive our new daily e-newsletter, with up-to-the-minute news, criticism, and a note from our editors.

email address

Subscribe



ARTnews Magazine

Like Page 219K likes



Follow @ARTnewsmag 115K followers

RECENT REVIEWS



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



THE GOD OF GLAZES: A CENTENNIAL RETROSPECTIVE OF CERAMICIST MIYAGAWA KOZAN



WHAT YOU CAN'T SEE CAN HURT YOU: 'INVISIBLE ADVERSARIES' AT BARD CONSIDERS THE POWER OF DARK SOCIETAL FORCES



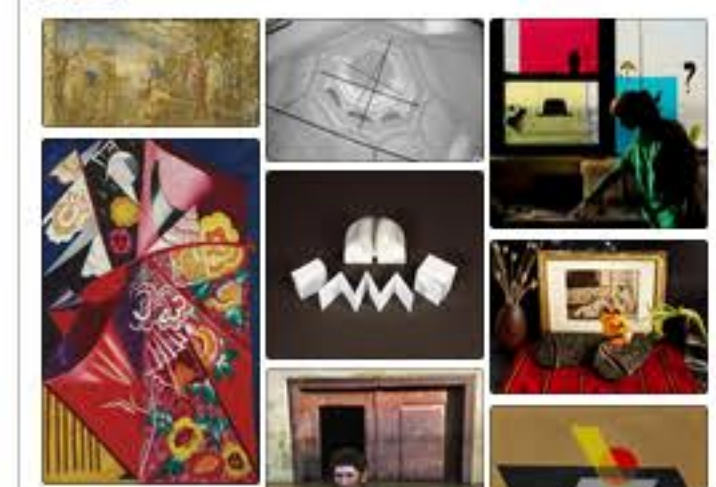
THE CHIEF: 'A JOSEPH BEUYS' EXAMINED THE ARTIST'S LASTING INFLUENCE IN CATALONIA



LOOK, LOOK AGAIN: BORTOLAMI GROUP SHOW CONSIDERS THE ART OF CLOSE, CAREFUL VIEWING



ARTnews Magazine



Follow On Pinterest