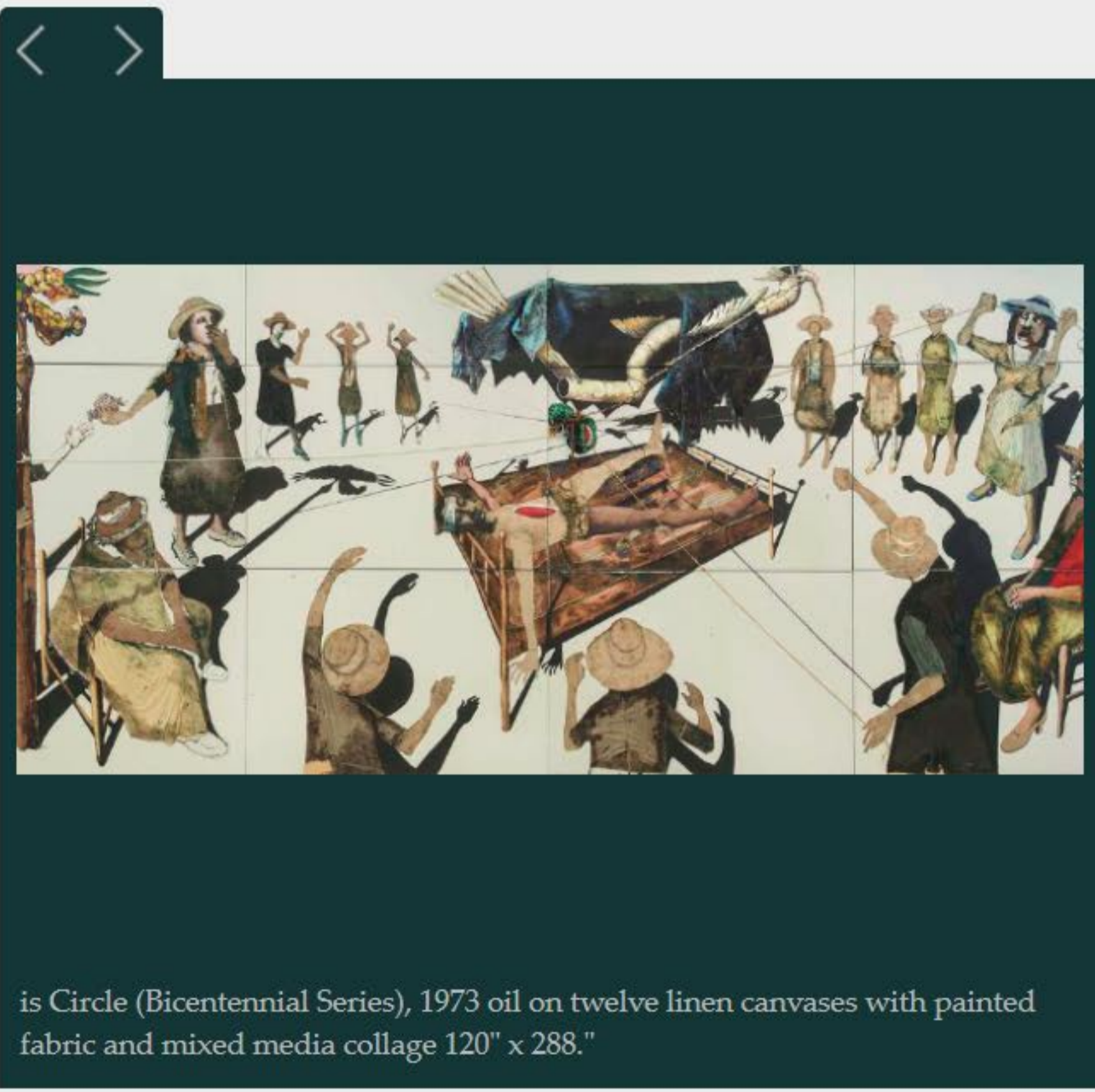


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# Touring Chelsea Galleries


## A Selection of Exhibitions

By: Charles Giuliano - Dec 19, 2016



During a recent visit to Chelsea we made our way through parallel streets with their cluster of galleries. During the busy holiday season there is always an enticing range of major shows. We caught the last weekend of some exhibitions while several major galleries were closed for reinstallation.

*Benny Andrews: The Bicentennial Project*  
 Michael Rosenfeld Gallery  
 100 Eleventh Ave @ 19th Street  
 New York, New York  
 Extended through January 21, 2017

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Born in Georgia the work of Benny Andrews (1930-2006) conflated earthy roots and a self imposed primitivism, with razor sharp wit and scathing agit-prop.

First impressions convey simplicity, an outsider sensibility of an autodidact, but Benny was anything but.

After a stint in the military, with funding from the GI Bill, he enrolled at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. In 1958, he completed his BFA and moved to New York City.

His running buddies were the leading figurative expressionists. That included summer in Provincetown. It's where I met him and was inspired to curate the exhibition *Kind of Blue: Benny Andrews, Emilio Cruz, Earle Pilgrim and Bob Thompson*. The show of four African American Artists was organized for the Provincetown Art Association and Museum and traveled to the gallery of Northeastern University. I was greatly assisted in that project by Carl Hecker the director of the David Anderson Gallery. He loaned a major work by Bob Thompson from the estate of Martha Jackson.

Previously I spent a P'Town weekend with Benny as guests of Rhoda Rosmore an arts patron. While researching that show I visited with Benny in his NY studio. At the time, 1982 to 1984, he directed the Visual Arts Program, a division of the National Endowment for the Arts.

When the leading figurative expressionists Jan Muller and Bob Thompson died young a group of like-minded artists formed Rhino Horn. In addition to Andrews the group, which organized a number of exhibitions, included Jay Milder, Peter Passuntino, Nicholas Sperakis, Peter Dean, Michael Fauerbach, Bill Barrell, Leonel Gongora, and Ken Bowman.

The centerpiece of the exhibition is *Circle (Bicentennial Series)*, 1973 oil on twelve linen canvases with painted fabric and mixed media collage 120 x 288."

The ingenious joining of multiple, easel-scaled paintings to form a broad panorama reminded me of the confines of his modestly scaled studio. It took considerable planning and design to create such a large work.

There is a central figure tied down to the four corners of a bed. Given the gaping, bright red, watermelon-evoking wound in his chest we assume that he is a martyr figure. Above him hovers a *deus ex machina* device which reminds me of Kafka's "In the Penal Colony."

Ropes extend from the machine in several orientations. They appear to be manipulated like marionettes by a circle of rural Southern men and women. They circle as observers and seemingly participants in this ritual of sacrifice. Their body language and expressions range from agitated to apathetic.

The intentionality of the work is not didactic. It is a norm for Andrews to create aesthetic conundrums.

The elements of his work entail diverse traditions and sources. There is an evocation of the narrative traditions of the Marxist social realists of the 1930s. In particular there are graphic references to Robert Gwathmey, Philip Evergood and Ben Shahn. Andrews was also interested in aspects of modernism particularly surrealism and collage derived from cubism. Forms lift off the picture plane. A nose, for example, is sculpted with a element of projecting cloth.

There are those ropes which play a prominent role in *Circle (Bicentennial Series)*. One may consider their use in a straight line from Picasso's early collage *Still Life with Chair Caning*.

The exhibition includes drawings that are studies for the painting. There are line drawings that depict vignettes of Georgia's sharecroppers and blues musicians.

They underscore that while Andrews had a brilliant career as a teacher and activist in New York he never lost touch with his roots and heritage growing up in rural Georgia.