Art in Review

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND HAUSER & WIRTH

"Kline Nurses," 2015, by Rita Ackermann, in "Kline Rape," her show at Hauser & Wirth, which depicts female figures, many of them at leisure, and explores macho unconsciousness.

Rita Ackermann

'Kline Rape'

Hauser & Wirth
548 West 22nd Street
Chelsea
Through Jan. 14

Rita Ackermann paints with skill, attitude and a highly effective command of pink, that girlie color. Her latest semiabstract paintings, at Hauser & Wirth, seem deliberately unresolved but still quite tasteful. They are among her best, if still not original enough.

But visual originality may interest Ms. Ackermann less than a skeptical conceptual framework. In some works, big intersecting bars of black and transparent washes evoke the Abstract Expressionist and the Color Field painters. The black forms in particular conjure Franz Kline, whose name figures in "Kline Rape," the show's suggestive title. If you know a little German, Kline evokes both "kleine" ("little") rape and "kein" ("no") rape, and thus male denial of criminality and, more generally, macho unconsciousness — at which the Abstract Expressionists surely excelled.

Ms. Ackermann's signature line drawings of women idling alone or in one another's company — as they have tended to do across the history of painting — frequently hover in these abstractions. Several may be self-portraits, like the subject of the show's first work, a Warholesque black on white drawing on canvas whose jaded subject stares out at us, a champagne glass at her side. Occasionally a more fully painted female figure appears, as in the small "Strip Nurse 1," whose smears conjure de Kooning, while its title recalls the artist Richard Prince, known both for paintings of nurses and for his own riffs on de Kooning.

In contrast to the historical commentary of the "Kline Rape" and "Strip Nurse" paintings, the "Stretcher Bar Paintings" are more locally self-referential, alluding to the way stretcher bars can enter the picture by pressing through from the back. Ms. Ackerman's waiting women inhabit these works too, some of which, like "Stretcher Bar Painting 3," are among the show's strongest.

ROBERTA SMITH

Benny Andrews

'The Bicentennial Series'

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

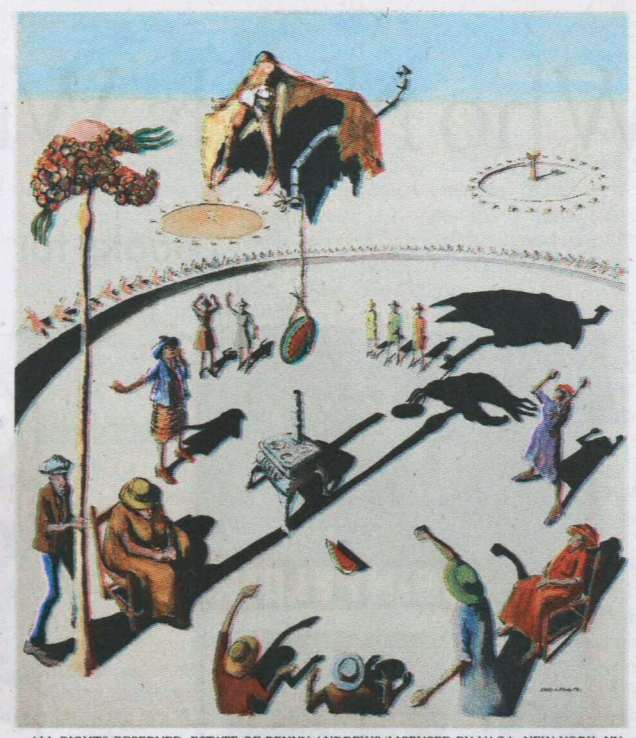
Benny Andrews once said the poles of his life were defined by two places, the rural South and New York City, America then and now. He was born in pre-civil-rights Georgia in 1930 to a sharecropper family. He spent most of his career as an artist in New York, where he died in 2006. Much of that career 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



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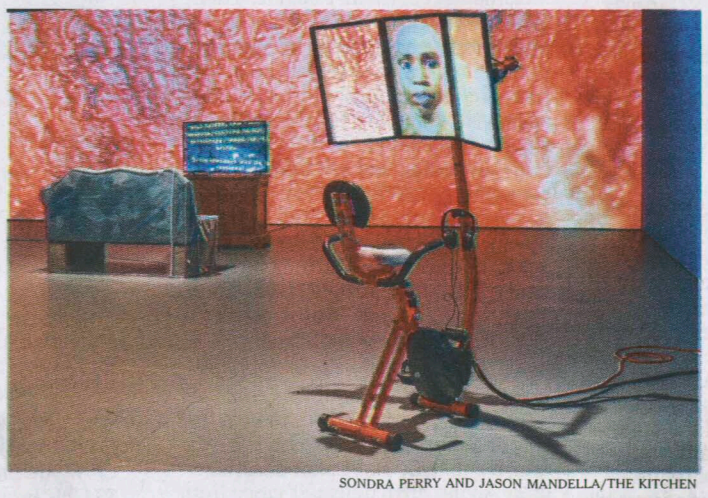
"Circle Study #11," 1972, from "The Bicentennial Series" by Benny Andrews at Michael Rosenfeld Gallery.



SONDRA PERRY AND JASON MANDELLA/THE KITCHEN

An installation view of "Resident Evil" by Sondra Perry. Her work, which uses video games, illuminates the black experience.

Sondra Perry

'Resident Evil'

The Kitchen
512 West 19th Street
Chelsea
Through Dec. 10

"Resident Evil," the New Jersey-born artist Sondra Perry's first institutional solo show, should be required viewing. With four formally accomplished, brutally forthright video installations, Ms. Perry uses the implacable inhumanity of computer and video-game software and the terrors of the "uncanny valley" as a searing window into the contemporary black experience.

One video makes the connection between police brutality and operating system failures explicitly, combining discussions of the so-called "blue screen of death," a type of Windows error message, and the "blue code of silence," the corrupt police officer's version of omertà, with photographs of black women and girls who have died in police custody. In another, Ms. Perry's own face, jarringly grafted onto a ready-made avatar though it doesn't quite fit, impersonates the kind of deeply shocked false consciousness that life inside such systems can foster.

But the crowning heartbreaker is the title piece, named after Capcom's first-person shooter video game from 1996. Footage of the artist's living room, of her mother reading on the couch and of Eartha Kitt singing "I Want to Be Evil" on their television skips jaggedly into footage of a protest in Baltimore after the 2015 death, in police custody, of Freddie Gray. We see both Fox News and citizen-smartphone versions of an encounter between Geraldo Rivera and the young activist Kwame Rose. While Mr. Rose makes an impassioned case for his own and his neighbors' humanity, Mr. Rivera rolls on like an automaton, unable to deviate from his preprogrammed, sensationalist goal.

WILL HEINRICH