

## Acknowledgements

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**Susan Wyatt**  
Executive Director

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223 West Broadway  
New York, NY, 10013  
(212) 226-3970

**Gallery Hours: Tuesday-Saturday 11-6**

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# Purvis Young

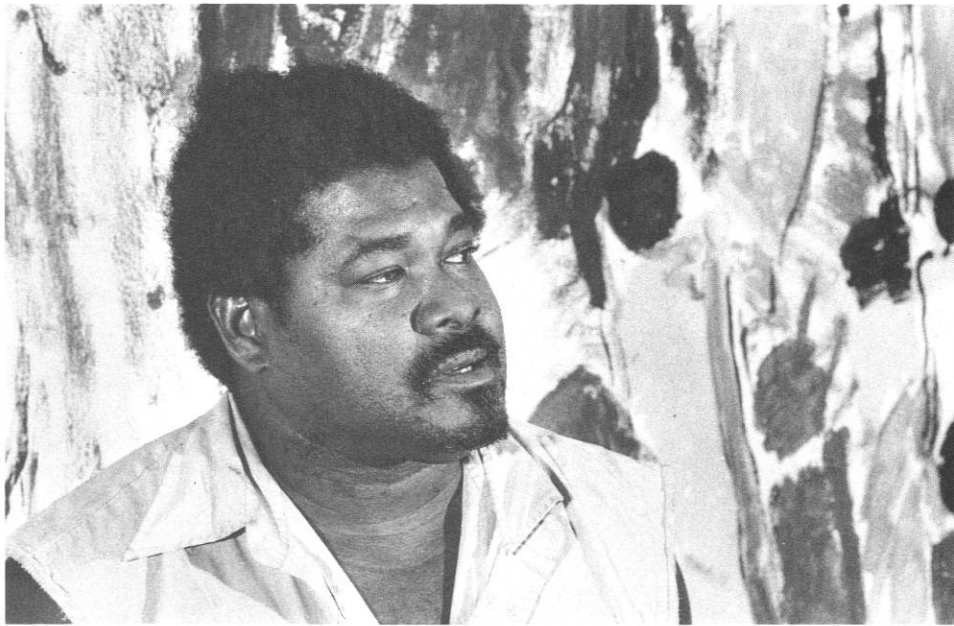
# Me and My Mink

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**Artists Space**

**November 17-January 7, 1989**





"Purvis Young at Goodbread Alley,"

The Miami Herald/Battle Vaughan.

**Purvis Young: "Me and My Mink"**  
by Cesar Trasobares

Purvis Young started to draw in the late sixties: war scenes with soldiers in fatigues, tanks and fighter planes, unemployed men in line for food, copulating bodies in countless positions. In another mood, he painted colorful trucks climbing winding roads and mountains. He also drew portraits of himself and others, at times in the company of fairies and angels. Eventually, the small scraps of paper were followed by larger pieces of masonite, plywood and cardboard. The scenes became more complex, and with a wider range of materials, more colorful and hypnotic.

Young was born in 1943 in Miami's Liberty City. He grew up on its streets, a witness to its violent ways and gutter workings. Roaming black neighborhoods since childhood, Young encountered an abundance of images that would later surface in his artworks. He became an artist of the street, without any formal training, making an art generated from obsession and desperation. Like hundreds of others in his neighborhood, he stands on the edge of opportunity, hoping, waiting for his turn in the world.

His first major work was a self-initiated effort. Beginning in 1973, Young attached hundreds of painted panels to a group of delapidated buildings on a street of "colored town," Overtown, a few blocks north of downtown Miami. The wall, *Good Bread Alley*, developed over a period of two years, veiling, with an atmosphere of a circus, the harsher reality of the ghetto surrounding it.

In drawings, paintings, and books, Young points to the consequences of racism, to the plight of the under-privileged, to years of neglect, to the private manifestations of outrage. His dirty, smudgy drawings and paintings, dripping with glue and bits of lint, aged in the humid subtropics, raise a voice of protest: groups of unemployed people lifting arms that demand jobs; men and women carrying loads; hands attempting to free themselves from chains; hot summer nights in the ghetto spent fucking; refugees in boats leaving their homelands. Some of these works are accompanied by scribbles in Young's own grammar, amplifying content, and, at times, alluding to hidden meanings. He isolates a poetry of poverty, the life of the street, the cosmos of despair.



The characters in his work are the people of his universe: Silo, a learned and wise Cuban *Santeria* priest, his mentor and guardian; Sam, the eating post owner who often gives food away to friends who can't pay; Red, the laundry worker he's known for more than 20 years. Others have identities as characters in familiar roles: soldiers, rioters, protesters, a bum "carrying his life," a "Cuban lady with a skinny baby," the Jazzman playing his music. The Whore, as sexual partner to one or many, appears blood red in the heat of passion. "Almighty God" emerges with a court of angels and by Himself, hovering over the landscape. Planets and stars fill vast skies.

An image of a giant pregnant woman served by multiple figures surfaces in varied contexts. Alone, deep brown against a golden sky, she is majestic; in the city, standing among the ragged buildings, she becomes a welfare mother. Elsewhere she appears in the company of eager males. At times she is accompanied by a giant male, Priapus of the ghetto, both towering over the city. Always nude, this mother figure, the *pregnata*, embodies an animal force, an archtypal compounding of Big Mama and the proverbial Mother Bee.

Young gathers the materials for his work in the street. From construction areas he gleans pieces of plywood, nails, glass, bits of wood, some plaster. He finds large cans, rusty metal trays and flat objects on which he'll paint. In the last year he has been sifting through back lots of printing shops to find large plastic sheets and odd scraps. He rarely buys art materials as friends keep him supplied with pencils, crayons and paint.

At some point in the mid-seventies, Young began to store drawings inside books. The books, serving as impromptu portfolios, would keep the drawings neat and flat. Eventually he came to like the way the books grew fat and decided to glue his drawings to the pages. He had discovered an artistic format that suited his free-flow way of thinking that, in his own words, "let my imagination fly . . ." The viewer's imagination is taken with Young by flipping the pages and seeing his images of the last 20 years unfold. As an extension of his involvement with books, Young began talking about "painting some walls." In a way, he wanted to make a mark on his world, permanently imbedding his impressions on the landscape that engendered them.

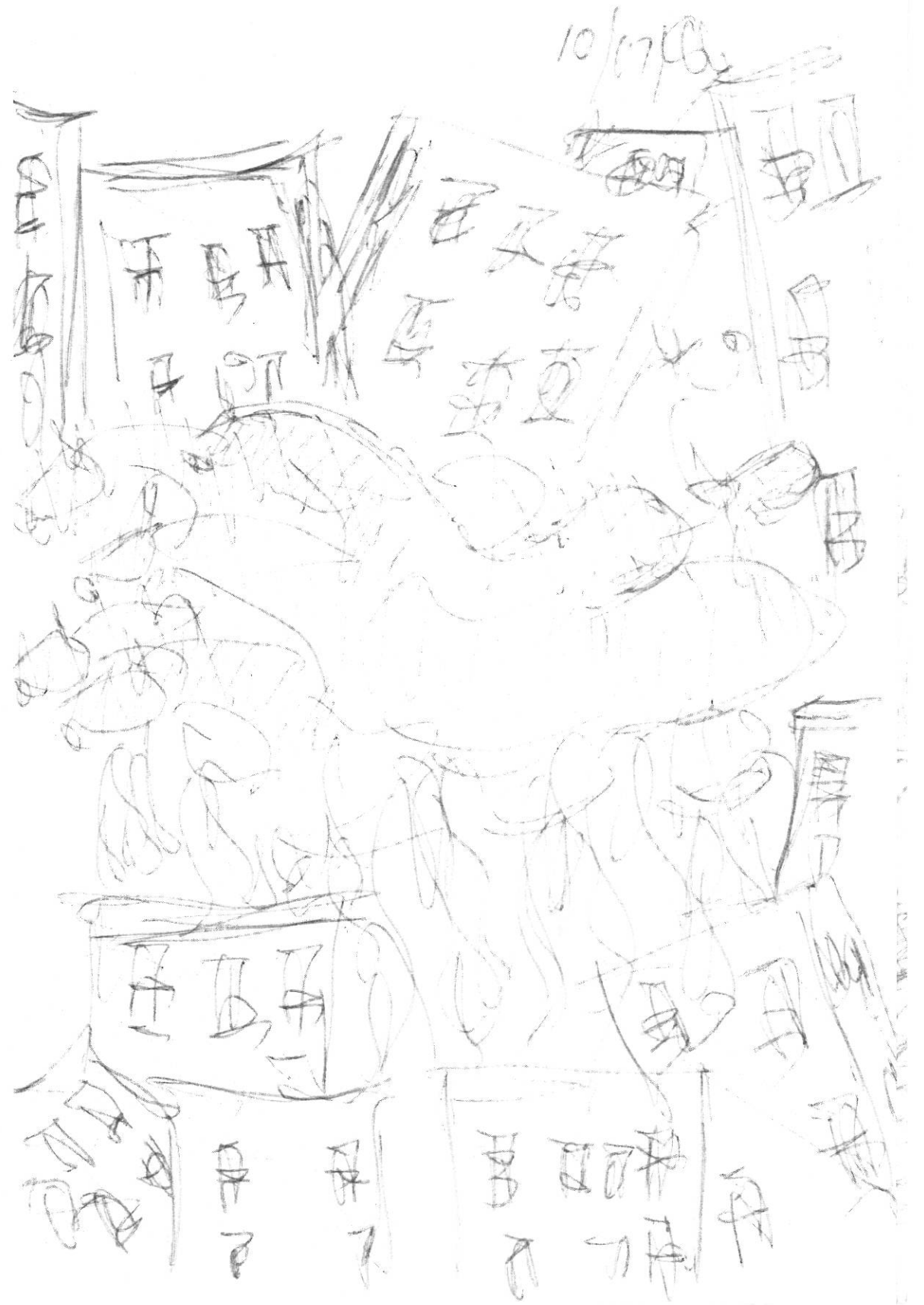
As a special project for the downtown Miami-Dade Public Library, Young was invited in 1983 to paint the interior of the building's auditorium. The resulting work, *Visions of the Street*, was an epic panorama of Miami's black history, including scenes of riots and burning buildings. Commissions to paint the outside of the Culmer/Overtown Library and to develop a Metro-Dade Art in Public Places project for the Northside Metrorail station followed. For the rail station, Young decided to paint a mural that would celebrate the workers who built the rapid transit system, their equipment and tools. He made numerous drawings during the construction of the elevated tracks and stations which served as a rich source for his mural imagery.

Like many artists of his generation, Young uses his work as a platform for expressing his views and feelings on numerous causes. Some observers insist that he is aware of his role as the *griot* of a tribe; as the unofficial historian of the daily life of Overtown. Indeed, his notebooks, stories, and artworks embody a detailed record of that community's life. In one of his books, Young wrote: "Like Rembrandt, I'm walking with the people." And yet, Young's fertile imagination roves beyond the neighborhood to channel other forces.

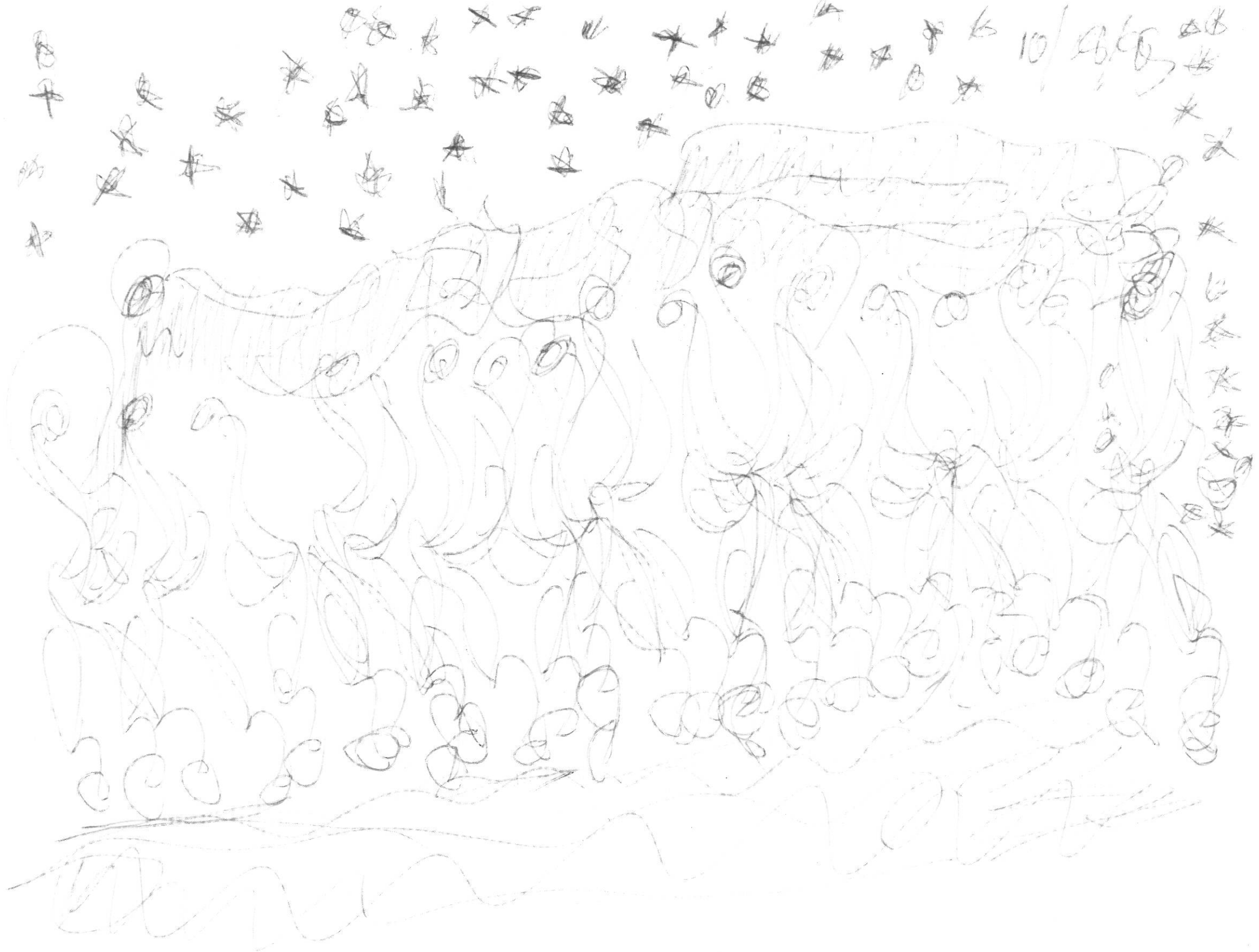
Purvis dreams about going to places he's never been. He would like to see the mountains of North Carolina he's heard about since his childhood. He remembers beautiful animals he sees on TV, wild dogs, stray cats, exotic birds, and he imagines others: "minks" and horses with wings. He talks about "hitting the road" in a van, maybe a train, traveling the streets of the United States.

"The street is life," Purvis Young wrote in one of his painted books. In conversation he explains, "you go around and find a bunch of paper a man has thrown away; it's good paper, you take it . . . you pay nothing to the man . . . the paper was there for you." He adds, "the street is *real life* . . . you come out here and feel the workings of the world . . . that's all you need to be an artist . . ."

Excerpts from the text for *Purvis Young: Me and My People*, a catalogue for his solo exhibition at the Miami-Dade Public Library, February, 1989.



10/26/05



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