

Henry Speller

“That’s all he does, draws and picks that old guitar.”

–Georgia Speller in the *Commercial Appeal*, April 3rd 1979

Tops is excited to announce *Henry Speller* an exhibition of thirteen drawings created in the early to mid 1980’s.

Henry Speller was born in 1903 in Panther Burn, Mississippi and lived in the Mississippi Delta until 1941 when he moved to Memphis. Speller was as well known during his lifetime as a blues musician as he was a visual artist and his cultural foundation was in the pre-war Mississippi Delta environment.

Speller originally exhibited his drawings on the front porch of his house on Butler street a few blocks south of Beale. His earliest known drawings from the late 1970’s were typically of sole figures, objects or buildings drawn on discarded scrap paper, usually the back of computer print-outs. By the mid 1980s Speller was primarily using 18 x 24 inch tablets and the drawings often made use of the entire page. His figures began to be joined with other figures or structures and the backgrounds were more often brightly colored or obsessively gridded. Speller’s drawings of buildings became more abstracted cubist-like depictions of labyrinthian constructions enveloping the page. If his form became more expansive his subjects remained consistent; the world around him: people, riverboats, trains, planes, cars, guns, guitars, churches, houses and animals.

Most of the drawings in this exhibition are figurative. Speller’s people confront the viewer directly. They are all smiling, some manically. The figures seem to be performing or posing for the viewer. The depictions of nudity, fetishized anatomy and self-pleasure breach decorum in a knowingly comical and exuberant way. Even in their various states of undress they are dressed up. Speller’s figures are ready to have fun.

Speller explained to the collector and scholar Bill Arnett, his reason for drawing was that “They just console me when I’m back here by myself.” Towards the end of a life that was, by his own account, marked by deprivation, to have this creative flowering must have seemed like a gift or consolation. Henry Speller rendered a world of excitement, mystery, and fun; a world that he transfigured through art and music.

TOPS

Tops has previously featured Henry Speller's work in our 2017 show *Drawings and Song*, which also featured the drawings of Georgia Speller and Coy Love. Tops also produced an edition of 50 vinyl records featuring a home recording of the trio by collector and archivist Jerry Pevahouse in 1978 for *Drawings and Song*. In 2019 we organized Henry Speller: *Mother Wit*, a solo exhibition of Henry Speller's drawing, at Institute 193 (1B) in New York

Henry Speller's work has recently been exhibited in *Called to Create: Black Artists of the American South*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. in 2022-23 *Souls Grown Deep like the Rivers*, *Royal Academy of Arts*, London, UK in 2023 *Another Tradition: Drawings by Black Artists from the American South*, The Morgan Library, NY, NY in 2021-22

Other important exhibitions include *When the Stars Begin to Fall: Imagination and the American South*, The Studio Museum in Harlem in 2014 and *Southern Folk Images, David Butler, Henry Speller, Bill Traylor*, Fine Arts Gallery, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, LA; travelled to Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, Memphis, TN in 1978.

Henry Speller's work is in many museum collections including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY, NY. The Studio Museum in Harlem, NY, NY. The Morgan Library & Museum, NY, NY. The American Folk Art Museum, NY, NY. The Brooklyn Museum, NY, NY. The Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC, The High Museum, Atlanta, GA. and The National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.