

## PRESS RELEASE

February 15 through April 24, 2009

**Durham, NC** - The first major North Carolina exhibition of internationally respected artist Benny Andrews will open at the North Carolina Central University Art Museum on February 15, 2009. **Benny Andrews: The John Lewis Series** is the last series Andrews produced before his death. It documents and celebrates the life of the civil rights advocate and United States Congressman John Lewis. A selection of works from the series is used as illustrations for the children's book *John Lewis in the Lead*. John Lewis is a living legend of the Civil Rights Movement and was one of the Big Six civil rights leaders of the 1960s, and the only one still alive today. In 1986 Lewis was elected to the House of Representatives, where he continues to serve as a congressman from Georgia.

Benny Andrews' oeuvre of collages, drawings and mixed media work reveals Andrews' distinctive figurative style developed from his childhood habits. Andrews and his brother Raymond, who became a novelist, saved illustrations from newspapers, magazines, and comic books, which Andrews then copied. He created original drawings based on the observed gestures and expressions of those around him or from memories of characters he saw at the movies. With an economy of lines and elongated figures, he emphasized gesture and subtle character traits. Long known as a figural painter, Benny Andrews' expressionist style often depicted a diverse range of themes of suffering and injustice.

This exhibition will be a wonderful opportunity to view the full range of Benny Andrews' artistic genius," said Kenneth Rodgers, director, North Carolina Central University Art Museum. "We are grateful for the generosity of the Atlanta Center for Civil and Human Rights and Mason Murer Gallery of Atlanta for making this North Carolina showing possible."

## The Exhibition

Approximately 37 works will explore the complexity and scope of the artist's mature style and will feature John Lewis' recollection of key episodes in his life and unwavering fight for civil rights. By gluing figures, interior room components, trees, clouds, farm animals, and architecture onto larger surfaces this series of Andrews' late work is remarkable for the artist's individualistic approach to texture, color and particularly collage. Highlights include *The Pettus Bride, 2005*, which measures nearly 3 x 6 feet. Edmund Pettus Bridge, which led out of Selma, was the beginning point for the fifty-four mile walk to Montgomery. John Lewis led nearly six hundred people to the bridge which culminated in an attack by state troopers and became known as Bloody Sunday.

Also included is *Confrontation*, which also measures nearly 3 X 6 feet. The compelling historical narratives in this work and others, barely transcends the artist's process of creating pictures, through a masterful orchestration of every component of the painting. Fifteen thousand black adults were eligible to vote but were denied the right in Selma, Alabama. Lewis and other SNCC workers began leading groups of people to the Selma courthouse to register to vote. Each time they appeared they would be confronted by Jim Clark, the sheriff of Selma, who was determined not to let blacks register to vote. Eighteen additional mixed media works focus his work for voters' rights in the south, culminating in his leadership role in the Bloody Sunday march over the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama.

The exhibition features twenty drawings that are critical to the genesis of his large-scale paintings, but also demonstrate Andrews' mastery of pure contour line drawing. They show what the simplest form of linear expression can deliver when channeled through the hands of a highly skilled story teller. Andrews's lines in *Chicken Yard, Calling the Children Inside, Cotton Pickers* and many others included in the exhibition, describe visible edges of his figures with strength, clarity and simplicity while ignoring surface details such as color, shadow and highlight.

## **The Artist**

Andrews was born to sharecropper parents in 1930 and, along with nine siblings, grew up in segregated rural Georgia. He was the first member of his family to graduate from high school, and, after a stint in the U.S. Air Force, he earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. In addition to teaching at Queens College, City University of New York, for 29 years, Andrews was an active arts advocate, creating a prison arts program, serving as director of the National Endowment for the Arts and organizing the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition to support other black artists. His work is in the permanent collections of more than thirty major museums, including the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, the Smithsonian Institution, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. He died in November 2006. The works have been purchased for the Center for Civil and Human Rights, which is scheduled to open in Atlanta in 2010. The North Carolina Central University Art Museum is indebted to both the Center and Mason Murer Gallery of Atlanta for allowing this series to be shown in North Carolina.

The North Carolina Central University Art Museum is located on Lawson Street across from the Farrison-Newton Communications Building. Every effort is made to make all museum events accessible to the handicapped. For general information or assistance, please call 530-6211. For group visits, please call in advance. The Museum is open Sunday from 2:00 p.m. - 5:00 p.m.; and Tuesday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Admission is free.