

# Visual Storytelling

Lesson Plan  
High School ELL

**Benny Andrews was born in rural Georgia in 1930. He had nine siblings and they all helped their parents work the land that supported them. He was the first in his family to finish high school, and he went on to attend college at the Art Institute of Chicago.**

Benny Andrews  
*Trash*, 1971



After graduating in 1958, he moved to New York City, where he developed a technique of figurative painting with collage elements (cut fabric and paper). He had his first solo exhibition in 1962. Through his work, Andrews became a socially-minded artist and an advocate for greater visibility of African Americans in the art world. For four decades, until his death in 2006, he was a prolific artist, exploring themes of history and social justice in his paintings while also dedicating himself to activism and education in the New York City community.

He led art education programs for underserved students through Queens College, where he taught for almost three decades. He also implemented a groundbreaking model for teaching art in prisons. In 1969, he cofounded the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition, which demanded equal representation for people of color in art museums and the art historical canon.

In 1970, Andrews started the “Bicentennial Series” as a response to the national celebrations planned for the two-hundredth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence of the United States. In his journal, he described this project as, “a Black artist’s expression of how he portrays his dreams, experiences, and hopes along with the despair, anger, and depression to so many other Americans’ actions.” *Trash* is one of the six pieces that make up the “Bicentennial Series,” the other five are: *Symbols* (1970), *Circle* (1973), *Sexism* (1974), *War* (1974), and *Utopia* (1975).

STUDIO  
MUSEUM  
HARLEM

## Objective

Students will learn about Benny Andrews and discuss how artists can create social change through their work.

## Guiding Prompts

After reading the introductory text and looking at the artwork, think about:

- Benny Andrews's drive and motivation to create art
- National and historical events that happened in his youth
- His interest and dedication to education

## Art Project

Choose one of the other five words from the "Bicentennial Series"—*Symbols*, *Circle*, *Sexism*, *War*, and *Utopia*—and create an artwork that represents your thoughts on that concept.

### Materials:

Carbon paper and pen/pencil to trace  
Magazine/newspaper photographs  
Colored pencils, crayons, and markers  
Recycled paper scraps for drawing  
9 x 12 inch card stock for final project  
Scissors  
Black china markers  
Glue  
Clear packing tape  
Colored masking tape

### Procedure:

1. In newspapers or magazines, find two to three images that represent the selected word and trace them on separate pieces of scrap paper. Find any additional figures or details that you want to incorporate and cut them out.
2. Think about what color would best convey the idea of your selected word and choose one (or two) medium(s) to color the background of your card stock. Lay out the traced figures and any of the cutouts throughout the colored card stock until you find a place for each of them. Add any details or color the traced figures.
3. Decide how you want to secure them to the card stock, with glue or tape.
4. Take a minute to examine your composition and select a medium (china marker or masking tape) to add additional marks.

## Vocabulary

### *Activism*

The doctrine or practice of vigorous action or involvement as a means of achieving political or other goals, sometimes by demonstrations, protests, etc

### *Advocate*

One who defends or maintains a cause or proposal; one who supports or promotes the interests of a cause or group.

### *Canon*

The body of rules, principles, or standards accepted as axiomatic and universally binding in a field of study or art.

### *Despair*

To lose, give up, or be without hope or confidence.

### *Figurative*

Of or relating to representation of form or figure in art.

### *Groundbreaking*

Originating or pioneering a new endeavor or field of inquiry; introducing new ideas or methods.

### *Portray*

To make a likeness of by drawing, painting, carving, or the like; to depict in words, describe graphically.

### *Prolific*

Producing in large quantities or with great frequency; highly productive.

### *Rural*

Of, relating to, or characteristic of the country, country life, or country people;  
living in the country; of or relating to agriculture.

### *Socially minded*

Actively interested in social welfare or the well-being of society as a whole.

### *Underserved*

Provided with inadequate services or facilities.

### *Utopia*

A place of ideal perfection, especially in laws, government, and social conditions.

## Opening Questions

After reading the text, answer the following questions in as much detail as possible:

- Why do you think Andrews was so interested in education?
- What motivated him to make the “Bicentennial Series”?
- What is happening in the artwork? How would you describe the style? Which elements or details stand out for you? Why?
- How do you think Andrews’s journal entry is represented visually in *Trash*?

## In the text find words that are related to ...

Education:

Activism:

Time:

Art:

## ANSWER KEY

Education: high school, college, institute, graduation, art education, students, teaching.

Activism: socially minded, advocate, history, social justice, community, representation.

Art: technique, figurative painting, collage, exhibition, artist, art world, museums, canon.

Time: four decades, three decades, two-hundredth anniversary.

## Closer Observation

Take a closer look at the artwork reproduction, zooming in if necessary:

- What do you notice about the people/figures represented?
- What about the objects represented?
- Focus on some of the choices Andrews made. Why do you think the artwork is so wide? Why is he using these particular colors?
- Now look at the artwork as a text, “reading” it from left to right. What story or stories is it telling us?

## Reflection

Benny Andrews believed that representation was important. Growing up, he didn’t have many figures who looked like him to inspire him personally or professionally. Think about someone in your life (family, friend, teacher, athlete, artist) who inspires or motivates you to achieve your goals. Write a paragraph or two about that person. What do you admire about them? How do they inspire you?

## Reading

Click on the link below to read Benny Andrews’s obituary in The New York Times. What else did you learn about his life, education, career, and activism? Search some of the other artists mentioned in the article and compare and contrast their life and work with Andrews’s.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/12/nyregion/12andrews.html>

## **Video**

Click on the link below to hear the artist talk about the challenges he had to overcome throughout his career. Watch the whole video once, and if there are any words you don't understand, watch it a second time with the closed captioning turned on.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d9u\\_35nSgoo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d9u_35nSgoo)

## **Sources**

<https://www.bennyandrews.com/overview>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benny\\_Andrews](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benny_Andrews)

<https://www.michaelrosenfeldart.com/artists/benny-andrews-1930-2006>

<https://studiomuseum.org/collection-item/composition-study-trash>

<https://www.macdowell.org/special-projects/legacy-benny-andrews>



Benny Andrews takes a break from working in Adams Studio in 1974 during one of his four stays at the MacDowell artist residency program. Bernice B. Perry photo courtesy of MacDowell



Benny Andrews  
*Trash*, 1971  
Oil and mixed media collage on canvas  
120 × 336 in.  
The Studio Museum in Harlem; gift of Mr. and Mrs. Stanley Katz,  
New York 1981.14.1a-1