

Abraham Lincoln Walker

Born 1921, Henderson, KY; died 1993, East St. Louis, IL.

Abraham Lincoln Walker was born in Henderson, Kentucky and moved to East St. Louis, Illinois at the age of seven. Through his early years and much of his adult life, the city was a thriving industrial and creative center, home to many artistic talents, among them, Josephine Baker, Tina Turner, Redd Foxx, Dick Gregory, Katherine Dunham, who founded the Performing Arts Training Center there, and Miles Davis, who lived just around the corner from the artist's house on Kansas Avenue.

A house painter by trade, Walker, like many self-taught artists, started out by imitating painting styles and making reproductions, working to understand basic palette and composition techniques. He leaned towards representational depictions of the neighborhood, his canvases bursting with odes to Black culture —bright colors and brushstrokes that moved with the syncopation and groove of jazz.

Much of Walker's work from the late 1960s through early 1970s features elongated and masked figures displaying ambiguous relationships and gestures, situated in desolate landscapes. His deeply affective dystopic visions vacillate between the world outside his studio, the biblical world deeply rooted in his upbringing, and, increasingly, a world of his own making. In many of his paintings from the 1970s onward, his figures become fragmented and distorted, overwhelmed by a visionary, celestial space in which faces, limbs, and other barely identified human forms are entangled in the fibrous tentacles of a living world, but fully capable of communicating their psychic bearing.

Well-ensconced in the creative community of East St. Louis, Walker participated in a handful of regional exhibitions, but he nevertheless remained somewhat aloof and enigmatic throughout his life.