



HIGH MUSEUM OF ART ATLANTA

1280 PEACHTREE STREET, N.E. • ATLANTA, GEORGIA 30309

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**FIRST MAJOR EXHIBITION CELEBRATING SELF-TAUGHT ARTIST  
NELLIE MAE ROWE IN 20 YEARS TO BE ORGANIZED BY  
THE HIGH MUSEUM OF ART**

*Featuring nearly 60 works from the High's foremost collection of her art*

**ATLANTA, April 27, 2021** — For the last 15 years of her life, self-taught artist Nellie Mae Rowe (1900-1982) lived on a busy thoroughfare just outside of Atlanta and welcomed visitors to her “Playhouse,” which she decorated with found-object installations, handmade dolls, chewing-gum sculptures and hundreds of drawings. This fall, the High Museum of Art will present [“Really Free: The Radical Art of Nellie Mae Rowe”](#) (Sept. 3, 2021-Jan. 9, 2022), featuring nearly 60 works drawn from the Museum’s leading collection of her art. The exhibition is the first major presentation of her work in more than 20 years and the first to consider her practice as a radical act of self-expression and liberation in the post-civil rights-era South. “Really Free” marks the Museum’s first partnership with the [Art Bridges Foundation](#), an organization dedicated to expanding access to American art, which will allow the exhibition to travel nationally into 2023.

“The High was among the first American museums to establish a department dedicated to self-taught art, and today we hold the foremost collection of work by artists without formal training from the American South, including Nellie Mae Rowe,” said Rand Suffolk, the High’s Nancy and Holcombe T. Green, Jr., director. “We are incredibly proud of this distinction and honored to celebrate Rowe’s life and work through this exhibition. Her art has been a fixture in our collection galleries for decades, and this exhibition allows a much-needed deeper look into her bold artistic production.”

Katherine Jentleson, the High’s Merrie and Dan Boone curator of folk and self-taught art, added, “The exuberant color and imaginative design that characterize so many of Rowe’s drawings—which comprise most of her surviving work—is so aesthetically pleasing that her work is often taken at face value. This show will really explore her drawing practice, tracing its emergence and relationship to the installations of her Playhouse, as well considering the artistic path she blazed for herself as a radical act undertaken at a time when Black, women and self-taught artists struggled for respect and visibility.”

Rowe began making art as a child in rural Fayetteville, Georgia, but only found the time and space to reclaim her artistic practice in the late 1960s, following the deaths of her second husband and members of the family for whom she worked. Although she did not speak much about politics or social movements, she purposefully embraced her creativity and devoted her

life to making art during a time when civil rights leaders and Black feminist politicians and artists were igniting great change across the country.

As she filled it with drawings and sculptures, Rowe's Playhouse became an Atlanta attraction, which fostered her growing reputation and public reception. She began to exhibit her art outside of her home, beginning with "Missing Pieces: Georgia Folk Art, 1770-1976," a bicentennial exhibition that brought attention to several Southern self-taught artists, including Rowe and Howard Finster, and traveled to venues across Georgia. In 1982, the year she died, Rowe's work received a new level of acclaim, as she was honored in a solo exhibition at Spelman College and included as one of three women artists in the Corcoran Gallery of Art's landmark exhibition "Black Folk Art in America: 1930-1980."

The High began collecting her drawings in 1980. Between 1998 and 2003, major gifts totaling more than 130 works from trailblazing Atlanta art dealer Judith Alexander, a friend and ardent supporter of Rowe, solidified the High's holdings as the largest public repository of Rowe's art. Recently, the Museum announced another major gift of 17 drawings by Rowe from Atlantans Harvie and Charles Abney. Selections from this gift, as well as recent gifts and pledges of Rowe's drawings and photographs of the artist and her Playhouse taken by Lucinda Bunn and Melinda Blauvelt, will be presented as part of the exhibition.

"Really Free" will feature the colorful, and at times simple, sketches Rowe made on found materials in the 1960s and reveal their relationship to her most celebrated, highly complex compositions on paper of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Other sections of the exhibition will explore themes in Rowe's work such as depictions of women, her childhood, images of her garden, and her experimentation with materials, including recycling cast-offs to make handmade dolls and chewing-gum sculptures. The final galleries will focus on her career breakthrough and ruminations on death and the afterlife.

In addition to works on paper and sculptures, the exhibition will feature photographs as well as components and footage from the experimental film on Rowe's life to be released by Opendox in 2022, "The World is Not My Own," which includes an artful reconstruction of her Playhouse. Through these elements, visitors can experience the lively art environment she created in and outside of her home.

"Really Free" will be presented in the lower level of the High's Wieland Pavilion.

### **Exhibition Publication**

"Really Free: The Radical Art of Nellie Mae Rowe" is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue co-published by the High and DelMonico Books that reproduces the High's vast Rowe collection and features a lead essay by Jentleson with contributions from documentary producer Ruchi Mital, scholar Destinee Filmore and award-winning artist Vanessa German. The High also will publish a suite of online content, including author videos, a virtual tour and additional interpretive material, as part of a new library of collection-focused digital resources that launches with "Really Free."

### **Exhibition Organization and Support**

“Really Free: The Radical Art of Nellie Mae Rowe” is organized by the High Museum of Art, Atlanta. Major funding for this exhibition is provided by Judith Alexander and Henry Alexander, The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, The Judith Alexander Foundation, and Troutman Pepper. Generous support for the national tour of “Really Free: The Radical Art of Nellie Mae Rowe” is provided by the Art Bridges Foundation. This exhibition is made possible by Premier Exhibition Series Sponsor Delta Air Lines, Inc.; Exhibition Series Sponsor Northside Hospital; Premier Exhibition Series Supporters Sarah and Jim Kennedy, Dr. Joan H. Weens Estate, and wish foundation; Benefactor Exhibition Series Supporters Anne Cox Chambers Foundation and Robin and Hilton Howell; Ambassador Exhibition Series Supporters The Antinori Foundation, Corporate Environments, Louise Sams and Jerome Grilhot, and Elizabeth and Chris Willett; and Contributing Exhibition Series Supporters Farideh and Al Azadi, Sandra and Dan Baldwin, Lucinda W. Bunnan, Marcia and John Donnell, Helen C. Griffith, Mrs. Fay S. Howell/The Howell Fund, Mr. and Mrs. Baxter Jones, The Arthur R. and Ruth D. Lautz Charitable Foundation, Joel Knox and Joan Marmo, Dr. Joe B. Massey, Margot and Danny McCaul, The Ron and Lisa Brill Family Charitable Trust, Wade Rakes and Nicholas Miller, The Fred and Rita Richman Fund, In Memory of Elizabeth B. Stephens, USI Insurance Services, and Mrs. Harriet H. Warren. Generous support is also provided by the Alfred and Adele Davis Exhibition Endowment Fund, Anne Cox Chambers Exhibition Fund, Barbara Stewart Exhibition Fund, Dorothy Smith Hopkins Exhibition Endowment Fund, Eleanor McDonald Storza Exhibition Endowment Fund, The Fay and Barrett Howell Exhibition Fund, Forward Arts Foundation Exhibition Endowment Fund, Helen S. Lanier Endowment Fund, Isobel Anne Fraser–Nancy Fraser Parker Exhibition Endowment Fund, John H. and Wilhelmina D. Harland Exhibition Endowment Fund, Katherine Murphy Riley Special Exhibition Endowment Fund, Margaretta Taylor Exhibition Fund, and the RJR Nabisco Exhibition Endowment Fund.

### **About the High’s Folk and Self-taught Art Department**

The High began collecting the work of living self-taught artists in 1975 and was the first general-interest museum to establish a dedicated department for folk and self-taught art in 1994. Today, the High boasts one of the most significant collections of American folk and self-taught art in the world, which is especially rich in artworks by Southern and African American artists. Milestones in the department’s collection history include the Museum’s 1982 acquisition of 30 drawings by the then relatively unknown artist Bill Traylor, the 1994 collaboration with Howard Finster that made the High the largest public collection of his work outside of Paradise Garden, Judith Alexander’s 2003 gift of 130 works by Atlanta artist Nellie Mae Rowe, and 2017’s gift-purchase with the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, which reaffirmed the High’s leadership in Southern self-taught art. Although known for its unparalleled holdings of work by Southern masters like Traylor, Finster, Rowe and Thornton Dial, the High also has major works by self-taught artists who worked outside of the South, including Henry Church, William Hawkins, Martín Ramírez and Henry Darger.

### **About the High Museum of Art**

Located in the heart of Atlanta, the High Museum of Art connects with audiences from across the Southeast and around the world through its distinguished collection, dynamic schedule of special exhibitions and engaging community-focused programs. Housed within facilities

designed by Pritzker Prize-winning architects Richard Meier and Renzo Piano, the High features a collection of more than 18,000 works of art, including an extensive anthology of 19th- and 20th-century American fine and decorative arts; major holdings of photography and folk and self-taught work, especially that of artists from the American South; burgeoning collections of modern and contemporary art, including paintings, sculpture, new media and design; a growing collection of African art, with work dating from prehistory through the present; and significant holdings of European paintings and works on paper. The High is dedicated to reflecting the diversity of its communities and offering a variety of exhibitions and educational programs that engage visitors with the world of art, the lives of artists and the creative process. For more information about the High, visit [www.high.org](http://www.high.org).

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### **DIGITAL IMAGES AVAILABLE UPON REQUEST**

#### **Media contacts**

Marci Davis  
High Museum of Art  
404-733-4585  
[marci.davis@high.org](mailto:marci.davis@high.org)

Catherine Coughlin / Madison Richards

Resnicow and Associates

212-671-5162 / 212-671-5189

[ccoughlin@resnicow.com](mailto:ccoughlin@resnicow.com) / [mrichards@resnicow.com](mailto:mrichards@resnicow.com)