

The artist at work

Yoakum's earliest drawings, which were executed in pencil and ballpoint pen, demonstrate the artist's unique graphic style. Ignoring the rules of one-point perspective, he drew doubled outlines, hatch marks, and rows of identical trees to delineate space. Eventually, he began to add color to his drawings—first with watercolor and later with colored pencil or pastel—which he would buff with toilet paper to create a softening effect.

Yoakum generally labeled his works with the locations they depicted; these inscriptions became more detailed and elaborate over the course of his career. Some drawings he dated by hand, while others he marked with a date stamp. Anecdotes from artists who were close to Yoakum suggest that he was not particularly concerned about the accuracy of these dates. Rather, Yoakum's main focus seemed to be his experience of these landscapes, which he visited in person as a young man and would return to in memory throughout his life.

Shaping the natural world

Having traveled widely and experienced the richness of the earth firsthand, Yoakum favored the natural world as his most dominant subject. On the rare occasions that he inserted built structures into his landscapes, they appear out of place. Homes are small and squeezed into pockets of space between soaring peaks or relegated to a corner. Developments and suburbs seem dropped from outer space, unnaturally forced onto flowing landforms.

Though the artist spent the final decade of his life working in an urban area of Chicago, he never depicted that gridded city landscape. Drawing buildings involved working with a ruler, a tool that Yoakum often rejected because it slowed him down, thus preventing him from fully realizing “the talents God gave him,” as he once told an artist friend.

Yoakum's shifting self-identity

Yoakum had a complex relationship with his mixed African, European, and possibly Native American heritage. When others identified him as Black, he often responded by saying he was Navajo (which he pronounced “Nava-joe,” in a wry reference to his first name)—a claim no biographical evidence supports. His family did, however, have roots in Cherokee territory, leaving open the possibility that the artist was of Indigenous descent.

The artist’s attempts to rewrite his personal narrative suggest that he was conscious of the ways race shaped how he and his work were perceived. This awareness might have informed his portraits of African American performers and athletes, whom he often depicted as white, although his exact reasons for doing so are unknown. Similarly puzzling is his use of stereotypical imagery in his portraits of Native American figures, which indicate a lack of understanding of a culture with which he purportedly shared a connection.