

Art Review:
The Brutal Politics of Benny Andrews at Michael Rosenfeld, NYC

by *Caroline Stover* / January 3, 2017



Benny Andrews, *Circle*, 1973; oil on 12 linen canvases with painted fabric and mixed media collage, 120 by 288 inches. © Estate of Benny Andrews/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. and Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York, NY.

A little over four decades ago, Georgia-born painter Benny Andrews (1930-2006) completed his six-part masterwork, *The Bicentennial Series*. It was 1975 and cultural institutions across the country were busy organizing special exhibitions and programs to mark the 200th anniversary of America’s independence. The 1976 bicentennial celebration was shaping up to be a sentimental commemoration of patriotism and national pride. Andrews, a black artist from the rural South and living in New York City at the time, felt compelled to bring a different narrative to fruition. “Benny Andrews: The Bicentennial Series” is currently on view at [Michael Rosenfeld Gallery](#) in New York, and it couldn’t be more relevant today—it’s a blazing meditation on the torments of war, the fate of our planet, and the monstrousness of sexism and racism in America.

The exhibition wastes no time in introducing visitors to the brute force of Andrews’s surrealist imagery. *Sexism* is the first group of paintings and drawings that viewers encounter in the gallery, and it contains some of the most disturbing images in the series. White-

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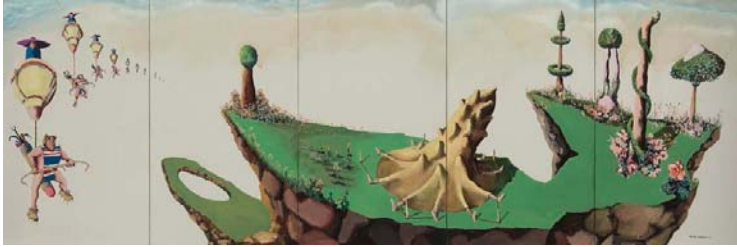
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symbols abound in the form of lollipop-shaped trees and arrow quivers or missiles between the legs of the male creatures.

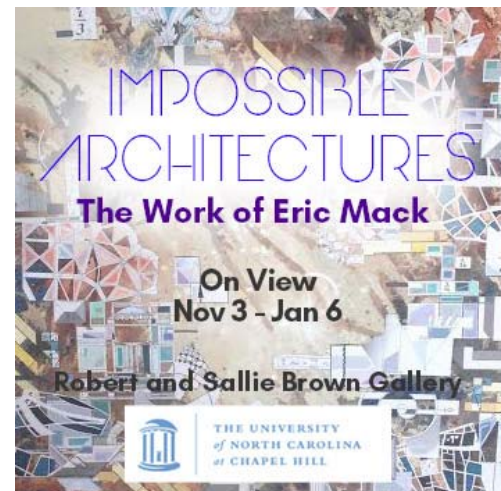


Benny Andrews, *Sexism Study #22*, 1973; oil on five stretched canvas panels, 30 by 90 inches. © Estate of Benny Andrews/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. and Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York, NY.

Sexism Study #24 shows a female form in fighting stance, legs spread and white-gloved fists raised, but the figure's movement seems to be thwarted by a covering over her head and body, and ropes attached to domestic objects that anchor her to the ground. This composition is repeated in *Sexism Study #15*, in which a covered male figure is tethered by ropes connected to metal plates. The cloth over his head and body is red, white, and blue, and decorated with stars and stripes. Andrews peels back the layers around gender roles in American culture and what he reveals is absurd and creepy. The female figures in *Sexism* are mostly depicted as trapped and victimized, but the cretinous males, surrounded by images of sex and power, can also be interpreted as victims.



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Benny Andrews, *Sexism Study #24*, 1973; oil on canvas with painted fabric collage and rope, 96 by 50½ by 2 inches. © Estate of Benny Andrews/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. and Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York, NY.

Andrews completed over 70 paintings and drawings for *Sexism* alone, and at least 200 works for the five other themes in his series. Only 57 pieces from *Bicentennial* are included in the New York show despite the gallery's spaciousness. The monumental scale of Andrews's undertaking speaks to his level of outrage. *Sexism* is rife with representations of sexual oppression. In *Symbols*, he delved into his own roots as one of 10 children born to sharecroppers in Plainview, Georgia, and depicted provincial scenes of a poor black community overshadowed by hardship and haunted by symbols of American injustice.

Andrews's art and his political activism were always entwined, but when he chose *Trash* as his second theme in the series, the relationship between art and activism was serendipitous. He was working on *Trash*

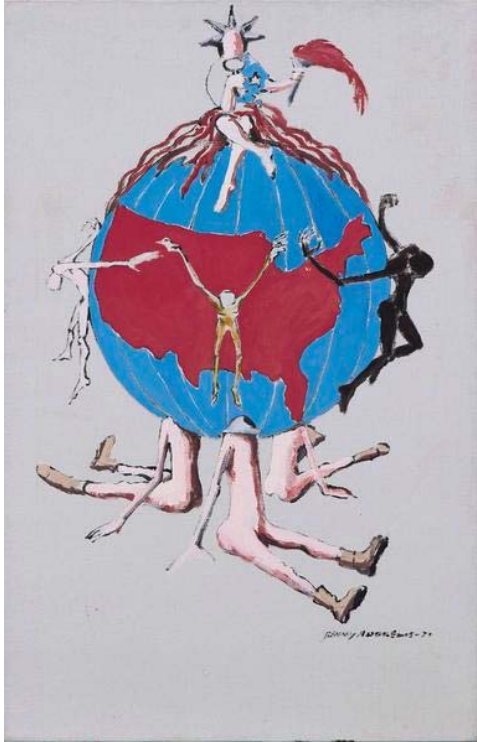
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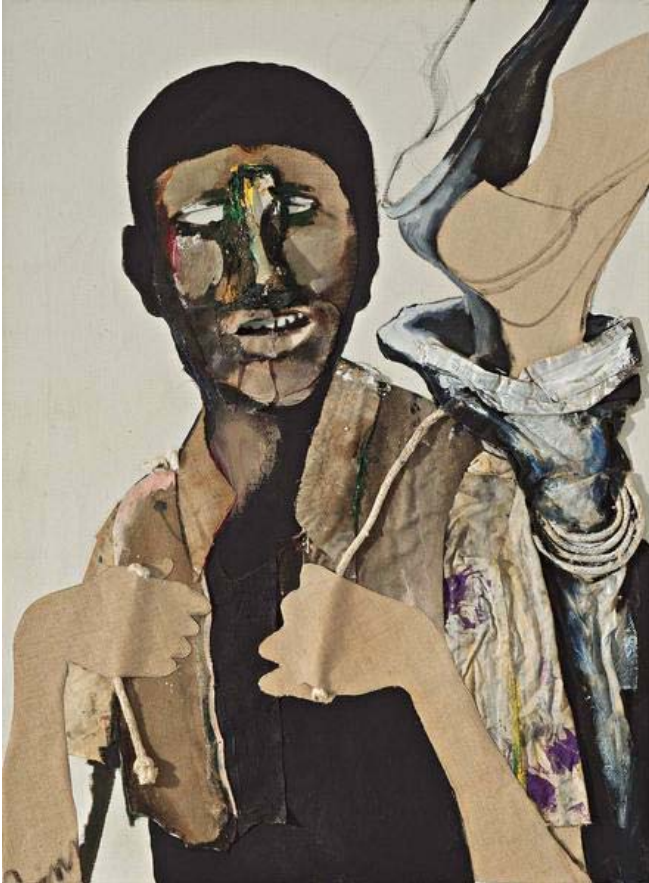
released a list of demands for better living conditions and civil rights, and Andrews was deeply moved by their plight.



Benny Andrews, *Liberty (Study #2 for Trash)*, 1971; oil on linen, 34 by 22 inches. © Estate of Benny Andrews/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. and Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York, NY.

The Attica incident gave Andrews the inspiration for what became his “symbol of blackness” in *Trash*. He had already established images of American nationalism and culture as his “symbols of Whiteness” (a quote from the 1972 ACA Gallery *Trash* exhibition catalogue, according to Rosenfeld Gallery notes). His painting style in *Trash* is distinctly expressionistic compared to the more precise depictions in *Sexism*. *Sexism* is surreal fantasy; *Trash* feels real. In *Puller (Study #1 for Trash)*, the figure’s thrown-back head, straining arms, and elongated feet are loosely painted, enhancing the tension and struggle in the image. In *Liberty (Study #2 for Trash)*, the people are almost devoid of detail. A globe is supported on the shoulders of three simply drawn white figures. The United States is front and center on the globe; a featureless Statue of Liberty sits casually on top. In sharp relief against the red, white and blue palette is a figure painted in solid black who is

seems real and alive, a palpable representation of suffering and entrapment beneath America's fetishistic symbol of freedom.



Benny Andrews, *War (Study #1)*, 1974; oil and graphite on canvas with painted fabric collage, 34 by 25 by 1¼ inches. © Estate of Benny Andrews/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. and Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York, NY.

The full force of Andrews's political convictions finds expression in *War*, where he uses his signature collage technique to devastating effect. In *War (Study #1)* bits of fabric and rope amplify the otherwise flat canvas. The soldier's shirt is rendered in pieces of painted cloth; rope circles the ankles of a man slung over his shoulder. But it's through the complex dimensionality of the soldier's face that Andrews hurls his message at the viewer. The man's eyes are empty holes cut in an oval of painted canvas. The distended nose appears to have been ripped off and then re-attached with thick paint. A molded piece of canvas is attached to part of the mouth, the protruding lip painted in fleshy high gloss. It is the face of war, represented by a death mask, both expressionless and anguished.

War in 1974. He approached the subject the way he approached every theme in *The Bicentennial Series*, by harnessing the raw symbolism that was at the core of the experience. This is especially true in *Circle*, the only monumental painting in the exhibition. It looks like an altarpiece. The central figure is a black man bound in the pose of a crucifixion to a bare, stained mattress. His heart, represented by a watermelon, has been removed and is held aloft by ropes. A circle of white women grasp the ropes; two black women sit passively observing. Andrews is calling on all his powers of dreamlike expression and surreal symbolism in this depiction of a tormented black man experiencing the ritualistic extraction of his essence.



Benny Andrews, *Utopias Study #8*, 1975; oil on linen with painted fabric collage, 40 by 60 inches. © Estate of Benny Andrews/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. and Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York, NY.

In 1975 came *Utopia*, the sixth and final installment of *The Bicentennial Series*, in which Andrews gave expression to his ideas of an idyllic world. The oil and collage painting *Utopias Study #8* is significantly devoid of human life. Five drawings in the exhibition depict people in fetal poses lying inside oval, egg-shaped holes. In *Utopias Study 5-C*, two embryonic beings converse as they lounge comfortably on the ground. Andrews's idea of utopia seems to suggest that ideally, it should be absent of human life, and if man exists at all, he is best left in a perpetually nascent state.



Installation view of “Benny Andrews: The Bicentennial Series,” showing *Circle* on the right wall. © Estate of Benny Andrews/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. and Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York, NY. (Photo: Joshua Nefsky; Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY)

Andrews was a prolific journal writer; his papers, including family correspondence and other writings, were endowed to the Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library at Emory University upon his death from cancer in 2006. Quotes from his journals and excerpts from interviews and exhibition catalogues appear in the highly informative texts that accompany “Benny Andrews: The Bicentennial Series” exhibition. One particular quote by Andrews from a 1977 article in the *Houston Chronicle* provides meaningful context for understanding his work. Andrews said, “Surrealism can get out of hand real fast. But then the black experience is so ridiculous that surrealism is the best way to express it. I’ve seen the same kind of work coming from prison artists. To get through an oppressive real life, the artists have to live a fantasy life.” One can’t help but wonder what symbols Andrews would invoke to represent today’s America. So that we may be inspired to think more about that, Michael Rosenfeld Gallery has extended the exhibition to January 21, a day after the presidential inauguration.

“Benny Andrews: The Bicentennial Series” is on view at Michael Rosenfeld Gallery through January 21.

Caroline Stover lives in Atlanta and works in publishing.

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