



Benny Andrews, "War Mementos" (1991): The mother's gesture shows his mastery of gesture and weight.

## Benny Andrews' broad vista of America

By Nancy Stapen  
SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE

Five years ago, the painter Benny Andrews observed: "It was only recently that people stopped

**Art Review** saying 'Benny Andrews, the black artist.'"

That assessment may have been overly optimistic. Andrews is 64 now, a celebrated painter and a former head of the Visual Arts Department of the National Endowment for the Arts. And he is still routinely referred to as "one of America's foremost black artists."

That identification is particularly ironic in Andrews' case; though he has forthrightly addressed racism, poverty and African-American culture in his work, his collaged paintings elude thematic or stylistic classification. Neither militant nor socially unaware, working figuratively but keenly aware of abstraction, Andrews is an American original.

All the more fitting that he should create "The America Series," some 65 paintings and drawings of the early '90s that present an eclectic overview of American society. After traveling for the last two years to museums and galleries around the country, the bulk of this opus has

BENNY ANDREWS  
THE AMERICA SERIES

At the Wendell St. Gallery, 17 Wendell St.,  
Cambridge, Wed-Sat. noon-5 p.m.,  
through Nov. 19.

landed at the Wendell Street Gallery in Cambridge. It is well worth a visit.

In "The America Series" Andrews presents a broad vista of a decentralized nation embodied in individuals. They range from the homeless and impoverished to art-world sophisticates, from rural toilers of the land to Jewish scholars, from a hooded Ku Klux Klan "Zealot" to a wryly humorous "K-Mart Lady." Several of the images here, painted during the Persian Gulf War, evoke devastation and loss — but as always, Andrews compresses broad social critique into the experience of individuals. He is a master of gesture and weight, with a mother's hand pressed against her soldier son's coffin eloquently expressing the bereavement inflicted by war. In contrast, the celebratory "The Soil" shows a farmer rooted in a verdant land where brilliant flowers bloom in joyful profusion.

Andrews is uniquely situated to formulate a portrait of this heterogeneous land. Widely traveled, he ex-

perienced extreme poverty as a sharecropper's son in the South, was educated in the Midwest and, as a successful artist, observed the workings of New York's moneyed art world firsthand. He grew up in rural Georgia, "as poor as people can be as far as money or any kind of physical possessions are concerned," as he once wrote in a book of his drawings. After serving in the Korean War, he attended the Art Institute of Chicago, which at the time was a bastion of Abstract Expressionism. Andrews rebelled against the tide, evolving his own brand of "crude" but incisive figuration.

An outsider among the school's white, Northern, middle-class urbanites, Andrews became friends with the school's black janitors, who hung out near the men's room. He wanted to capture them on canvas, but felt the oil paint with which he worked was too insubstantial to convey their essence. One day, he grabbed some paper towels and toilet paper from the men's room, which he crumpled and spread onto a roughly painted canvas. He proceeded to paint vigorously over the paper, thus inventing his unique brand of painted figurative collage.

Andrews was active in the '60s as a leader in efforts to win recognition

# THE BOSTON GLOBE

THE BOSTON SUNDAY GLOBE • NOVEMBER 6, 1994

for black artists. This, plus his trenchant satire during the Nixon years (the "Bicentennial Series") pigeonholed him as an activist. But this one-note view ignores his broad aesthetic reach and multifaceted vision. Both are evident in abundance in "The America Series." A narrative painter, Andrews tells tales as diverse as the utopian vision of racial harmony depicted in the pastoral "Umbrellas" and the arresting portrait of "Poverty," in which a black man sits down to a meager meal of pork chops and a few peas. His hand gripping his glass desperately enough to shatter it, this figure has a looming presence embodying resignation and coiled anger at the same time.

Throughout, Andrews avoids stereotype. His image of a "Homeless" woman wielding a shopping cart heaped with her worldly belongings is an icon of dignity with an undertone of menace. The wealthy white couple of "Esthetes," contemplating an African mask in a gallery, are painted from the vantage of one born to poverty who now mingles with the privileged art world — a vantage that Andrews cannily describes in an essay in the catalog accompanying the show as "similar to what the saying 'a cat can look at a queen'



Detail from "Esthetes" (1990): satirical but empathetic.

exemplifies."

"Esthetes" also conveys the rich ambiguity of Andrews' vision. It has a distinct satiric edge, but it also contains tragic allusions, with the suspended African mask conjuring the ghosts of Southern lynchings. In addition, there is the disjunction of a ritual object created in one culture and wrenched into the commodified realm of another. Yet Andrews also conveys empathy for the couple, especially the woman, who, despite her reserved stance, seems riveted by the mask's mystery. It is not lost that the collecting elite is a tribe of sorts; Andrews uses formal means to suggest that these disparate cultures may have more in common than meets the eye, with all three protagonists wearing masklike expressions, and the couple adopting the totemic posture common to African sculpture.

The emotional charge of Andrews' figures is underscored by the artist's astute sense of placement. The "Homeless" woman nearly fills the canvas, suggesting an ironic sort

of plenitude, while the yawning space punctuated by a sea of tiny gravestone markers behind the grieving family in "War Mementos" conveys the infinite nature of loss.

Andrews' aesthetic is rooted in abstract principles. Among his main influences is Vermeer; while Andrews hardly paints peaceful interiors, he has learned much from the master's austere, harmonious geometry and crystalline light. Although Andrews rejected the "look" of Abstract Expressionism, he retained its physicality and emotionally charged gestures; he is a great admirer of Franz Kline. He also bears a strong kinship to another form of expressionism, namely the biting social critique of the German Expressionists. This plus Andrews' populist affection for common folk caused the astute critic Michael Brenson to liken Andrews' work to "Grant Wood that has gone through the grinder of Otto Dix." Nowhere is this aesthetic reach more visible than in "The America Series."