

REVIEWS MAR. 15, 2017

Benny Andrews

NEW YORK,
at Michael Rosenfeld

by Julian Kreimer



Benny Andrews: *Circle (The Bicentennial Series)*, 1973, oil on linen with painted fabric and mixed mediums, twelve panels, 10 by 24 feet overall; at Michael Rosenfeld.

A man stands with his legs spread wide. We see him from above so that one of his legs, foreshortened and appearing to jut out from his crotch, looks as phallic as can be. Nearby, a one-legged veteran in military garb gazes into the middle distance, while a decrepit Statue of Liberty sits on a rock outcropping set on a tabletop. Behind these figures a row of paper bags stretches into the distance, each one containing an open-mouthed, ball-fisted figure who appears to be screaming.

The scene is depicted in a crisp line drawing, *Composition #9 for Trash* (1971), included in this show of fifty-seven paintings and drawings from Benny Andrews's seminal "Bicentennial" series, which he produced between 1970 and 1975. Andrews (1930–2006) was the first member of his share-cropping family to finish high school in Jim Crow-era Georgia. After serving in the Korean War, he attended art school in Chicago under the GI Bill before moving to New York, where he worked as an artist, educator, and activist.

A wall label in the gallery quoted Andrews from a 1975 interview in which he conveyed his fear that the official United States Bicentennial festivities planned for the following year would relegate the story of "Black people . . . [to] restorations of the Old Slave Mart, country churches, and slave cabins." Another wall label cited an unpublished diary entry from 1972 in which Andrews described his work as a "Black artist's expression of how he portrays his dreams, experiences, and hopes along with the despair, anger and depression."

Andrews divided the "Bicentennial" series into six subsections—"Symbols," "Trash," "Circle," "War," "Sexism," and "Utopias"—focusing on one per year. Many of the works shown here were studies for larger compositions, including murals, one of which was included. At ten feet high and twenty-four feet wide, this twelve-panel piece—*Circle (The Bicentennial Series)*, 1973—dominated the show. A black man is bound to a bed at the center of the image; above him, a vulturelike monster with a stovepipe body takes off with two watermelons in its talons, apparently ripped from the man's gaping chest. A crowd of onlookers surrounds the bed, some of them holding ropes strung to the watermelons. Long, sharp shadows set against broad areas of bare white-primed linen heighten the surreal atmosphere of the scene.

The drawings manifest a striking economy of means, as if Andrews were trying to see how much he could say with the least amount of ink. In *Study of Guitarists for Symbols* (1970), single, winding lines describe two musician figures, one standing and the other seated. The former's lapels, belt, and pant legs are not delineated, but we immediately sense the sartorial difference between his dapper suit and the latter's folksier rolled-up shirtsleeves and trousers. Standing in stylistic contrast to the delicate, terse drawings, Andrews's paintings often feature painted fabrics glued to their creased surfaces. In *Poverty (Study #1—Afro War)*, 1974, an actual bag made of pink fabric is placed over a painted figure's head and laced shut with a real rope.

Andrews's politically engaged figurative painting blends comedy and tragedy in a way that recalls the work of Max Beckmann and anticipates that of Kerry James Marshall. It also seems particularly relevant now, resonating as it does with contemporary cultural productions, such as Paul Beatty's novel *The Sellout* (2015) and Donald Glover's television series "Atlanta," that use Surrealist-inspired techniques to depict the US from the point of view of African-American protagonists.

ADVERTISEMENT

