

HYPERALLERGIC

Art [Reviews](#)

What Does It Mean to Really Be Seen?

Perhaps Abraham Lincoln Walker invented these people and the stories that brought them together because he desired the play of recognition between human beings.



Seph Rodney



Abraham Lincoln Walker, "Party Time 1" (1977), oil on canvas (all images courtesy Andrew Edlin gallery)

If dreams were elaborate theatrical productions, what would their trailing wires, the bits that don't make it to the stage, look like? I imagine something like Abraham Lincoln Walker's paintings.

His images are fantastical and phantasmagoric and frequently combine the features of landscape, abstraction, and portraiture, but

are unconcerned with being finely finished. The actual paint formula is unknown, but to my eye seems like a combination of oil intended for canvas, enamel, and perhaps house paint. Walker's lack of care for painterly fine tuning is, of course, a hallmark of naïve painting, which has been of the moment for the last few decades. But too much of this work betrays artists' desire to appear unbothered by artistic etiquette, while too little of it has paid attention to the meanings conveyed by marks. Walker, a Black, self-taught artist who died in 1993 after spending his professional life as a house painter, could have slotted into this zeitgeist easily, but he seemed to be after something else.

I spend a long time looking at his "Girls and Things" (1976). It's almost a portrait, almost a landscape; ultimately, it's a scene with characters in varying hues of teal, turquoise, and olive, against a background of mauve and lavender with some pinkish highlights on the faces of the two main figures at the center of the composition. They draw my attention, given that the male reads as a dandy with his red shirt, light gray vest, and two-tone shoes complementing his green suit, while the female partner facing him looks regally down over her upturned chin and full and rouged lips. A couple other figures nearby appear as Salvador Dalí-esque caricatures, just arms and heads attached to a bit of torso. The anchors to reality are the clothing and placement of the figures, and perhaps most of all, the faces, which indicate that these characters mean to signify Blackness. But move too far down the length of the painting and it turns into a miasma of broken shards. What saves it from complete incoherence is that grounding in the color scheme, which makes the world a definable space, and the figures whose gazes acknowledge each other.



Abraham Lincoln Walker, "Widow's Mite" (1977), oil on board

It's the energy *between* the figures in the majority of the compositions that is curious. Looking at "Widow's Mite" (1977), there is again a comprehensive color scheme, this time brown with gold highlights. Three main figures occupy the foreground. A man who is elevated in the composition looks and points with the only hand that's depicted at the face of a woman opposite him, but it's not clear whether she returns that look, because her face is obscured by a smattering of abstract objects that cause her to appear unseeing. The figure set in the middle between them seems younger and male, and he gazes down and to the left of the painting at nothing identifiable, thus reading as if he is looking inward. A face is embedded in the space between the central adult male figure's shoulder and back with their eyes closed, and another with their eyes downcast appears in the middle of the composition. In most of the other works in the show, except for those that are mostly abstract, there are a plethora of faces, some of which only emerge from the abstract gloaming after some time spent looking.

Why the proliferation of faces in Walker's paintings? It occurs to me that the figures rarely confront the viewer because he didn't expect us to be here. He painted in obscurity for about 30 years and died with a trove of paintings in a garage that his adopted son found years later. Perhaps Walker invented these people and the stories that brought them together because he desired the play of recognition between human beings, even when they only bore human traces. To see each other is a task; it is work. And Walker was steadfast in coming back to that gaze that is about being recognized, though various objects sometimes impede our looking.

Look at "Party Time I" (1977). It's a forest of gazes all contained within the body of the painting, no one looking outside the world Walker created. There are figures on the periphery of a muddled middle and it's not clear what they are doing — huddled around a fire? Convening a jury? In any case, it's that close and always slightly strange human

contact that makes the work feel genuine and reaching. He paints faces because they are where we can gauge that we are seen, that we matter. And I hope that Walker had a sense of that before he passed on.



Abraham Lincoln Walker, "Blue Man's Form" (1978), oil on canvas

Abraham Lincoln Walker continues at Andrew Edlin Gallery (212 Bowery, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through April 12. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.