

The New York Times

Indelible Impressions From 3 Shows in Washington

There is plenty of art to see now in the nation's capital, but three exhibitions stand out: Bill Traylor's iconic drawings, Dawoud Bey's haunting portraits and the savoir faire of Senegalese women.

By **Holland Cotter**

Nov. 21, 2018

SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM

'Between Worlds: The Art of Bill Traylor'

The self-taught artist Bill Traylor was born into slavery in rural Alabama in the early 1850s, lived through the Civil War and Reconstruction, and on into Jim Crow. In his 70s, with much of his family gone north, he moved to the city of Montgomery, where he lived on the streets and slept in a local funeral home. After a decade there, in his 80s, he suddenly — or so it seems, because we know so little about his earlier life — started making paintings and drawings of the kind seen in the astonishing exhibition “Between Worlds” at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C.



“Untitled (Man Carrying Dog on Object),” circa 1939-42. High Museum of Art, Atlanta

His materials were rock-bottom basic: pencils, poster paint and scraps of cardboard. The studio was the sidewalk. Before his death in 1949 he produced hundreds of works. Most were silhouette-style images of people, animals and buildings that referred to the world around him but had a dreamlike psychological charge. In them, hulking dogs are both guardians and predators. Human figures have a goofy, spindly comedic lilt but are often attacking each other. This is a world of instability, mistrust and aggression, an imaginative version, one guesses, of the history Traylor lived through.

With 155 such images, this show, which won't travel to other museums, is the largest Traylor survey to date. So buoyant and fresh is the look of the work that you could almost miss its dark undertow. Yet the reality that self-taught art can be an expression of radical self-knowing has rarely been more movingly demonstrated.

Through March 17. Eighth and F Streets NW, Washington, D.C.; americanart.si.edu.