

## The New York Times

# What to See in New York Art Galleries This Week

Miguel Covarrubias's caricatures; Mariam Ghani and Erin Ellen Kelly's latest collaboration; Bill Traylor's drawings; Vivian Maier's self-portraits; and Hervé Guibert's photographs of friends and lovers.

Feb. 7, 2019

## Bill Traylor

Through March 3. Betty Cuninghame Gallery, 15 Rivington Street, Manhattan; 212-242-2772, [bettycuninghamegallery.com](http://bettycuninghamegallery.com).



Bill Traylor's "Blue Mule," circa 1939-1942, gouache on cardboard.  
via Betty Cuninghame Gallery

If you can't get to the Smithsonian's remarkable Bill Traylor retrospective, you can at least visit Betty Cunningham Gallery and spend an hour or two in front of a blue gouache mule Traylor painted on cardboard. Born a slave and not known to have made drawings before his mid-80s, Traylor came to posthumous fame through the efforts of Charles Shannon, a younger white artist who met Traylor around the time of World War II. Shannon ultimately collected more than 1,200 of Traylor's drawings, many of them graphic, silhouette-like portraits of animals.

Traylor would sometimes start one of these portraits with a rectangle or flattened oval, as if trying to capture weight and body as general categories before moving on to specifics. But once he's added delicate hind legs, spindly forelegs, and the muscular slopes of rump and neck, Traylor invariably arrives at something with the eerie singularity of a Sumerian logogram.

Part of it is his uncanny balance of simplification and detail. In "Blue Mule," it's a sticklike tail ending in a delicate puff of hair, or the measured rise and fall of an equine back accomplished with three blunt strokes. Part of it is the monochrome, which lets him picture the mule and its shadow simultaneously. And part of it is the distinctly syncopated composition: By placing the drawing's only element off center, Traylor brings forward the color of the blank cardboard ground, though it can also still read as earth and sky.

But what really makes Traylor's silhouettes so extraordinary is how nakedly they grapple with the basic mystery of representational art: How can a two-dimensional shape, which we take in at a glance, encompass a three-dimensional object, which we can never see all of? *WILL HEINRICH*