

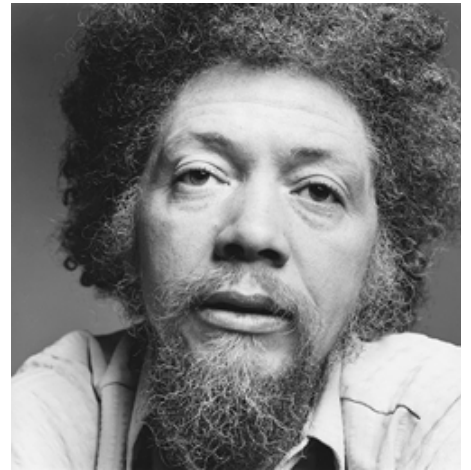


Benny Andrews



(1930-2006)

As a boy in rural Georgia, Benny Andrews helped his share-cropper family in the cotton fields. He was one of ten children in a “family of dreamers,” and he began to draw at a very early age. As he said, “All of us—all my brothers and sisters—drew because my father did. I’ve been drawing and painting ever since I can remember. They say I started when I was about 2 years old.”¹ When he was in his twenties, after having spent four years in the Air Force, Andrews attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago on the GI Bill—and that’s when he visited an art museum for the first time. By 1958, he had a BFA and moved to New York City, where he practiced his art and became a vibrant part of the art world. His works are now in the collections of many museums. He was an activist for black artists and women artists. From 1982 to 1984, he was director of the Visual Arts Program for the National Endowment for the Arts. Andrews lectured at numerous universities and taught for nearly three decades at Queens College. And he was the pioneer of a prison art program.



Benny Andrews, 1974



Benny Andrews (1930-2006)
Down the Road, 1971
Oil on canvas with painted fabric collage
55" x 48" x 1 1/2" / 139.7 x 121.9 x 3.8 cm
Signed and dated

Andrews' vast body of work includes drawings, book illustrations, paintings with collage. (The 1996 video *Benny Andrews: The Visible Man* shows the artist in his studio working on a painting/collage and discussing his technique of incorporating paper, fabric, and even cut-out sections of his old paintings into the new artwork.) Andrews was described by the *New York Times* as a "figural expressionistic painter."² Speaking about his own work, he is quoted in *The Storied South* as saying that "the further I get away from being illustrative, the better I am. I have never ended up with an abstract painting, but to me, the heart of art is the abstract part of it."³ His work, he said in the 1996 video, was "based on doing people."⁴ He created series of artworks like the Autobiographical Series, the America Series, the Revival Series. In the lead-up to the 1976 celebrations for America's 200th birthday, Andrews launched a Bicentennial Series. He explained that he was joining "the loyal opposition ... [to] point out that we've also been really a horrible country too ... look across the real streets at the poor, the discriminated against, the disenfranchised, and the large numbers of persons in prisons, just to mention a few."⁵

Benny Andrews moved to Westbeth in 1970 with his wife, photographer Mary Ellen Andrews, and their three children, Christopher, Thomas, and Julia; they lived there about seven years. Mary Ellen Andrews says that “many friends also moved to Westbeth: the Gunns, the Milders, the Dobbises. And many new people awaited us, like Ralph and Helen Dubin, Vito Giacalone, Marilyn Schwartz. Kudos to Joel Oppenheimer for his free writing class for Westbeth kids and, similarly, to Dorothy Noland. I did portraits of Westbeth children and adults—there was no lack of subjects, who were accessible by a knock on a nearby door.”⁶

Indeed their artist friends Jay Milder and Sheila Schwid and their three children had found a home at the newly opened Westbeth Artists Housing. Schwid remembers Andrews acclimating to the New York artists’ scene: “Benny decided that he would pick up some of the culture of the New York painters. Thus he taught himself to play chess. Then he decided to learn to smoke a pipe. One day when he was struggling to get his pipe to light, Christopher looked at his dad and said, ‘You have to keep your mouth shut while you light it.’ Benny just laughed and followed his son’s instructions. Benny had a saying, ‘If you don’t know what to do, don’t do anything.’ It got him through many a tight spot.” He “was a good friend,” she adds. “I miss him.”⁷

To read more about Andrews and to see his artwork, go to bennyandrews.com.

Credits:

Headshot at top and on homepage: Photograph by Dwight Carter; Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY.

Down the Road: Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY; Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY.

Notes:

1. Benny Andrews in *Benny Andrews: The Visible Man*, directed by David Irving (L&S Video, Inc., 1996), DVD.
2. Benjamin Genocchio, “Benny Andrews, 75, Dies; Painted Life in the South,” *New York Times*, Nov. 12, 2006.
3. Quoted in William Ferris, *The Storied South: Voices of Writers and Artists* (University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 214.
4. Andrews in *Benny Andrews: The Visible Man*.
5. Benny Andrews in *A Patriotic Show*, exhibition catalog (Lerner-Heller, 1976), n.p.
6. Mary Ellen Andrews, email message to Terry Stoller, July 12, 2017.
7. Sheila Schwid, email message to Terry Stoller, May 21, 2017.

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