

Through Memory's Eye

Ages: 8+ (Grades 3–12)

Duration: Open-ended

Materials Needed: Scrap paper; paper and pencil; markers, crayons, or colored pencils.

Inspiration: Benny Andrews (American, 1930–2006). *The Long Rows*, 1966. Oil on canvas. Collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Gift of the Andrews Humphrey Family Foundation, 2012.3.1. On view in *African American Art in the 20th Century*.



Introduction

An autobiography doesn't always take the form of written text. In 1965, artist Benny Andrews, who grew up in Georgia during the 1930s and 40s, began to create a series of autobiographical paintings about the people he knew and the experiences he had as a child. Let's explore one work from this series, *The Long Rows*, to think about memory and perspective, or point of view.

Look

- What's going on in this painting?
- What do you see that makes you say that?
- What more can you find?

Think

- What emotions do you feel when you look at this image?
- Who might this person be?
- Do you think they have a connection to Andrews? Why or why not?
- What is different about this portrait compared to other portraits you've seen?
- What do you notice about the perspective, or point of view, of the work?
- Why did Andrews chose to paint this work from this point of view?

Connect

Benny Andrews left his childhood home in Georgia after graduating from high school. He spent time working in Atlanta, joined the Air Force, and eventually enrolled in art school in Chicago, before moving to New York City in 1958. Andrews received a fellowship in 1966 that allowed him to travel back to Georgia to make art, including this work and others in an autobiographical series. Andrews' paintings tell the stories of the people he lived and worked with during his youth, often sharing a childlike point of view. In *The Long Rows*, we cannot see the figure's face—they appear to be bent over as they hold the hoe and work in the soil. The figure takes up the majority of the middle of the painting and appears to be extremely tall compared to the growing crops. The crops on either side of the figure create a symmetrical frame around them, and the blank blue sky appears to go on forever in the distance.

Do

1. First, think about a memory you have from a younger age that involves another person or group of people. This might be a memory connected to an experience, an event, or a place. Use scrap paper to write down some details you have from this memory, like names, colors, weather, objects, conversation, activities, reasons for being together, etc.
2. Your memory is something that was created at a specific time in your life. How old were you when this memory was formed? What do you remember about yourself at that time? Do you still interact with the people involved? Do you still live in or spend time in the place where it happened?
3. Using a clean sheet of paper, fold it into thirds. (The orientation of your paper is up to you.)
4. Begin to sketch a visual representation of your memory as it exists in your childhood mind in the middle third of your paper. Don't worry about representing the memory exactly as it appeared in real life. Instead, think of the middle as where the main part of the memory should go.
5. In the left and right portions of your paper, frame your memory with key details and objects that were part of this memorable experience with someone else or a group of people. Try to design them in a symmetrical way—the left side should reflect the right side and vice versa.

Reflect

Why do you think Benny Andrews hid the face of the figure in his composition? How did that choice affect how you understood the painting? Why do you think certain details are very clear in your own memories versus others that might seem fuzzy or unclear? Are you able to talk about your memory with the person or any of the people involved today? If so, are they able to provide more details? Do they remember the event, activity, or setting in a different way than you do? You might understand something about the situation differently now that you are older, or perhaps someone gave you more details that changed your understanding of what took place.

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