

# The Museum of Modern Art

## MoMA PRESENTS *JOSEPH YOAKUM: WHAT I SAW*, THE ARTIST'S FIRST MAJOR MUSEUM EXHIBITION IN OVER 25 YEARS

### Exhibition Brings Together Over 100 Drawings, Highlighting Yoakum's Prolific Career and Unique Visual Language

#### *Joseph E. Yoakum: What I Saw*

November 21, 2021- March 19, 2022

Floor 2, 2 South

**NEW YORK, MAY 11, 2021** — The Museum of Modern Art presents *Joseph Yoakum: What I Saw*, the first major museum exhibition of the artist's work in over 25 years, on view at MoMA from November 21, 2021, through March 19, 2022. At age 71, Joseph Yoakum (1891–1972) began making idiosyncratic, poetic landscape drawings of the places he had traveled over the course of his life, creating some 2,000 extraordinary works that bear little resemblance to the world we know. This exhibition is comprised of over 100 of those works, predominantly from the collections of the artists in Chicago who knew him and admired and supported his work. *Joseph Yoakum: What I Saw* is organized by Esther Adler, Associate Curator, Department of Drawings and Prints, MoMA; Mark Pascale, Janet and Craig Duchossois Curator of Prints and Drawings, The Art Institute of Chicago; and Édouard Kopp, John R. Eckel, Jr. Foundation Chief Curator, Menil Drawing Institute, Houston. The exhibition will be on view at the Art Institute of Chicago from June 12 through Oct 18, 2021, and following its MoMA presentation it will travel to the Menil Collection, Houston, where it will be on view from April 22 through August 7, 2022.

Yoakum was born in Ash Grove, Missouri (despite his own later claim that Window Rock, Arizona, was his birthplace) just 25 years after the end of the Civil War. He left home as a child to work with several popular traveling circuses, and this took him across the United States and abroad, as did his service in an all-African American noncombat unit in Europe during World War I. Yoakum's familiarity with far-flung landscapes, then, was real; he claimed to have visited every continent except Antarctica. These travels, paired with a worldview informed by religious faith and the tenets of Christian Science, shaped his artistic vision. "Wherever my mind led me, I would go," Yoakum once said. "I've been all over this world four times."

When Yoakum began making work regularly, in the early 1960s, mostly from his storefront studio and home on Chicago's South Side, he quickly developed a signature visual language that has fascinated viewers since. Drawn from memories both real and imagined, Yoakum's landscapes reveal a living world dense with swelling land forms, serpentine empty roads, and ever-green foliage—and almost always emptied of people. Though he was insistent that they were drawn from life, the works more clearly reflect Yoakum's belief in the visibility of

God's hand in the natural world, as much as they do his life experience as a man of color in the United States over the course of the 20th century. His drawings, mostly labeled with detailed descriptions and signed prominently by the artist, allowed him to transcend the boundaries and limitations that he was forced to navigate, both as a result of his skin color and because of his advancing age.

Beyond natural terrain, Yoakum also documented events like major naval voyages and UFO sightings, and represented notable figures of African American history and culture in his lesser-known series of portrait drawings, also included in this exhibition. A series of sketchbooks made at the very end of his life, when he was confined to a nursing home, contain drawings that push further into abstraction than any prior works, and will also be on view.

Yoakum was deeply admired by a younger generation of Chicago-based artists, and their teachers at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, who were inspired by the singularity of his work. Among those who became avid supporters, collectors, and friends were Roger Brown, Cynthia Carlson, Whitney Halstead, Gladys Nilsson and Jim Nutt, Christina Ramberg and Philip Hanson, Karl Wirsum and Lorri Gunn, and Ray Yoshida, who helped promote Yoakum's work during and after his lifetime. They are largely responsible for what we know about the man and his work today, and many of the drawings included in *Joseph Yoakum: What I Saw* are drawn from their private collections, as well from as their gifts to museums. While Yoakum's artistic life was firmly rooted in Chicago, MoMA was the first New York institution to exhibit his work, in May 1971, and most of the drawings that are now in MoMA's collection were previously owned by Yoshida.

The exhibition is accompanied by a richly illustrated catalogue, the first museum publication dedicated to new scholarship on the artist. In addition to a close examination of the artist's compelling formal and compositional strategies, as well as the roles religion and race played in his claiming of the landscape as his subject matter, the catalogue provides the most accurate timeline of Yoakum's life and career, with reflections on his connections in Chicago and the significance of his influence on other artists working there. It also includes new research into his false claims of Navajo heritage, as well as his technical methods and materials.

**SPONSORSHIP:**

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