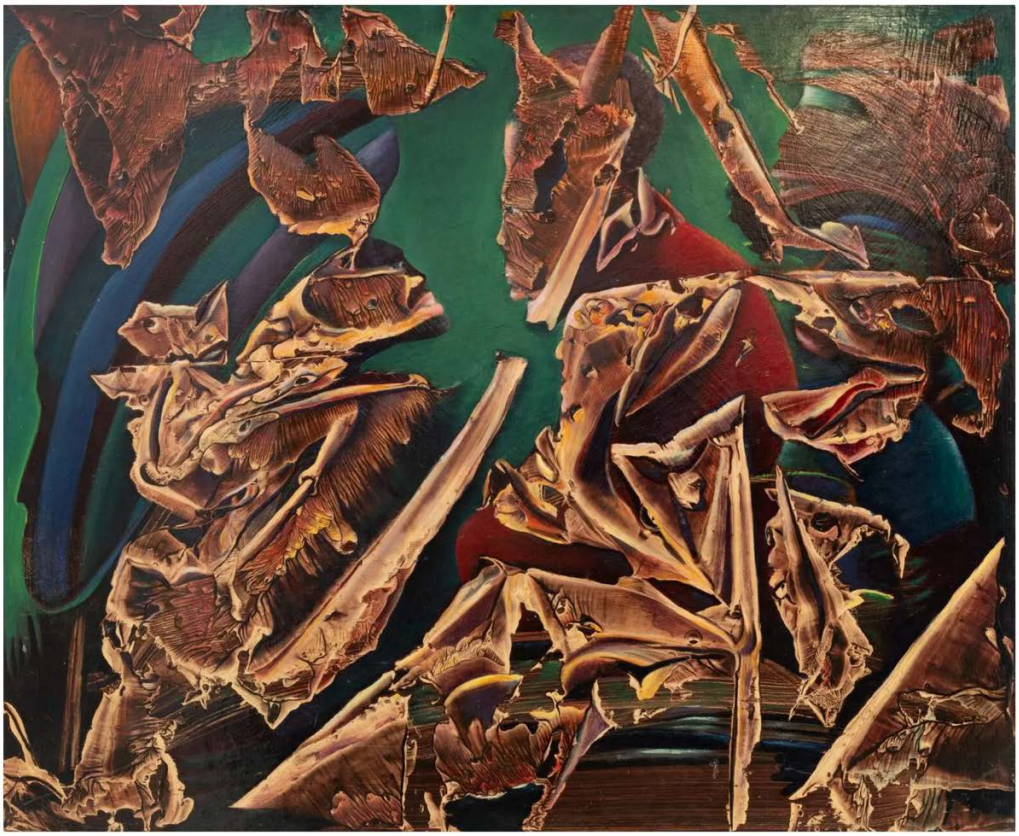
The New York Times

Visionary Artworks Plumb the Mysteries of Creativity

The self-taught artist Abraham Lincoln Walker worked in his basement on phantasmagorical paintings, discovered by the art world more than 30 years after his death.



Abraham Lincoln Walker (1921-93), "Untitled," 1987 oil on board. Walker's art was rarely shown during his lifetime, but a push by his son and a couple of art dealers is bringing it into public view. via Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York

By Hilarie M. Sheets

Feb. 15, 2025, 5:00 a.m. ET

Scott Kerr, a fifth-generation art dealer in St. Louis, didn't know what to expect last year as he was crossing the Mississippi River into East St. Louis, a once vibrant city in Illinois with a large Black population that never recovered economically after the civil unrest of the 1960s.

Kerr was responding to an unsolicited email from a man named Lincoln Walker, who was hoping to get an appraisal of paintings by his father, Abraham Lincoln Walker, a house painter by trade who died in 1993. He had spent his spare hours during his last three decades in his basement, consumed with making art.

The younger Walker, 62, an auto mechanic who goes by Link, guided Kerr to a tractor-trailer on his property. There, he opened up the back doors to reveal a trove of more than 800 artworks filling racks and stacked deep on the floor.

“I was just mesmerized by what I saw,” Kerr said of the dark, phantasmagoric paintings, many with abstracted faces and forms materializing out of flowing evanescent brushstrokes and textured surfaces. “As soon as I looked at it, I was very confident that this was a major body of work.”

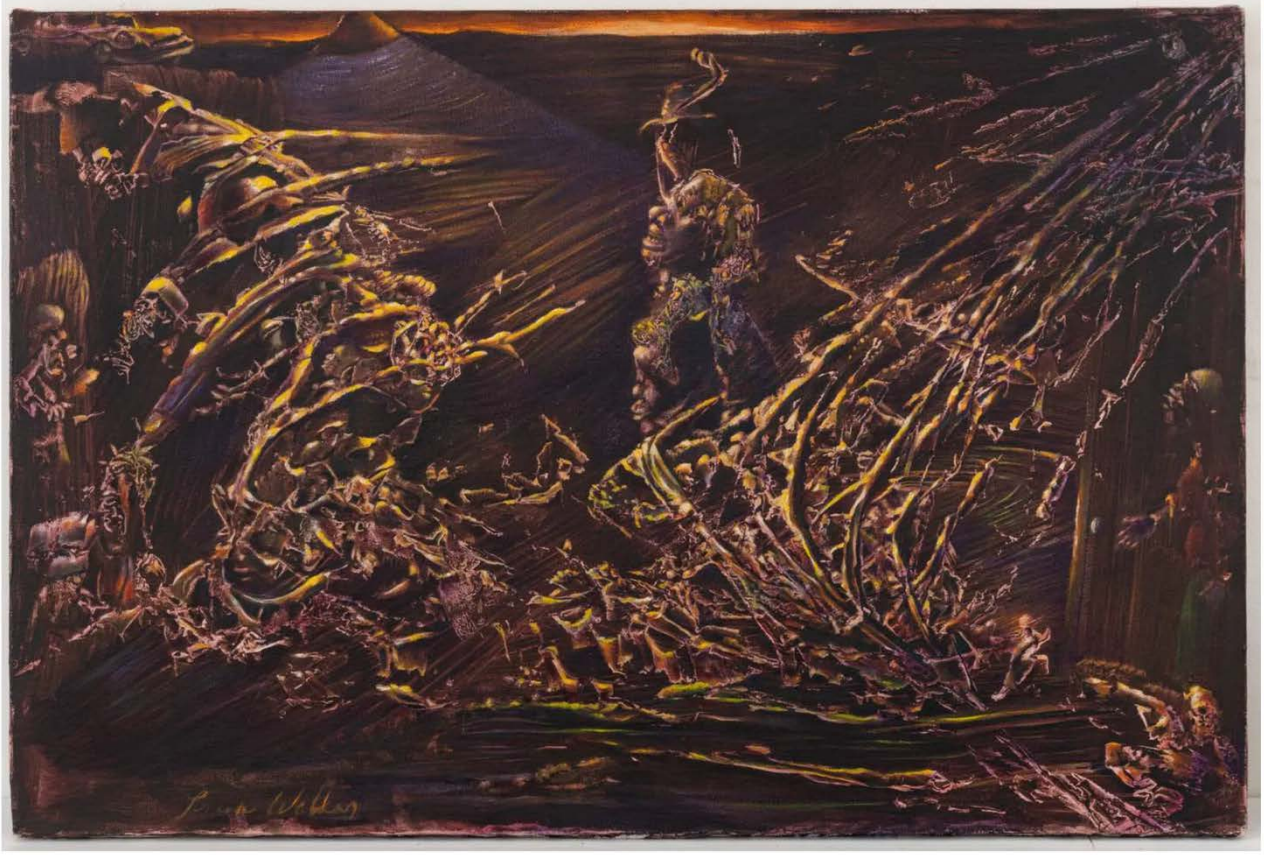
Link Walker, Lincoln Walker’s son, stands in front of his family’s former home in East St. Louis, Ill. Bryan Birks for The New York Times

So far, many in the art world seem to concur.

Last November, at the Art Dealers Association of America's Art Show in New York, Andrew Edlin, a specialist in self-taught artists, organized a presentation of Walker's work. (Kerr, whose gallery McCaughen & Burr, now represents Walker's estate, has teamed up with Edlin.)

Edlin's booth sold out, he said, with paintings bought by prominent collectors including Beth Rudin DeWoody, founder of the Bunker Artspace in West Palm Beach, Fla.; the New Museum board president, James Keith Brown; and the artist Brian Donnelly (a.k.a. KAWS).

Walker's first solo New York gallery show opens Feb. 22 at the Andrew Edlin Gallery, with about two dozen paintings priced from $10,000 to $85,000. Several more works by the artist will be at the Outsider Art Fair, which Edlin owns, from Feb. 27 to March 2 at the Metropolitan Pavilion in Manhattan.



Abraham Lincoln Walker, "Untitled," 1980, oil on canvas. via Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York

During a preview of Walker's paintings at his gallery, Edlin described one untitled 1980 canvas as a cross between the work of the Surrealist Max Ernst and the Romantic painter and poet William Blake. "I don't know if that's hell or purgatory," Edlin said.

He believes that Walker must have looked at other artists as he was teaching himself to paint, comparing some of his neighborhood scenes of Black life to expressive figurative painters such as Benny Andrews and Ernie Barnes, and Walker's more desolate landscapes to Surrealists like Giorgio de Chirico and Salvador Dalí. Yet Walker's influences remain largely unknown.

"There's this inherent mystery about the work of a lot of 'outsider' artists that get discovered posthumously because they didn't necessarily write or talk about it and aren't around to tell people about it," Edlin said. He noted that it's typical for someone other than the artist to get such work into the public eye, citing the stories of two acclaimed self-taught artists. Henry Darger's landlord rescued his work and Martín Ramírez's psychiatrist shared his.

Edlin acknowledged that the term "outsider art" is controversial, with many in the art world rejecting the differentiation between trained and untrained artists. "The nomenclature is very loaded politically," said Maxwell Anderson, president of the Souls Grown Deep foundation, which promotes Black artists from the American South. "When you look at our website, you won't find the following phrases: 'self-taught,' 'outsider,' 'vernacular.' We just want it to be seen as art."

But Edlin believes that the outsider art category does have a distinct culture.

Such artists working hermetically "don't have career aspiration, it's just not part of the equation," Edlin said. "I've always felt like there's something to being un-self-conscious that is liberating in the creative process. They're creating their own worlds."

Walker certainly never sought attention for his paintings.

“He never cared if anybody ever saw one of them; that was just not his thing,” said Link, who was adopted by Walker and his wife, Dorothy, as an infant and inherited his father’s work when his mother died in 2013. Link said he carefully stored the paintings for years, but after he almost died during the coronavirus pandemic, he decided it was time to do something with them. He said he sent inquiries out to the art world, and Kerr was the only one to respond.

“My mom wanted to get his paintings out there,” Link said. “We all knew how good he was. I want to make his name great.”

An undated photo of Abraham Lincoln Walker and his wife, Dorothy. via Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York

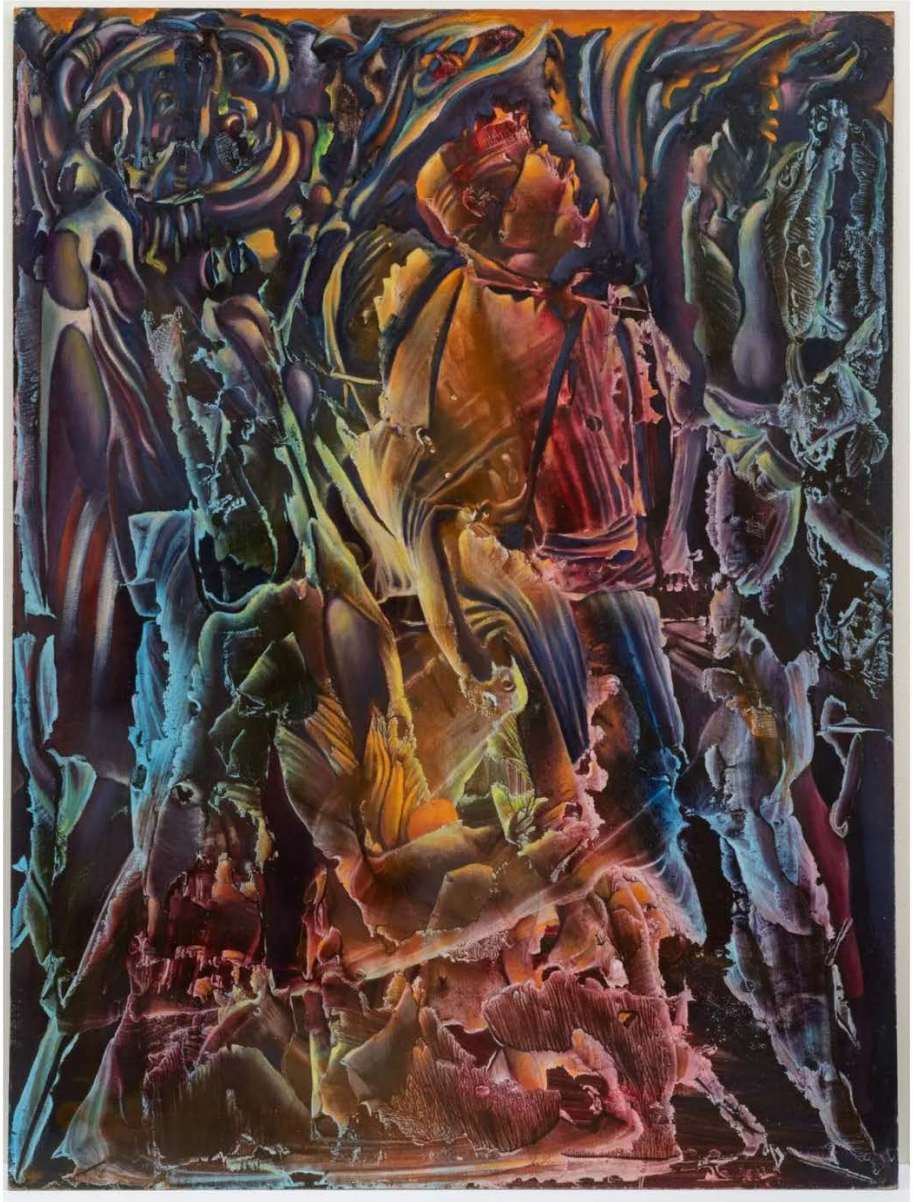
Dorothy Walker, who was a social worker, had some of her husband's paintings exhibited at a street fair and at a local gallery in the mid-1970s — and, according to Link, would yell at her husband when he didn't show up for these events. In 1995, with the help of Lou Brock, a baseball Hall-of-Famer whose wife was close to Dorothy through their church, she got Walker a posthumous retrospective at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

A 1995 article in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch about the exhibition noted that Dorothy showed some of her husband's paintings in 1974 in Seattle, where they were critiqued by Jacob Lawrence, arguably the most famous Black artist at that time. (Link said an uncle on his mother's side was a professor at the University of Washington, where Lawrence taught, but doesn't know if his father ever met Lawrence.) There was also a 2013 show of Walker's work at 10th Street Gallery, in St. Louis, Mo.

Born in 1921 in Henderson, Ky., Abraham Lincoln Walker moved in his youth to live with his aunt and uncle in East St. Louis, which was once home to creative luminaries including Josephine Baker, Ike and Tina Turner, and Katherine Dunham. In the 1995 article, Dorothy said that as a child, her husband had been an evangelical inspirational speaker at the Church of God in Christ in Mounds, Ill. Link said he could remember his father going to church only once.

"But he was real religious," Link said. "I'd come downstairs, he'd be on his knees praying. Some of his paintings might be what he pictured as the afterworld, as hell or heaven."

Walker had a thriving house-painting and wallpapering business, and first tried making art in the early 1960s, when Dorothy asked him to bring home a catalog of murals. When she selected a tree with apple blossoms to hang over the living room couch, Walker balked at the $25 price, instead painting the image himself.



Abraham Lincoln Walker, "Untitled," 1986, oil on board. via Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York

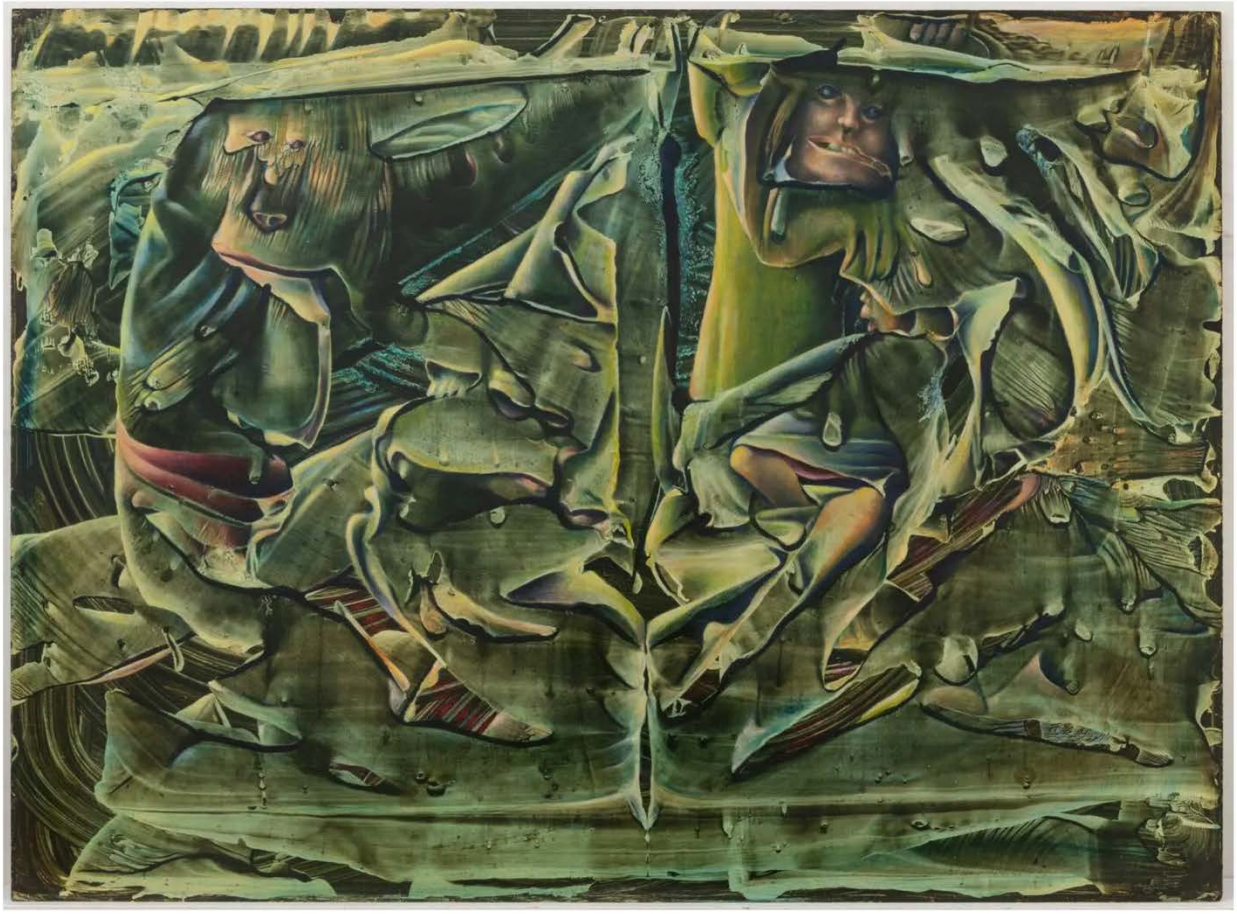
"He had the ability to look at something and duplicate it, if he wanted to," Link said. He would play in the basement while his father painted before and after work and all weekend long, listening to Bill Cosby on 8-track or jazz albums by Count Basie or Miles Davis, a contemporary of Walker's who was also raised in East St. Louis, just blocks from the Walkers' home. On lunch breaks from work, Walker would drive around the neighborhood with his sketch pad, often drawing one of the abandoned burned-out houses there.

Link said that his father never went to an art museum, though he did keep the family's set of encyclopedias in his work space — a possible source for early works from the 1960s, where Walker was learning the fundamentals of anatomy and composition and experimenting with styles such as Cubism.

By the 1970s, Walker had developed his own moody palette and dystopian style of painting narratives unfolding around him. These scenes became increasingly psychedelic and abstract in the 1980s, in works where he moved paint across his canvases in huge swaths. Link said he used putty knives, all kinds of brushes, newspaper, plastic wrappers — whatever was at hand.

An undated self-portrait of Walker. via Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York

Walker quit smoking and drinking after the sudden death of a close friend, Link said, and subsisted mainly on juiced vegetables for the last 15 years of his life. According to his wife's account, Walker would fast periodically, and then would have visions.



Abraham Lincoln Walker, "Untitled," 1981, oil on board. "My favorite of his paintings have abstracted human forms emerging from almost geologic matter, like continents breaking apart and something very cosmic," said Katherine Jentleson, a curator at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta. via Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York

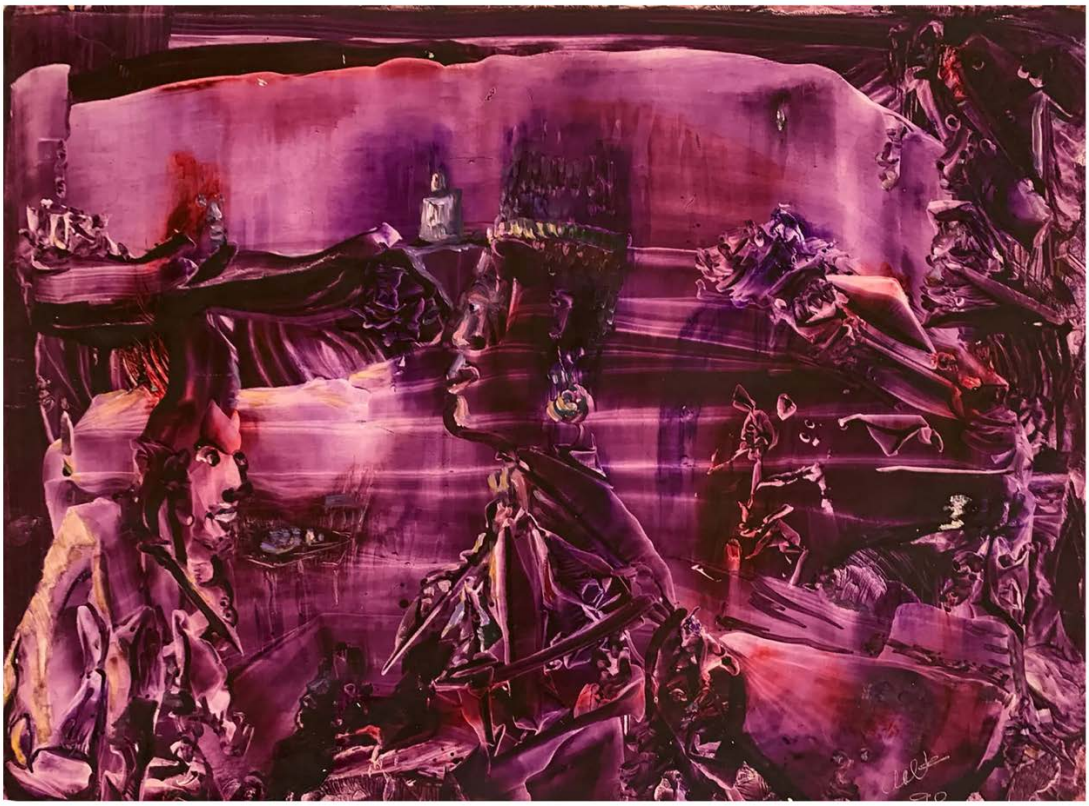
"As he progresses more to abstraction, I think he's referencing a response to a spirit world," Kerr said. "From three feet away you would think a painting is a complete abstraction, until you get up on it and there are just a thousand different faces in the work."

Massimiliano Gioni, artistic director at the New Museum, said he was struck by how Walker used "frottage," a technique of rubbing a textured surface and teasing out imagery within the pattern. It has a long history in art, most famously with the Surrealists, including Ernst, who said he was inspired by Leonardo da Vinci.

"Did Walker just develop it on his own? Maybe. Did he learn it? Probably," Gioni said. "With the great self-taught artists, you are always confronted

with this strange phenomenon that they had a knowledge of art and techniques. It suggests they were certainly less isolated than we think."

Beth Marcus, who lives in Boston and collects contemporary and self-taught artists, bought two Walker works in November. What really interested her were the large brushstrokes in his later works that looked like they had been applied with house painting tools. "It reminded me of Gerhard Richter and Ed Clark," she said, "who used squeegees in their work."



Abraham Lincoln Walker, "Untitled," oil on paper. via Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York

Walker's relationship with reality and fantasy fascinates Katherine Jentleson, senior curator of American art and curator of folk and self-taught art at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta. "My favorite of his paintings have abstracted human forms emerging from almost geologic matter, like continents breaking apart and something very cosmic," she

said. Jentleson has committed to acquiring at least one painting for the High Museum from Walker's exhibition at Edlin.

While a lot self-taught artists she exhibits had exposure to canonical art, whether through museums or magazines or television, she said that in terms of scholarship, "I think we have to be more broad in what we think of as being relevant influence on their art."

Many experiences in Walker's life could have had "an interesting bearing on the lyrical quality of his brushstrokes or otherworldly realms he appears to be dipping into," Jentleson said. "Very rarely is an artist, especially in the latter half of the 20th century, truly going to be outside of culture, in the way that Jean Dubuffet imagined." Dubuffet was the midcentury French artist who promoted the idea of "art brut" as pure, naïve talent.

For Donnelly, the artist who bought five of Walker's paintings, the works can stand on their own visual power without connecting all the art historical and biographical dots. "I love learning about artists," he said, "but there's so much there in the painting, it's nice not to have it all laid out for you."