



Page from Benny Andrews' sketchbook
Benny Andrews Collection, Manuscript Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University
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A Look Under the Canvas

At the Correspondence Informing the Art of Benny Andrews

BY PELLOM MCDANIELS

THE DEATH OF BENNY ANDREWS IN 2006 CREATED A VOID in the world of contemporary art and art criticism that is yet to be clearly understood. His unique combination of creativity, intellect and compassion for all human beings was extraordinary. Andrews commanded the respect of artists, patrons and art critics for more than 40 years, however, his contributions to the advancement of civil rights and social justice for African Americans and American Indians in particular, have yet to be fully explored.

Andrews' body of work represents one man's effort to get African American art recognized as a full expression of American life, just as Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, though set in black communities, is recognized as an integral work of American literature.

His signature *Bicentennial Series* (1971–1978), which opened at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta on January 18, 1975, challenged Americans to view their imagined past through the eyes of its oppressed black population and within the context of the celebration of 200 years of nationhood. Linking his approach to a kind of insanity, Andrews explained his intent in the exhibition catalogue: “My whole thing with doing this series of works for the Bicentennial is based on craziness. Hell, I knew when I started back in 1971 with *Symbols* that unless I took an approach that was crazy I'd never do anything worth looking at.”

Born November 13, 1930 in Madison, Georgia, the grandson of slaves, Andrews returned to the state as the first African American to have a show at the prestigious High Museum of Art. Through his *Bicentennial Series*, Andrews revisited his memories of growing up in a poor, sharecropping family. The iconography of the four murals in the *Series* (*Symbols*, *Trash*, *Circle and Sexism*) effectively linked poverty and exploitation to the extreme forms of wealth and power found in American capitalism.

Housed in the Manuscripts Archives and Rare Books Library (MARBL) at Emory University in Atlanta, the Benny Andrews Collection contains correspondence between Andrews and a number of friends and colleagues, many of whom influenced his world view. Recognizing the significance of documentation, Andrews kept duplicate copies of the numerous letters he wrote. These materials provide insight into the life of one of the 20th century's most important creative minds and a glimpse under the canvas of a life lived to its fullest. The collection also contains articles by and about Andrews, exhibition catalogues and a wealth of ephemera.

Warren Cochrane to Benny Andrews

February 14, 1958

In 1958 Warren R. Cochrane, the executive secretary of the Butler Street YMCA in Atlanta, wrote Andrews who was living in Chicago and completing his studies at the School of the Chicago Art Institute. The two men had known each other for almost ten years and Cochrane's letter of February 14, expressed his great appreciation for the history between them:

I was certainly glad to know that some other work was opening up for you even though it is in Detroit and will necessitate your making trips to that City. I was very glad to have had the opportunity of talking with you at length and to see the fine progress which you are making. I never had any doubts about your ability. I did have some question about your personality and your ability to adjust to changing situations. I know that one who is doing creative work such as you must be able to move about pretty freely. He must not be a strict conformist and yet knowing the very rural background which you had as a child and the limitations of early training, as a psychologist and a student of Human Behavior, I know sometime these things can be very limiting. You, however, seem to have done a good job in rising above these limitations and the very fact that you are able to move freely in an interracial set-up demonstrates your ability to make easy adjustments.

Cochrane's knowledge of the adversity of Andrews' early life was especially important to his understanding the significance of the artist's achievement.

Andrews developed his artistic talent and vision when he was growing up in Plainview, Morgan County, a very rural area of Georgia. Young Benny drew as a way to express himself and to psychologically survive having to work the unforgivable cotton fields. And art would prove to be Andrews' vehicle to a better life — an art which drew from his memories of the sounds, smells and textures of the family's two-room shanty.

Graduating from high school and hoping to make something of himself, Andrews moved to Atlanta in 1948 and took up residence at the Butler Street YMCA. At the Y, Benny met Cochrane who was impressed with the youth and advised him on a number of topics. Having worked at Fort Valley State College, Cochrane encouraged Benny to attend the college on a 4-H scholarship and he helped the fledgling artist get a part-time job in the college art department.



BENNY ANDREWS: THE BICENTENNIAL SERIES

Museum Members Preview
Friday, January 17, 1975
6:00 to 9:00 p.m.
The High Museum of Art
Peachtree at 15th.

Refreshments. This card admits two.

This preview party is co-sponsored by the Members Guild and its Junior Committee.

A Georgia native, Benny Andrews has gained national prominence as a highly sensitive and observant painter. His *Bicentennial Series* centers around four monumental paintings created since 1971, augmented by forty related studies. Mr. Andrews will attend the preview party.

Photograph by Mary Ellen Andrews.

High Museum announcement for members' preview of Andrews' Bicentennial series.
Benny Andrews Collection, Manuscript Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University

Throughout his letter, Cochrane reflects on the extreme adversity that Andrews experienced in his youth. The letter also suggests that the two men shared a common goal of securing Andrews' future as an artist. In his February 14th letter, Cochrane writes that:

I sincerely hope that you will go forward with your plans to shift your base of operations to New York City because even though the going may be tough for a while, I am convinced that New York is the only place where a person with the talents which you have will ultimately reach their greatest fruition. I, of course, shall do all I can to help you make the transition and I do have some real contacts which I will have to resurrect since I have been out of circulation so long in that area.

I understand fully your feelings about coming home and understand the infrequency of your visits. Certainly you are moving in a totally different world and even though you love your family, actually you have very little in common. Then too, you are a restless soul and your very nature requires that you move in areas where you can be stimulated. This is the life blood of an artist and you should not do much about it except to see that you have enough contact to maintain this stimulation. Certainly, the very atmosphere and segregation of Atlanta particularly, doesn't do much to help.

Cochrane's support of Andrews' development as an artist was admirable, yet he failed to realize that Benny maintained a strong connection to his family and his southern rural roots which he expressed through his art.

At the Art Institute of Chicago, where he began his studies in 1954 after serving in the Air Force during the Korean War (1950–1953), Andrews settled in to transform himself into the artist that he had imagined himself being. What is more, he used

his experiences at the Art Institute and in the city of Chicago, to explore the possibilities of what art was or how it could be used to chronicle life.

Andrews took courses in art history, theory, design and technique at the Art Institute. Visiting professor Boris Margo advised Andrews to create from his own personal perspective. This became the basis of his "folk"-oriented work, beginning with his decision to portray the three black janitors who frequently manned the mops to clean up the students' paint spills. Andrews recalled the creation of his first collage, *Janitors at Rest* (1957) in an article by Phil Williams and Linda Williams in *Ataraxia* 4, a 1975 issue of the journal.

[The janitors] were always sitting in the toilets, because whenever we'd spill some paint, they would grab a mop and go running out there and mop it up, then they'd go back and sit in the toilets. They had all these little half pints bottles so they'd be down there drinking. And I always talked with them because they were the kind of people I came from, they were like my relatives.

Ludvik "Louie" Durchanek to Benny Andrews October 23, 1961

In June of 1958, Andrews graduated from the School of the Chicago Art Institute with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree. Taking Cochrane's advice, he moved to New York. He set up his studio, visited galleries and began to interact with agents, artists and critics. After struggling through the first couple of years, Andrews found his rhythm and successfully began to show his work in and around New York City. Among the artists he befriended was Ludvik "Louie" Durchanek. The Austrian-born painter and

sculptor schooled Andrews about the art scene and shared his observations about other topics. In a letter dated October 23, 1961, Durchanek writes:

Dear Benny,

I have to break [with] my work to reply to your letter which awaited me on my return from Hartford where I had been visiting with my best and only friend for 15 years a Jew, a psychiatrist — who incidentally bought two of your drawings (self-portrait and seated person) [50 enclosed first installment].

I must confess — I do not like your view of Jews. On the whole it is beneath the dignity of an artist (who must know better) to make any distinctions between humans. This is something which an artist must attain — or to hell with the S.O.B. [Son of a Bitch]. He is just NO good. I also wish to confess that I had to fight my prejudices [childhood infections].

If you reflect (forgive my admonition it's because I like your sincerity) — if you then reflect that the Jew who always was in a minority, always had been shit on (and will be) has for these few reasons greater emotional needs, he also wants to be loved just like anyone else, and incidentally hurts like anyone else.... [Y]ou have to hold a bird's eye view, whether people like it or not, forgive and forget. Then reflect. The American is just as much of nuisance in Europe, so is almost everyone else. There are uncouth people everywhere.

Durchanek's open and frank discussion about Andrews' "view of Jews" advanced a philosophical view of the role of the artist in society that Andrews would embrace as his own.

Identifying himself as an artist of the people in the catalogue accompanying a 1992 show at the Triton Museum, Andrews said: "Whatever it is that I do or do not do in the paintings I paint, really are attempts by me to communicate to the 'folks.' Furthermore, while I could write yards on who the 'folks' are, just let it suffice it to say for this time they are 'us.'"

In his deep compassion for all, Andrews worked hard to symbolically represent universalized forms of suffering and oppression. Indeed, the muted and muddy colors used in works such as *Woman* (1962) and *Men's Room* (1962) removed the category of race from the figures depicted. These early paintings were clearly influenced by Durchanek's views about the obligation of the artist not to "make distinctions between humans."

Andrews' eventual mastery of this approach added to the richness of the images he created depicting life in New York City where a multitude of ethnicities and classes interact. It also created a framework for examining Southern life and the humanity of those whites as well as blacks suffering within its inhumane traditions.

Andrews to Durchanek

March 6, 1975

Well I suppose you've looked at all these enclosures and thought..... "what's going on here?"

I [have] been putting it off, but finally I said, well maybe he'll come so I'm sending the invitation to the opening of my show at the ACA and I hope you'll come down for it. I really don't expect you to get to the opening...but during the three weeks of the show I hope you get down and even stay over with Mary Ellen and I. You could bunk out in my downstairs studio if you wanted to. As you can see I've been...exhibiting a lot, I'm very much in the middle of my "Bicentennial Series," and heaven knows I got enough of my ideas from you, especially from your "Great Society", and of course all of the series of things you've done over the years. So Louie here are some of the fruits of my having met you a long time ago. Like I've always said to you before I try to praise you, I know you're too wise for bullshit...now, as I look at my endeavors, and I'm really in the middle of them, I really owe you lots.

By 1975, Benny Andrews had become one of the most vocal visual artists, art critics and art writers in America. As an activist and advocate for social justice, Andrews had interrogated, criticized and successfully carved out a space in the world of contemporary art that had become ripe for a revolutionary re-visioning. In Andrews' March 6, 1975 letter to Durchanek, he recognizes his responsibility to continue to share the lessons learned, especially from his old friend.

...the suggestions regarding the use of symbols, the little subtleties, etc. all were released by your prodding me to ease up on saying too much. I also benefited from your having read so damn much. Funny isn't it that one person can benefit from someone else having read a lot. I got the fruits of your digesting the ideas of the classics, it's very clear to me. I think I know about things, symbols, etc. but I know that's because I heard you talk about them...funny, so like a lot of those other people that have come to you over the years, I've taken my toll too. So here are some of my brochures and catalogues of what I feel you were doing in your way first. I think that makes the whole thing everlasting, I've always told these young people, who think I'm helping them, to forget trying to thank me, just to get to work and if they ever get the chance, pass it on.

What is most significant about the letters between Andrews and Durchanek is the openness with which they speak.

Andrews to Romare Bearden

February 1, 1974

By the late 1960s, for most black artists including Benny Andrews, aesthetics and ideology were inextricably linked. In the "The Black Emergency Cultural Coalition" article that he wrote for the Summer 1970 *Arts Magazine*, Andrews explained that he embarked on "a completely new adventure" (as an art activist) in the wake of the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr.

On June 4, 1968, Andrews attended a reception at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art introducing the upcoming *Harlem on my Mind: Cultural Capital of Black America, 1900-1968* exhibition. Planned without consulting with the artists, the show consisted of photographic and print memorabilia on Harlem life and entertainment; no fine art was included. To protest this

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exclusion, Andrews organized the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition (BECC). In leading the charge, Andrews became the voice of black artists united against the institutional racism that had persisted in most mainstream museums.

By January 1969, Andrews along with artists Norman Lewis, Vivian Browne, Romare Bearden, Ray Saunders and others had been meeting regularly in Andrews' studio apartment to plan their protest strategy. On January 12, 1969, more than 100 artists, patrons and concerned citizens gathered outside the entrance to the museum to demand a change in its curatorial policies and practices and to call attention to the contribution of black artists and scholars to the history of American art.

Andrews' audacious approach to challenging how museum curators and gallery owners chose works of art to exhibit, and how patrons of the arts made decisions to support artists through their purchases, sharpened his understanding of the art world of the 1970s and his place in it.

Years after the protest against the Met, Andrews wrote to his friend and fellow protester Romare Bearden. In the February 1, 1974 letter, Andrews praises his friend's efforts to advance the understanding of African American history and culture and addresses what he feels black artists should project in their work:

Of course as I sit here and speak of the artistic quality of your work, I'm forever mindful of another equally fine quality that your work possesses, and is very important in the scheme of history concerning Black artists today, and in both artists and historians of the future. That is...your taking up this important role of continuance that is proving to be such a necessity as far as the projection of the Black experience through art is concerned.

To be candid, I feel that Jake Lawrence, Hale Woodruff, Charles White along with Norman Lewis in a similar capacity though stylistically different, [add Richard Hunt to the name of Norman Lewis] had maintained this tradition of projecting

the Black experience up until a few years ago.... I remember the great dignity and sense of concern that you had for other Black artists when you had the historical exhibition of your works at the Museum of Modern Art. I shall never forget the feeling I received from you and the sensitivity you showed towards the fact that other Black artists like Hale Woodruff, Norman Lewis and others were not sharing the same kind of honor that you were at that particular time.

However, Andrews felt that by the early 1970s Lawrence, Woodruff and White had become less socially conscious and more commercially driven. On February 14, 1974, Bearden replied:

Dear Bennie:

Thanks very much for taking the time to write me such a nice letter. It was appreciated.

During the first week of this month, I fell and broke my ankle and tore some ligaments.... Accordingly, Bennie I must keep my left leg up, and it will be in a cast for some weeks. Forgive me then this short acknowledgment of your letter, as writing comes hard. Please, however, wish Mary Ellen all the best....

PS. I suppose you know that Norman [Lewis] and Ouida got married last week — so all the news isn't bad.

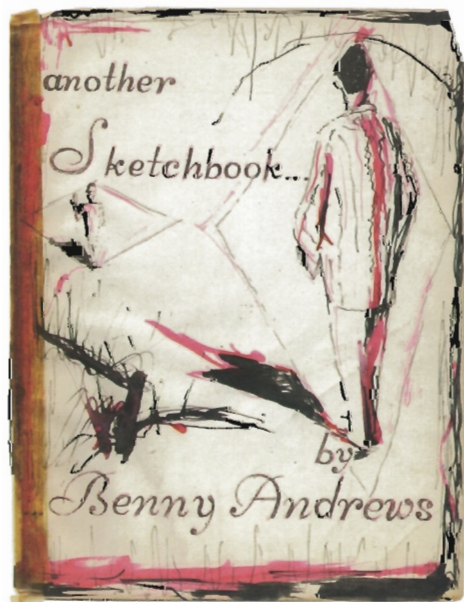
Although he chose not to discuss the concern raised by Andrews regarding the "tradition of projecting the Black experience," Bearden, himself, continued to represent this concern in his work until his death in 1988.

Raymond Andrews to Benny Andrews June 23, 1991

Family for Benny Andrews had always been important, especially his relationship with his younger brother, Raymond Andrews, who became a novelist. As children they dreamed about the possibilities for their lives based on what they read in comic books and saw in movies at the theater in Madison, GA. Benny's success as a visual artist influenced Raymond's decision to pursue a writing career. The brothers collaborated on a number of projects as illustrator and writer. *Appalachee Red* (1978), which was awarded the first James Baldwin Prize for fiction that year, was their first joint effort. By 1990, Raymond had published his fourth book *The Last Radio Baby: A Memoir* (1990) and was working to complete his fifth book, *Jessie, Jesus and Cousin Claire* (1991).

The brothers' professional relationship brought out the best in their work as artists but there still remained a contentious element between them. By 1991, they began to experience more of the tensions that underlined their relationship as siblings. In his June 23, 1991 letter to Benny from New York, Raymond talks about the living arrangements with Benny and Nene Humphrey (Benny's second wife).

I've had [too] much time to think. About the arrangement. When I first came, went South in 1984 I thought we, or you, were interested in keeping some "hole in the woods" where we could, mainly, do our work painting and writing. But, to me at least, as time passed you seemed to want a "showpiece" in



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the jungle. A summer cottage. This is all and well, everyone can appreciate this, but as time passes I'm going to have less and less time to spend there maintaining the place. You know my lifestyle, being a writer, and bachelor, I have to leave the woods at any and all moments. Last year, or earlier this year, for example, I had to spend much time away and as a result your dog and my relationship suffered. But I couldn't stop my writing and philandering ways to please a dog.

In discussing his using the house in Athens, GA, as his writing retreat, Raymond expressed his need to have the flexibility to work when he wanted to, without the consequences of commitments or arrangements. Throughout the remainder of the letter, Raymond continues to talk about the task of being the caretaker of Andrews' Georgia property and his need to have access to the space for his future projects:

I came back to write five books and, hopefully, the fifth one will be completed sometime in 1994. So I would like to stay at the place until then, or the beginning of 1995. I say this now because by that time, I'm sure, there will be much interest in that place as to who wants to stay there [and] when. Remember, you'll be [yes] retiring soon and the tendency to go back into the woods will grow on you, Nene and the kids.... So I say let me stay there until 1994 and I'll be on my way [probably stay with Daddy over in Madison].... Life is strange, but I never thought that place would be so popular with you.

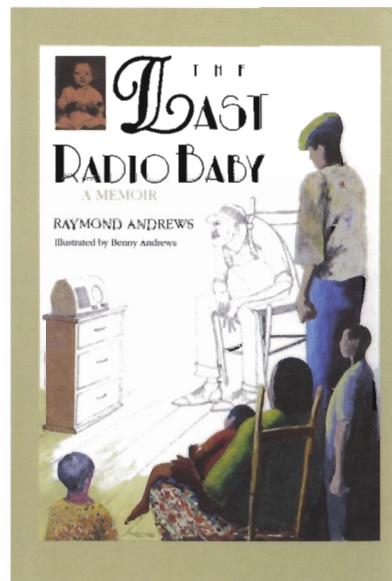
Recognizing the need to address Raymond's concerns relatively quickly, Benny responded by writing a very long and detailed letter dated June 26, 1991. In his correspondence Andrews outlines his dismay at the decision that he and Nene had to make concerning Raymond's further use of their home:

Similar to you, we're very dissatisfied with our expectations of what is happening and we're making arrangements to change the situation. While you don't talk about it much in your letters, you too had some obligations in this arrangement, you're living in both of these places with all, and I repeat, with all expenses paid plus I've paid you monies over the years. I'm appalled at your omission of your obligations; you didn't even have the grace to even say please when telling me to put \$2500 in your account, on top of that you told me "I don't pay interest of course." In your letters you've been telling us what to do, what you want, etc., never did you say what you'd do in return....

No Ray, it's over.

We're making a contract with a caretaker...to start September 1, 1991. We will be coming here more often than before to conduct business so we'll relieve you of any previous obligations.... [W]e'd like for you to have time to make arrangements to move by November, no later than Thanksgiving. I'll be down here the second week in September and we can discuss anything you'd like at that time.

Benny and Raymond and Nene continued to discuss the changes in their relationship and the needs that each of them had as artists and as individuals. Benny was hurt that his brother would take advantage of his generosity. Still, they were family. In



Cover of *The Last Radio Baby*
Benny Andrews
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October 1991, Raymond's fifth book, *Jessie, Jesus and Cousin Claire*, was published to very favorable reviews. Tragedy, however, would overshadow this significant accomplishment.

On November 26, 1991, Andrews and Nene Humphreys arrived in Athens, GA, from New York, expecting to have the place to themselves. Unfortunately, they found a suicide note from Raymond explaining that he was sick and "didn't want anyone to fret" over him. In the gazebo behind the studio they found him dead from a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head. What was most disturbing was the fact that he killed himself near the date they had asked him to leave. Benny, of course, was devastated by this particular aspect surrounding Raymond's death. He would never be the same.

In the wake of this tragedy, Andrews began producing works addressing the embedded racism in America that he felt perpetuated the internalized sense of inferiority experienced by blacks. He also examined the tradition of religion in African American communities, especially in the South, and its purpose to provide a path to salvation. And he continued to show in solo and group exhibitions in the United States and throughout the world.

Benny Andrews died on November 10, 2006. With the Andrews estate's donation of his papers to African American Collections in the Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library at Emory University in Atlanta, the native son returned home again.

The life and work of Benny Andrews is a composite of many things: the people that he met, the places he had been, and his experiences along the way. Yet, Andrews never really left the South and the Plainview of his childhood. He always returned to this theme in his work. He always returned home to the people he knew, and the people who knew him.

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