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ART IN REVIEW

Benny Andrews: The Pop Object 'The Still Life Tradition in Pop Art'

By HOLLAND COTTER Published: May 9, 2013

Michael Rosenfeld Gallery

100 11th Avenue, at 19th Street,

Chelsea

Through May 18

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Benny Andrews was born into a sharecropping family in Plainview, Ga., in 1930; went to a local college on a scholarship, dropped out, joined the Air Force and ended up at the Art Institute of Chicago, where, as one of the few black students, he felt ill at ease. By the end of the 1950s he was in New York, making figurative paintings that were also collages and sculptural reliefs built up from scraps of recycled clothing. The work, social and political in content, had little to do with mainstream styles of the day.

The 36 pictures at Michael Rosenfeld span Andrews's career. One of the earliest pieces, "Dinner Time" from 1965, is a straightforward oil-on-canvas domestic scene; "Liberty #6 (Study for Trash) (Bicentennial Series)," made six years later, is a symbolic depiction of a parade float carrying headless nude soldiers and a woozy blond, flag-swathed Lady Liberty. In the time between those pictures, Andrews (who died in 2006) was active in the civil rights movement, taught art in a New York jail, and helped found the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition, which campaigned to have major museums recognize African-American art.

Allegory and genre, sometimes combined, remained his dominant modes; experiments with high-relief fabric collage continued. In subject Andrews's art continued to be of its time; in form it never was, which limited its circulation. Rosenfeld, working with

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Andrews's widow, the artist Nene Humphrey, is working to give the career the visibility it deserves. An institutional survey, accompanied by an edition of Andrews's invaluable and voluminous journals, is in order, letting us see an important body of work and an important American life in full.

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Pop Art's continuation and subversion of the still life tradition is not exactly a new idea, given that the first museum show devoted to Pop — at the Pasadena Art Museum in California in 1962 — was titled "New Painting of Common Objects." This show, organized by the art historian John Wilmerding, is accompanied by an ostentatious catalog at least partly designed to encourage sales, and is installed almost as gracelessly as an auction-house display. Still, it has clarity on its side, thanks to Mr. Wilmerding's thematic [divisions](#): flowers and plants, household objects, body parts and clothes, and food and drink. It also expands beyond the usual Pop suspects to include the slyly three-dimensional paintings (depicting roses and lima beans) of Marjorie Strider and a soft sewn-and-stuffed-fabric coffee-table still life by Jann Haworth, as well as works by John Wesley, Stephen Antonakos, Robert Arneson and H. C. Westermann. The vacuum-cleaner piece by Jeff Koons is perhaps an expansion too far.

But mainly this is a great cherry-picking exhibition, most notable for a handful of unfamiliar, rarely exhibited or outstanding works. Among these are Jim Dine's "[Five Feet of Colorful Tools](#)" (1962), with its playful confusion of objects, shadows and silhouettes; Vija Celmins's giant hyper-real sculptures of a pencil and a rubber eraser, as spellbinding as ever; and Marisol Escobar's carved wood (with drawing and painting) portrait of Andy Warhol. Edward Kienholz's "Cement TV," a portable television neatly coated with cement, seems sardonically anti-Pop. The show's oddest surprise may be "Steel Plant II Rubber," a welded-steel representation of a rubber (not a steel) plant by Larry Rivers, from 1959. The single most thrilling sight by far is Roy Lichtenstein's "Black Flowers" from 1961, a somewhat crudely rendered masterpiece that merges painting, drawing and commercial printing. At once exuberant and desiccated, and on loan from the Los Angeles collector Eli Broad, it justifies the whole show. ROBERTA SMITH

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