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ART & DESIGN

What to See in New York City Galleries This Week

By ROBERTA SMITH, HOLLAND COTTER, WILL HEINRICH and KAREN ROSENBERG NOV. 24, 2016



"Circle Study #11," 1972, from "The Bicentennial Series" by Benny Andrews at Michael Rosenfeld Gallery. All Rights Reserved, Estate of Benny Andrews/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. and Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York, NY.

Benny Andrews

'The Bicentennial Series'

Michael Rosenfeld Gallery
100 11th Avenue, at 19th Street
Chelsea
Through Jan. 7

Benny Andrews once said the poles of his life were defined by two places, the rural South and New York City, America then and now. He was born in pre-civil-rights Georgia in 1930 to a sharecropper family. He spent most of his career as an artist in New York, where he [died in 2006](#). Much of that career was shaped by political activism devoted to the proposition that black lives and African-American art more than just mattered: They defined what "American" means.

Mr. Andrews would, no doubt, have had strong views on the recent presidential election, with the currents of racism and misogyny brought right to the cultural surface. And in a sense he expressed those perspectives some 40 years ago in six thematic groups of impassioned works that he titled "The Bicentennial Series," selections from which are on view together, for the first time, [at Michael Rosenfeld Gallery](#).

Produced from 1971 to 1976, each thematic group is made of dozens of ink studies and oil sketches that (with one exception) culminated in monumental multipanel murals. In the introductory group, represented in the show by ink studies only, Mr. Andrews looked back to his Georgia childhood with tableaus that mixed family portraits and Ku Klux Klan figures. Thereafter, the work turns allegorical and surreal. The second group, done at the time of the Attica prison rebellion, includes an oil study of the Statue of Liberty being hauled off to a junk heap. In one later painting, a dark-skinned man is tied down, as if crucified, to a brass bed that suggests a boxing ring. In another, light-skinned, phallus-shaped male hunters track down female prey.

For all the mural-size pictures — the show contains one — Mr. Andrews used a distinctive technique involving applying pigment-soaked cloth and paper to canvas. The results, with their mix of academic painting and vernacular craft, carve out a space for work that asserts a black identity within the art historical continuum. Mr. Andrews titled the last of his six thematic groups "Utopia." It depicts a weird candy-colored landscape with no figures at all: The human presence and any social ideal are, clearly, mutually exclusive. This is the message of the "Biennial Series" as a whole: Far from being a fantasia on what makes America great, it's a vision — as the election was — on what makes America America.

HOLLAND COTTER

