

JOSEPH E. YOAKUM
WHAT I SAW



mt Raykal of Yablonny mtn Range
near Ulan-Ude near Lake Baykal,
of Lower Siberia Russia & Asia
by Joseph E. Yaxum 8/14-69

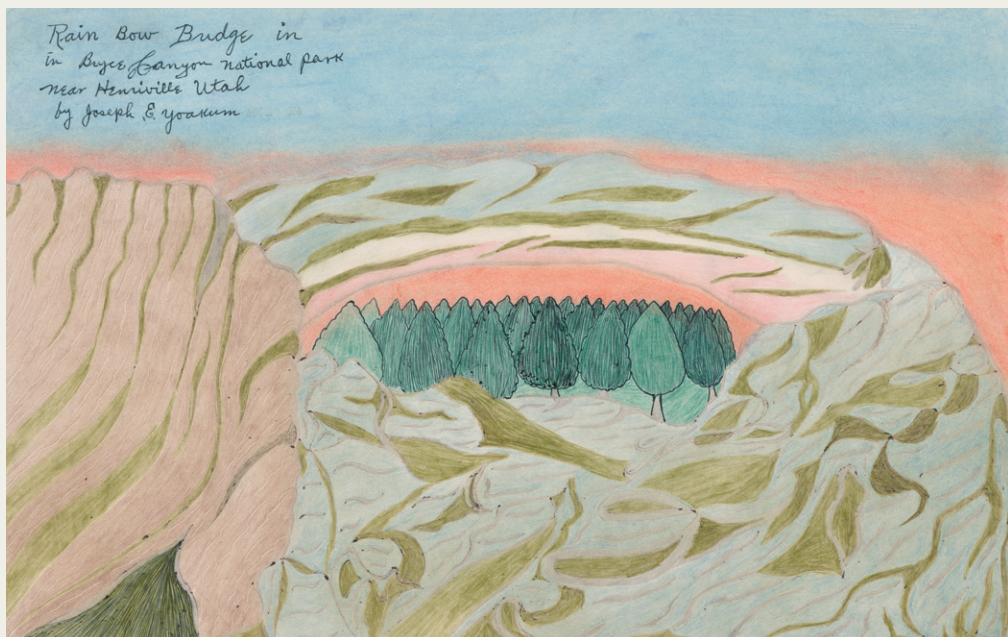


Joseph E. Yoakum (1891–1972) had no formal art training when he began drawing landscapes in 1962 at age 71. Born in the Jim Crow South, he left home as a boy to work for several circuses and later served in France during World War I. His extensive travels around the world formed foundational memories that he would return to and filter through his deep religious faith as a Christian Scientist. Using mostly inexpensive papers and readily available materials—at first pencil and ballpoint pen, and later colored pencil and pastel—he drew on a daily basis until his death in 1972.

From his storefront studio on Chicago's South Side, Yoakum created images that feature recognizable landmarks and terrains as well as lesser-known places; they are titled with long and specific—though not always accurate—place names. Generally devoid of people or any trace of their existence, the drawings display the majesty of the earth. Yoakum insisted that he based every one of his landscapes on his first-hand experiences of actual places, that he was driven by a self-declared wanderlust: "I had it in my mind that I wanted to go to different places at different times. Wherever my mind led me, I would go. I've been all over this world four times." Most of his drawings represent North American locations, but he claimed to have visited all the continents (except Antarctica, which he nonetheless represented), where he would have been exposed to some of the most dramatic landscapes on earth. While his drawings may echo the external world, they provide little evidence of being grounded in observed topographical realities. As a critic put it, "One does not question their accuracy, just as one would not question the tall tales of a spellbinding storyteller." Instead, they invite us to suspend disbelief in that they seem to function largely, but not entirely, as dreamscapes, where his memories and visions of places merged.

Another hallmark of Yoakum's approach to landscape is his sense of space, which is complex, indeterminate, and deeply ambiguous. He was fascinated with flatness and patterns. Yoakum dispensed with such conventions as cast shadows and the rules of perspective, and so the geological and vegetal forms in his landscapes—bodies of water, mountains

LEFT *Mt Baykal of Yablonvy Mtn Range near Ulan-Ude near Lake Baykal of Lower Siberia Russia E Asia, 1969.* Blue felt-tip pen, blue fountain pen, purple ballpoint pen, and pastel on paper, 18 7/8 × 12 1/8 in. (48 × 30.9 cm). The Art Institute of Chicago, Anonymous gift



TOP *Waianae Mtn Range Entrance to Pearl Harbor and Honolulu Oahu of Hawaiian Islands*, stamped 1968. Blue felt-tip pen, blue ballpoint pen, pastel, and colored pencil on paper, 12 × 19 1/8 in. (30.5 × 48.4 cm). Collection of Christina Ramberg and Phil Hanson

BOTTOM *Rain Bow Bridge in in Bryce Canyon National Park near Henrieville Utah*, stamped 1968. Brown ballpoint pen, blue ballpoint pen, pastel, and colored pencil on paper, 12 1/4 × 19 1/8 in. (31 × 48.5 cm). Collection of the Roger Brown Study Collection

and rock formations, clusters of trees—are not securely defined beyond the picture plane; in a dynamic movement of push and pull, they often seem to shift in their relative positions. Yoakum's landscapes refuse to cohere spatially: they are compositionally complex and ever-shifting, but also energized, fascinating to the eye and to the mind.

Many of Yoakum's views have hidden anthropomorphic or biomorphic imagery. In some examples, rock formations or mountains evoke the shape of giant heads. Landforms thus turn into bodies, coming to life. In other cases, however, it is less clear if the artist meant to suggest something or if we, as viewers, are merely projecting recognizable forms onto the paper. Yoakum never confirmed his intentions in this regard. He preferred, instead, to maintain a sense of mystery. However elusive the artist's statements may be, a biomorphic quality is undoubtedly present in Yoakum's work: it further complicates his pictures, giving them an enigmatic and paradoxical dimension that surprises viewers and requires them to readjust their gaze.

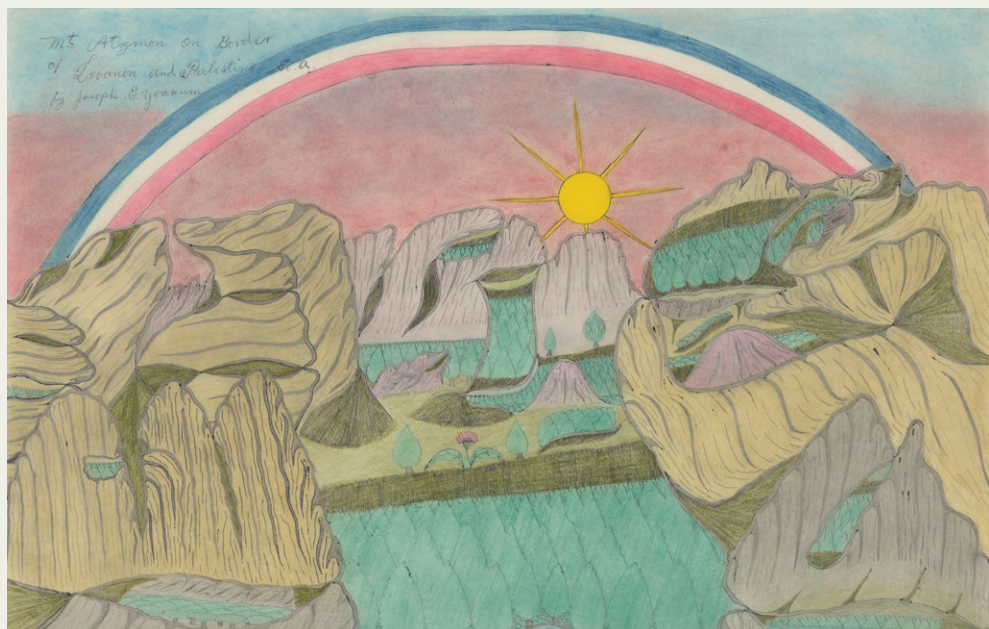
Yoakum's landscapes almost always bear inscriptions (which today serve as titles) that the artist laboriously and prominently added in ballpoint pen; the locations were revealed to him in a process of "spiritual unfoldment." His inscriptions became more detailed and elaborate over the course of his career, as if they were meant to ground his fantastic compositions or to reconnect their imaginative excess with the real world. That oscillation between the real and the imagined becomes especially pronounced in landscapes that have little or no resemblance to the places they claim to represent. Without titles, there is no such tension; their effect on Yoakum's landscapes is therefore crucial.

With a dual heritage—both African American and Native American—and having been born in Missouri before traveling the world and settling in Chicago, Yoakum was culturally adrift. His self-identity reflected both his own complex racial background and the fluid nature of race in America over his lifetime. Drawing landscapes

let him reconnect with his past with a sense of place and spiritual belonging. Additionally, Yoakum's portraits, a smaller subset of his oeuvre, typically depict celebrated figures in the African American community such as actors, athletes, and performers, as well as Native Americans. Most of them are cropped at the bustline, either in profile or in full-frontal poses, a convention he may have borrowed from the advertisements and stock photographs that he sometimes traced.

Generally executed in blue or black ballpoint pen and sometimes in fiber-tipped pen, his line work is deliberate and intricate. It exudes energy and movement while also generating a strong sense of structure through a set repertoire of marks that he combined and recombined ad infinitum. Because he reveled in the invention and elaboration of rich formal patterns—reminiscent of organic and mineral shapes—within those outlined areas, Yoakum's compositions tend to be carefully compartmentalized in cell-like structures, each section containing its own stylized design. Although Yoakum began drawing primarily monochromatic works in pen and graphite pencil, he soon started experimenting with color, which he employed liberally, typically covering the whole sheet. Yet it seems to have always come second in the sequence of his creative process. The essence of his pictures comes through in lines more than in color, though the latter became an integral part of his mature aesthetic.

Following an itinerant life, Yoakum ultimately turned inward, where through drawing he seems to have made an attempt at a spiritual homecoming. Bringing his prolific imagination to paper, he opened up a whole new world, one that fuses inner and outer landscapes and blends both imagined and real topographies. Instead of focusing on the peculiarities of specific sites, he stressed the unity and cohesiveness of the earth as a living organism through his own stylistic framework. His resulting graphic landscapes offer a version of the world that is intensified, reconfigured, and defamiliarized.



TOP Chorro Valley San Luis Obispo County Paso Robles California, n.d. Black ballpoint pen, black fountain pen, and watercolor on paper, 9 $\frac{7}{8}$ \times 7 $\frac{7}{8}$ in. (25.3 \times 20.1 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston, Anonymous gift

BOTTOM Mt Atzmon on Border of Lebanon and Palestine SE. A., stamped 1968. Purple and black ballpoint pen, pastel, and colored pencil on paper, 19 $\frac{1}{8}$ \times 24 $\frac{1}{8}$ in. (48.4 \times 61.2 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston, Anonymous gift

Joseph E. Yoakum: What I Saw is organized by Edouard Kopp, John R. Eckel, Jr. Foundation Chief Curator, Menil Drawing Institute; Mark Pascale, Janet and Craig Duchossois Curator of Prints and Drawings, The Art Institute of Chicago; and Esther Adler, Curator, Department of Drawings and Prints, The Museum of Modern Art.

This exhibition is generously supported by Cecily E. Horton; Leah Bennett; Diane and Michael Cannon; Hilda Curran; Cindy and David Fitch; Barbara and Michael Gamson; Janet and Paul Hobby; Caroline Huber; Mary Hale Lovett McLean; John and Stephanie Smither Visionary Art Fund; James William Stewart, Jr.; Nina and Michael Zilkha; Alice Kleberg Reynolds Foundation; and the City of Houston through Houston Arts Alliance.

PUBLIC PROGRAMS

All programs will be held at the Menil Drawing Institute unless otherwise indicated.

IN CONVERSATION

Esther Adler and Anthony Pinn on the Spiritual Landscapes of Joseph E. Yoakum
Wednesday, April 27, 7 p.m.

LECTURE

Leslie Umberger on Joseph E. Yoakum and Self-Taught Artists
Thursday, June 2, 7 p.m.

CURATOR TALK

Edouard Kopp on Joseph E. Yoakum
Sunday, June 12, 3 p.m.

IN CONVERSATION

Pete Gershon and Edouard Kopp on Visionary Art in Houston
Thursday, June 23, 7 p.m.

WRITING WORKSHOP

Inprint "Writing Workout" with *Joseph E. Yoakum: What I Saw*
Saturday, July 16, 11 a.m.

All public programs are free and open to everyone.
Please check menil.org/events for more information.

Menil members enjoy additional events.
To join and learn more, please visit menil.org/support.

Exhibition Dates
April 22–August 7, 2022

Menil Drawing Institute
The Menil Collection

COVER *Grizzly Gulch Valley Ohansburg Vermont*
(detail), n.d. Black ballpoint pen and watercolor on paper, 7 7/8 × 9 7/8 in. (20 × 25.1 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the Raymond K. Yoshida Living Trust and Kohler Foundation, Inc., 2013