

Highwaymen

13 July – 13 August 2021

Charles Moffett

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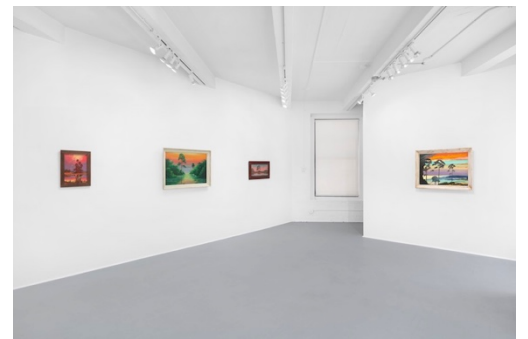
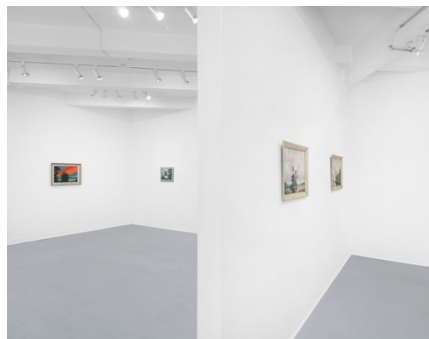
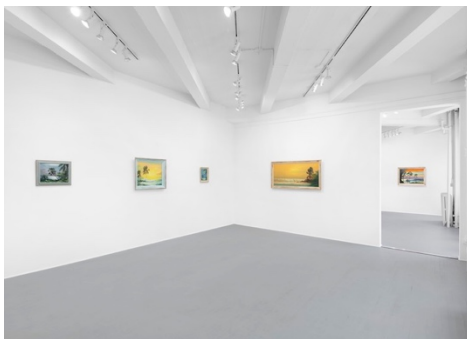
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Checklist and images: molly.nyc/highwaymen

Charles Moffett to present exhibition of works by the Florida Highwaymen: a Jim Crow-era cohort of 26 self-taught Black landscape painters who—in light of discrimination-based gallery rejection—established a booming market by selling original, still-wet paintings out of their trunks along the Florida coast

New York, NY – Summer 2021 – Charles Moffett is pleased to present *Highwaymen*, a presentation of 11 paintings created between 1950 and 1980 by the Florida Highwaymen, an outsider art movement of 25 men and 1 woman. Innately gifted at technical painting, the members of the group collectively channeled their skills into a distinctive, marketable aesthetic, selling door-to-door to homes and businesses and out of their cars in towns along the main Florida highways. The result is a historically important body of folk art that embodies one group's pioneering ability to carve out economic opportunity for themselves through the creation of an iconic regional genre of cultural objects whose versatile desirability began, by design, in highway diners; beauty parlors; roadside motels; and kitsch-filled South Florida homes.



All undated. Clockwise from top left: **Rodney Demps**, *Untitled (Rainbow Sky)*, 24 x 36", painting on Upson board
• **Sam Newton**, *Untitled*, 11.75 x 8.5", oil on board • **Mary Ann Carroll**, *Untitled (Wetland Scene)*, 16 x 20", oil on canvas board • Installation shots of an advance staging of *Highwaymen* (photos by Daniel Greer)

"The Highwaymen paintings represent the postwar ideal of Florida better than alligators and oranges," said Highwaymen historian Gary Monroe. "They challenge our notions of race relations during the time that these artists prevailed, before the Civil Rights Movement and when Jim Crow laws were still in force. These dreamy images stimulate a viewer to a transcendent sense of self relative to our wondrous land, where fact and fiction can blur to suit one's imagination."

The co-founding Highwaymen, **Alfred Hair** (1941 – 1970) and **Harold Newton** (1934 – 1994), began painting under the

instruction of Fort Pierce, Florida-based white landscape painter **A.E. “Bean” Backus** (with whom Hair had been connected through his high school art teacher). With Backus’ technical training under their belts, Hair and Newton decided to saturate their landscapes’ color palette to increase commercial appeal and on-the-spot sales. “By unintentionally bastardizing the canonical pictorial strategies to which Backus confined himself,” explained Monroe, “they created a new form of fantasy landscape painting.” As summarized by the journalist Gordon Hurd: “More than anything, what distinguished the Highwaymen artists were their colorful landscapes, eschewing any formal color theory and relying on instinct and intuition to depict their steady stream of beaches, palm trees and Everglades scenes. Organic colors were not their main focus; they wanted to wow buyers with burnt-orange Florida skies or unnaturally florescent clouds.”

Hair and Newton had soon established the foundation of a winning commercial formula. The group expanded in the late 1950s, when the two began to recruit and mentor likeminded 20-somethings who had a loose interest in painting and entrepreneurship. A particularly notable innovation was Hair’s development of a ‘speed painting’ technique, where he would work on dozens of paintings at once, mixing a particular color and using it across all of the canvasses in one sequence before moving onto another color. At his 1960s peak, Hair is believed to have been creating and selling around 50 paintings each week for roughly \$20-\$25 apiece (approximately \$200 in today’s dollars).

While all 26 Highwaymen had a united overarching aesthetic, specific members of the group were naturally noted for their unique styles and stories. A few of the eight Highwaymen featured in the Moffett show are:

- **Rodney Demps** (1953 – 2020), who met Highwaymen mentor A.E. Backus on a school field trip to his studio; by age 13, he was a de facto studio assistant to co-founding Highwayman Alfred Hair, painting the skies in the background of Hair’s paintings. Demps is known as the “surrealist Highwayman” for the dreamy quality of his later compositions.
- **Mary Ann Carroll** (1940 – 2019), the sole female of the group whose continued drive to create and sell artwork was fueled by her status as a single mother of seven. She won over Highwaymen co-founder Harold Newton in 1957 and soon took to the road to sell her paintings, keeping herself protected with a gun in her glove compartment. Carroll was celebrated later in life, including by Michelle Obama, who collects her work.
- **Al Black** (b. 1947), a natural salesman who catapulted the group’s sales volume. Before he began selling his own paintings in 1970, Black would sell the other artists’ work “like hotcakes,” hiking up the prices and pocketing the difference. Mary Ann Carroll once said that Black “could sell a jacket to a mosquito in summer.” Black was incarcerated for fraud and other charges between 1997 and 2006, during which time his commercial painting career flourished. He is one of the few living Highwaymen.

The Highwaymen’s heyday decline was catalyzed by leader Alfred Hair’s premature death in a 1970 bar fight at the age of 29, and was cemented by structural changes to the Florida tourism industry; commercial development of Florida’s natural landscape scenery; and shifting trends in interior design. The 26 painters received formal recognition in the late 1990s and early 2000s for their important cultural contribution to the state of Florida, and in the years since, the original paintings have reemerged in popularity within and beyond the region.

“The Highwaymen did not consider themselves fine artists who worked for art’s sake—purists might say they created art for all the wrong reasons,” said Monroe. Still, “an identity informs and separates the Highwaymen’s paintings from the banal formulaic pictures that are made far away from the locales that they pretend to represent, or by eager painters who try to technically capture the Florida landscape. Every member made a contribution, painted with passion, and expressed a personal view while contributing to a collective vision.” Most fundamentally, said Mary Ann Carroll: “It was an honest dollar for an honest day’s work.”

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This exhibition is presented in collaboration with Nina Johnson Gallery.