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New Exhibition Tells the Story of a Lost Roanoke Neighborhood

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David Ramey's colorful illustrations capture life in Roanoke's thriving Black communities of Gainsboro and Northeast before they were razed in the name of "urban renewal." His drawings and stories are on display in a new exhibition, *David Ramey: Gainsboro Road and Beyond*, featured at the Taubman Museum of Art and the Harrison Museum of African American Culture in Roanoke.

With the help of a grant from Virginia Humanities, these two museums co-curated an exhibition that features more than 200 drawings and 150 accompanying stories across the two institutions. They share the artist's youthful memories of the Gainsboro and Northeast communities from the mid-1940s through the late '60s.



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We recently spoke with Charles Price, president of the Harrison Museum of African American Culture, and Dr. Karl Willers, chief curator at the Taubman Museum, to learn more about their collaboration on the exhibition. You can see it at the Harrison Museum of African American Culture and the Taubman Museum in Roanoke through March 31, 2024.

What do you think your audiences will walk away remembering from this exhibit?

Dr. Karl Willers: All audiences, even those who knew David Ramey well during his lifetime, have been amazed at the number of drawings and stories he produced about the Gainsboro neighborhood during the later years of his life. No one, except possibly David Ramey Jr. and a few of the artist's other relatives, realized the significance of David Ramey's overall contribution to American arts and letters.

Charles Price: Our audience will be amazed by how much detail David Ramey was able to remember from memory. He has a unique way of presenting elements that are part of his vision. He shows individuals in a way that is recognizable, yet which still supports his own perspective and vision, and he does so in a way that I have not seen before. People look at his work and they might, for example, recognize and remember the corner store and maybe even recognize the particular person going into the store. That is something I have been really impressed with, his ability to recall every car or person or place down to the tiniest detail.

This exhibition draws from among the more than 700 drawings Ramey created throughout the 1980s through the early 2000s sharing his perspective on his neighborhoods that were razed during “urban renewal” programs in previous decades. Can you give us a peek into some of the insights you had during your curation of these stories and artworks?

Price: Reliving that unfortunate time of urban renewal gave me mixed emotions. It was a time of an uncertain future; what would become of our neighborhoods? Ramey captured what was once such a thriving community and presented it the way it was through his art.



Dumas (detail) by David Ramey, featured in David Ramey: Gainsboro Road and Beyond

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Willers: It was a great honor to work with David Ramey Jr.'s archives of his father's work, and over time was utterly bowled over by both the artistic power and historical importance of what David Ramey had achieved over the years, drawing by drawing and story by story capturing the whole of the Gainsboro neighborhood that he knew as a child and young man.

Since Ramey wrote about a page of text describing each drawing he produced, there was just enough material in the archives to piece together a total of four Gainsboro books: *Times and Life on Henry Street*, two complete but different versions of *Gainsboro Road and Beyond*, and *Gainsboro Going into North East*. In total, the work took on a breadth of encompassing vision as well as a depth of detailed focus that I have never encountered previously, nor do I expect to see again.

What, to you, is the most memorable piece in the exhibition? Why does it speak to you?

Willers: One of the things that became obvious to me when working with the material is the sustained quality of the drawings and accompanying stories. There is never a work that is disappointing, but rather each drawing reveals a new acquaintance or situation encountered in people's lived experiences of Gainsboro, or a different perspective on the streets and alleyways or vistas and neighborhoods of the community.

Despite the brilliance of each drawing and its overwhelming impression of a society and community of great achievement, I am probably most moved by the culminating drawings that depict the actual bulldozing of Henry Street, the loss of Gainsboro, and the destruction of Northeast. Most of Ramey's drawings reveal a community at the height of cultural, social, religious, educational, and economic productivity, and it is a shock within the work itself to encounter the heartbreaking reality that this world of rich cohesion, built over generations, is now lost. It is even more sobering to contemplate the harm done to the many individuals who made that community and still suffer from its demolition.



Nick's by David Ramey, featured in David Ramey: *Gainsboro Road and Beyond*

Price: The most memorable piece for me in this exhibition is the drawing of Kaiser Record Shop because it was a spot where my friends and I would hang out as teens! We would go through what teens today consider the "old" vinyl records. For me, that piece connects to my memories of Gainsboro, and David Ramey captured it perfectly.

Is there anything else you would like to share about the process of developing and curating *David Ramey: Gainsboro Road and Beyond*?

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Henry Street (detail) by David Ramey, featured in David Ramey: Gainsboro Road and Beyond

Willers: I sincerely hope that the exhibition will travel. The destruction of Black neighborhoods at the hands of “urban renewal” projects and similar infrastructure plans is by no means limited to Roanoke. What is unique to Roanoke is the genius and intensity of David Ramey and his remarkable ability to bring to later and future generations both the glories and tragedies of African American lives and experiences.

Price: I would like to add that there are 200 drawings between our two museums, and they represent only a portion of the works David Ramey produced. That in itself is remarkable!