

Abraham Lincoln Walker

February 22 – April 5, 2025

Andrew Edlin is proud to announce the first NYC gallery exhibition for the late East St. Louis artist Abraham Lincoln Walker (1921-1993). Although Walker participated in a handful of regional group exhibitions during his lifetime, he had little desire to show his art publicly, preferring to work in near-complete solitude in the basement of his East St. Louis home, a few blocks from where Miles Davis grew up.

For most of his adult life, the people in his immediate orbit knew Walker as the owner of a successful house painting business, Lincoln Walker Painting and Decorating Company. Born in Henderson, Kentucky, Walker went to live with his aunt and uncle in East Saint Louis when he was five or six years old and became an inspirational speaker in the Church of God in Christ. He met his wife Dorothy, a social worker, and together they raised two children. Walker's social life sometimes included the local VFW lodge and Pudge's Tavern, and the numerous rathskellers found throughout the city. He painted in the early mornings before work, the evenings after work, and most Saturdays. According to his wife, Walker said, he would have started to paint earlier but 'who had ever heard of a Black Artist?'

Walker's singular approach to painting was fueled both by his lifelong spiritual beliefs and by his personal experiences living in a city that was once a thriving industrial and cultural center but had become roiled by economic and racial tensions, including the 1968 race riots. At some point he became an ordained minister, but by the time he picked up a brush he had stopped attending services and questioned the integrity of various church leaders. While his relationship with organized religion had become conflicted according to his son, "his faith never changed, he always lived in his relationship with the Lord."

Already in his forties, Walker was resolutely self-reliant in his approach to making art. He isn't known to have formally studied art, visited museums or had art books at home, and no extant writings, recordings or interviews with him have surfaced, which leaves the paintings themselves as the best evidence of his rapid artistic trajectory: his street and genre scenes like *Public Aid* (1974), *Daddy's Grave* (1976), *Party Time I* (1977), and *Whatcha See is Whatcha Get* (1977).

The 1970s were pivotal for Walker, his range broadening from intricate narratives in urban settings like *Party Time I* to the surrealist facial distortions and dystopian landscape of *Widow's Mite*, painted the same year. In *Old and New* (1978), he transforms the physical composition of both figures' complexions to resemble decaying vegetation or amphibian flesh — an effect that recalls the portraits of fellow Midwesterner Ivan Albright. Walker's increasing confidence fostered a process of creative improvisation. He seemed to be discovering his figures within the paint itself, revealing ambiguously

rendered faces, bodies, and limbs. His technique encompassed applying paint with a variety of implements, including pieces of wood or plastic that would leave behind a specific texture. Or he would scrape paint away with a palette knife to reveal the gessoed canvas. Walker also deployed his own versions of frottage and decalcomania to heighten his colors' luminosity and the lyricism of his line. By the 1980s he was steadily articulating the mystical visions that would characterize his paintings for the rest of his life. Increasingly fixated on exploring celestial spaces, he layered overlapping fields of color to convey emotional weight and tenacity, as in an untitled painting on paper of a solitary man standing upright in a small fishing boat as a multi-hued sea rages in darkness around him. Even in his most abstract later paintings, it is possible to trace his subject matter back to the deep reservoir of visionary tales he recounted to congregations as a young boy.

— Dan Cameron, February 2025