

# BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE



MAILINGLIST

ArtSeen

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## *Traylor in Motion: Wonders from New York Collections and Bill Traylor: Drawings from the Collections of the High Museum of Art and the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts*

by Alana Shilling

AMERICAN FOLK ART MUSEUM | JUNE 11 – SEPTEMBER 22, 2013

His graphite seems enchanted: the simultaneous embrace of two-dimensionality and rejection of linear perspective unfolds sentiment without sentimentality; the merest quaver of a line conjures up droll hens and truculent couples, while poster paint explodes across the cardboard canvases in puffs of citrine and Prussian blue. Such is the haecceity of celebrated autodidact Bill Traylor (c.1854-1949). The American Folk Art Museum's current assembly of over 100 drawings by the artist and former slave reaffirms that singularity. The exhibition—likely the most extensive to date—is a double one, pairing the Museum's own "Traylor in Motion: Wonders from New York Collections," with "Bill Traylor: Drawings from the Collections of the High Museum of Art and the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts."

The magnitude of this exhibition reveals surprising oversights in critical reception of Traylor's work in decades past. Though Traylor's place in the pantheon of revered American artists seems assured, the usual characterizations of his oeuvre leave much unsaid—the Museum's own "Traylor in Motion" brings an overlooked aspect of his work, kinesis, to the fore. Other oversights are more pervasive. Traylor's vision of "reality" is celebrated, while raw immediacy of that vision is held at a distance; critics have been quick to label Traylor a storyteller, but do not harken to his most profound narratives. Traylor has something urgent to say. It seems that it is still hard to listen.

Even Traylor's biography is readily romanticized, lending his life a certain opacity. After seven decades laboring on the Alabama plantation where he was born a slave, Traylor relocated to Montgomery in 1928. He spent his days sketching outside of the Pekin Colored Pool Room on Monroe Street—then a

vibrant African American enclave. He was “discovered” in 1939 by artist Charles Shannon. In a span of a few years, between 1939 and 1942, Traylor executed over 1,200 drawings, all untitled. Shannon would become the accidental archivist of Traylor’s works, preserving, cataloguing, and titling them.

It is poetic, the narrative of the former-slave-turned-artist, befriended by the man who would protect his legacy. But that very legacy is compromised by a curious selectivity that is at once subtle and insidious. Traylor is a canonical American artist, yet what we see of his works is burdened by a programmatic partiality. For instance, the artist’s aforementioned talent for epitomizing reality with an uncanny intimacy is widely acknowledged. But the reality Traylor captures is not always charming. True, Traylor’s talent for transforming the constraints of his stylized figures into possibilities for expression is noteworthy. Yet, why muse over graphite underdrawing or giggle at the enterprising barnyard fowl eying a Junebug while the presence and impact of less congenial realities is overlooked? Consider the animals Traylor so often draws.

He crafts quizzical turtles and placid horses, but also shows a preoccupation with less winsome details. His animals often possess emphatically drawn genitals and his most frequent subjects, dogs, are violence embodied. They are usually sinister, hostile creatures that threaten viewers with open jaws lined with rows of forbidding fangs. In their bellies, pigment-driven chaos churns.

And then there are the stories. Attention is often directed towards the simplest of them. The stories told by ladies primly clutching umbrellas or scoundrels brandishing moonshine to the stars are delightful. Yet, the drawings with the greatest capacity for narrative—and the greatest of narratives—have been regularly suppressed by adjectives like “mysterious.” Inattention is thus excused by the implication of interpretive impossibility. Pronounced “enigmatic,” these compositions are swept into tidy categories with labels possessing little semantic value: “constructions” and “exciting events.” For decades, these titles have summed up so much of Traylor’s art; not to explain it, but to mystify it.

These “constructions” and “exciting events” would be better titled “chimeras.” Though they may seem like mystical fantasies, they are the most realistic. They portray nothing less than the predicament of a man caught between past enslavement he cannot forget and present liberty he struggles to accept. To discount them is to ignore what makes Traylor not only a noteworthy artist, but also an eloquent



Bill Traylor, “Untitled (Exciting Event: Man on Chair, Man with Rifle, Dog Chasing Girl, Yellow Bird, and Other Figures),” 1939 – 1942, Montgomery. Poster paint, pencil, colored pencil, and charcoal on cardboard, 15 1/2 × 11 1/2". Louis-Dreyfus Family Collection.

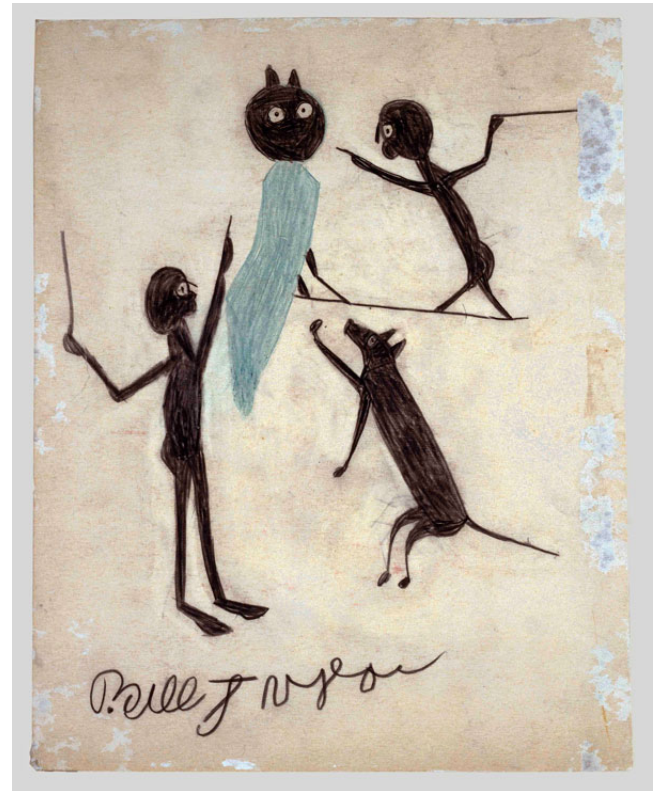
annalist of a nation's history: its brutality.

Yoking together images and events as a dreamer might, these “chimeras” teem with scenes of persecution, attempted escapes, and danger. The canvases fill with men clambering up strange objects or groups in flight, followed by weapon-laden figures in hats. Tellingly, the chase is often circular, locking pursued and pursuer in an eternal round.

Yet, it is impossible to summarize that cavalcade of scenes. It would be impertinent to try. Though some of these “chimeras” are whimsical, levity is less common than horror. These works offer chilling visions of an enduring slavery that can never be wholly exiled—not by wars won, not by the laws of men. That quality of torturous perpetuity is often expressed in the drawings by stubborn synchrony. In “Brown House with Multiple Figures and Birds” (1939 – 42), graphite figures sprint between those painted in bold colors. The composition becomes a visual representation of a mental palimpsest where the past keeps time with the present, the second inheriting the terrifying legacy of the first.

Elsewhere, the separation of past and present disappears entirely, as in “Exciting Event: Man on Chair...” (1939 – 42), which sets seemingly unrelated elements in suggestive dialogue—a reveler, an old woman with a cane, a man carrying a rifle. A yellow bird is suspended above like an unfinished *deus ex machina*, while at the bottom right a tiny girl flees from the hound that is about to overtake her. In the midst of these disjointed vignettes sits a man on a chair, bottle in hand. He is larger than the figures pouring out their life on the canvas, almost superimposed, as if those scenes of revelry and horror are nothing more than his own troubled dreams.

There is much in Traylor's art that is admired by many people. But there are also elements that have been annexed to hinterlands of uninterpretability. Maybe it is easier to swoon over Bill Traylor's “realistic” drawings without confronting the implications of their reality. It is certainly easier to attend to how Traylor's works commemorate a historic site that is forever lost than to recognize him as having forecast the legacy to which we will always be heirs. Unlike a lost landmark or decade, Traylor's art preserves something that we cannot lose, though we want most urgently to forget it: the shameful history of slavery in America. The stain of oppression is not easily removed. For Bill Traylor, it never was.



Bill Traylor, “Untitled (Two Men, Dog, and Owl),” 1939–1942, Montgomery. Colored pencil and charcoal on cardboard 13 3/4 × 10 7/8". Louis-Dreyfus Family Collection.

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