

FORT GANSEVOORT



David Ramey

Some People Call It Progress

An online exhibition

Thursday, September 12, 2024 – Saturday, November 2, 2024

Beginning September 12, 2024, Fort Gansevoort will present *Some People Call It Progress*, a solo online exhibition of the late Roanoke, Virginia-based artist David Ramey. The gallery's first exhibition of Ramey's masterful drawings will be accompanied by a conversation between the artist's son, David Ramey Junior, and Fort Gansevoort. Additionally, this digital presentation will highlight the artist's distinctive narrative voice through excerpts from his abundant writing practice.

David Ramey's art was the subject of the expansive two-part solo exhibition *David Ramey: Gainsboro Road and Beyond*, presented earlier this year at the Taubman Museum of Art and the Harrison Museum of African American Culture in Roanoke, Virginia.

Through detailed drawings and handwritten stories, Ramey dedicated the later years of his life to preserving his memories of the Black community in Roanoke, Virginia as it existed in 1940s, 50s, and 60s. Between 1955-1980, the artist witnessed the destruction of his community as Black residents and businesses in the neighborhoods of Gainsboro and Northeast Roanoke were displaced, and numerous properties were acquired by eminent domain. Ramey's detailed imagery resonates with collective nostalgia for a community lost due to ill-conceived plans for "urban renewal" inherently fueled by racial discrimination.

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Working in his chosen medium of colored pencil, graphite, and ink, rendered on standard sheets of 8 ½ x 11-inch office paper, Ramey's intimate and meticulously rendered drawings reveal his passion for precision and historical accuracy. Those close to the artist attest to his photographic memory. Ramey often inscribed his drawings with two dates: the year the work was conceived, and the year of the scene depicted. This system of dual datation exemplifies Ramey's intuitive process of record keeping and the intrinsic archival nature of his artmaking.

Numerous drawings in the Fort Gansevoort exhibition depict the thriving businesses located on the commercial thoroughfares of Henry Street and Gainsboro Road at the height of economic and social prosperity in Roanoke's Black Community. A drawing depicting Atlantic Sandwich Stand features a neatly rendered brick facade with period-specific advertisements. The artist's clever use of cropping and architectural framing highlights important narrative details and showcases interior and exterior views within the same frame. A group of men in the foreground are positioned in front of the illuminated threshold, as if about to enter. Beyond the trash cans, pictured on the far left of the sandwich shop's exterior, two diminutively rendered men appear in the distance. The crescent moon overhead emphasizes the nocturnal hours of this scene. Visible through the portal of the large front display window, an apron-clad cook flips hotdogs while an eager group of patrons crowd behind the counter to place their orders and enjoy their meals.

Many drawings feature joyful scenes of communal gatherings in Gainsboro's notable entertainment venues. *Harry Franklyn Pool Hall* reflects an atmosphere of camaraderie as a group of men appear engaged in a game of billiards. Here, the artist's use of linear perspective emphasizes the length of the pool table and the articulated wooden floorboards. Ramey's heightened attention to detail highlights the specificity and vividness of the scene. He took care to articulate the quotidian elements of chipping wall plaster and a wallet hanging out of a billiard player's rear pants pocket. A poster hanging on the wall reads "James Brown June 9." This advertisement likely documents a specific concert that the famous musician played in Gainsboro. Listed in the Negro Motorist Green Book, The Dumas Hotel on Henry Street brought significant musical talent to the Gainsboro neighborhood further enriching its thriving culture.

Other drawings in the exhibition reflect the artist's personal experience of working as a train conductor on the Norfolk and Western Railway—one of the most important industries in Roanoke, Virginia. The drawing *Days of Steam Inspection Time on 611* (1993) features a man dressed in overalls and a hardhat standing on a train track while a steam engine approaches behind him. The famous Norfolk and Western 611 train is also affectionately known as the "Spirit of Roanoke." The direct confrontation of the subject's gaze supports the reading of this drawing as a self-portrait. His strong commanding pose communicates the sense of self-worth Ramey obtained by working with his hands—both on the railroad and in his artmaking.

The drawing *Chow Time* (1993) features a long narrow dining car with the roof removed to reveal the action within. Ramey illustrated the surrounding environment of the train yard and silhouetted mountains in the background, simultaneously revealing interior and exterior spaces in a single image. The distinctive black-and-white checkered floor of the dining car anchors the composition as an unexpected visual focal point. Rendered from an aerial perspective, railroad workers are seated at two long communal tables within the dining car. With its unconventional elevated point of view, this drawing creates an atmosphere of voyeurism, as if to suggest the omnipotence of the artist looking down upon the scene. Though more whimsical in its rendering, *Chow Time* evokes a similar tone to the remembered moments documented in Ramey's scenes of life in Gainsboro.

Though his work is not yet widely known, the curated selection of drawings featured in the Fort Gansevoort exhibition will provide a glimpse of David Ramey's larger oeuvre illuminating his stature as a significant visual artist and social documentarian of American history.

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About the artist

*David Ramey (1939 -2017) was a self-taught artist born in Ridgeway, Virginia. In 1949, he relocated to Roanoke, Virginia where he lived and worked for the remainder of his life. From the 1980s until his passing in 2017, he created more than 700 drawings during a nearly 40-year period. As an adult, Ramey worked as a train conductor on the Norfolk and Western Railway. Heavily influenced by watching his father draw in his youth, Ramey took up drawing as a means to visually record humorous events he encountered in his profession. Ramey later focused his artistic attention on documenting everyday life in Roanoke's thriving Black community. In his intimate, meticulously rendered drawing in colored pencil, graphite, and ink on paper, Ramey recalls from memory the people and businesses from the Gainsboro neighborhood in which he grew up. Between 1955-1980, the artist witnessed the destruction of his community as Black residents and businesses in Gainsboro and Northeast Roanoke were displaced, and numerous properties were acquired by eminent domain. Often pairing his drawings with handwritten stories, Ramey's narrative works resonate with collective nostalgia for a community lost in the effort of Urban Renewal. Certain collections of drawings and stories were conceptualized as books, including Ramey's self-published volume *The Times and Life on Henry Street*. David Ramey's art was the subject of the major two-part solo exhibition *David Ramey: Gainsboro Road and Beyond*, presented at Taubman Museum of Arts, Roanoke, VA and the Harrison Museum of African American Culture, Roanoke VA from 2023-2024.*

For sale inquiries please contact:

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Caption and courtesy information:

David Ramey

Untitled

2010

8.5 × 11 inches

Ink graphite and colored pencil on paper

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