



Featured in
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Henry Taylor Paints His People

Terence Trouillot profiles the maverick painter, reflecting on how the artist's work is intertwined with his community and personal histories

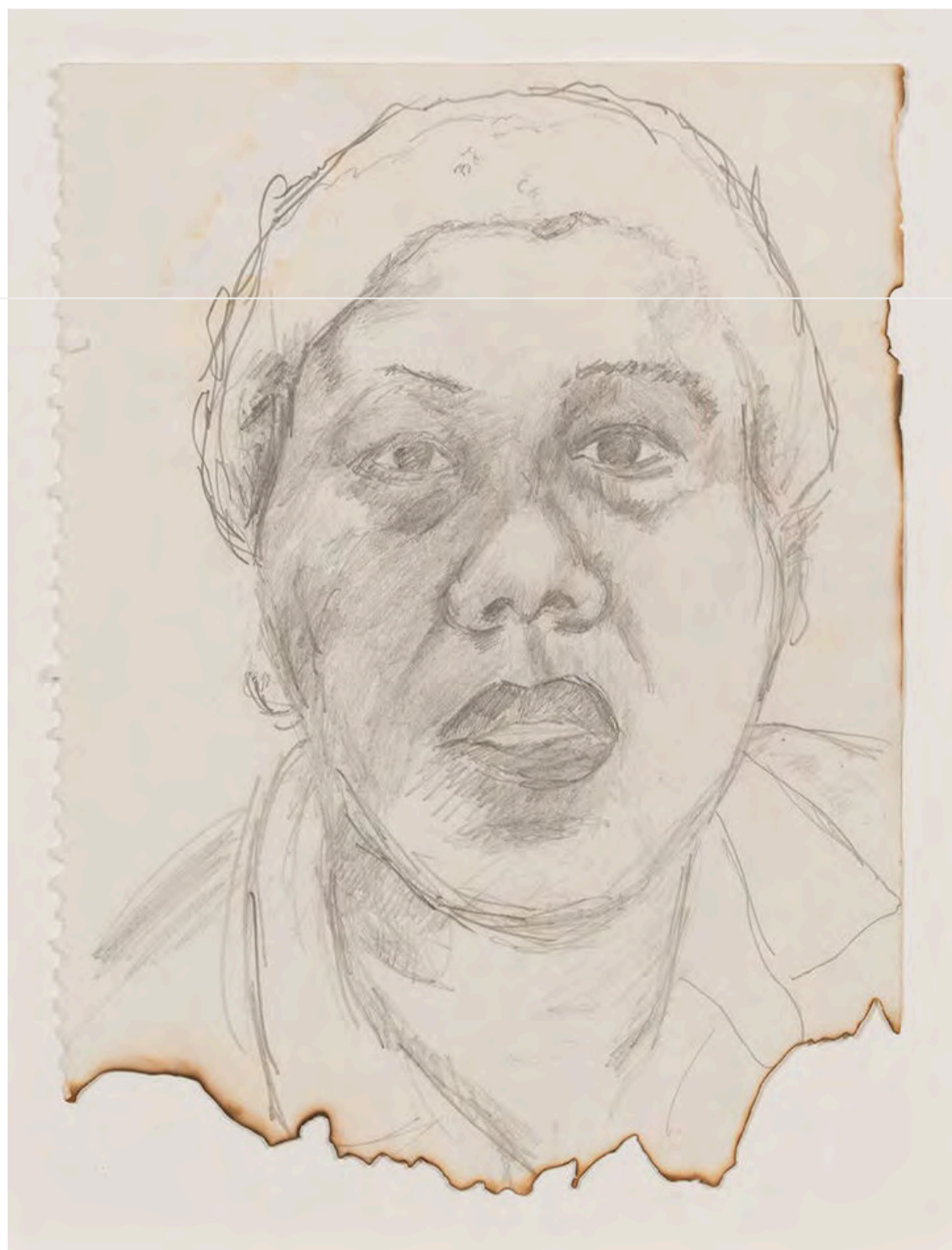


BY TERENCE TROUILLOT IN PROFILES | 05 JAN 23



On a muggy night last May, my friend Aidan texted me to say that he was hanging out with Henry Taylor. Aidan and I first met Taylor in 2012, when we were both working at M. Wells Dinette – the now-closed restaurant at MoMA PS1. Aidan was the executive chef; I was the general manager. It was the same year that the museum presented Taylor's first solo institutional show in New York, organized by Peter Eleey and Laura Hoptman. I had never encountered his oeuvre before, and I remember being floored by the sheer grit and tenacity of his brushwork. Taylor makes beautifully rendered, loose, intuitive paintings of Black people. I'm reminded specifically of the epic *Warning shots not required* (2011), an imposing rectangular canvas measuring more than six metres in width, dedicated to Stanley 'Tookie' Williams – founder of the Los Angeles street gang the Crips and, later, an advocate for anti-gang education. The piece is strange and severe, as Williams stands against a high grey wall and brown/ochre pavement (indicating prison grounds), alongside images of a black horse, a fish and floating heads, among other pictorial elements – an oneiric vision of carceral life. (Williams served a death-row sentence after being convicted on four counts of murder.)

What was also noteworthy for me was Taylor's arresting generosity and personal charm. During the install and throughout the run of the PS1 exhibition, Taylor routinely joined us in the museum courtyard to smoke cigarettes and drink leftover wine from the restaurant – shooting the shit with us at the end of our shifts. Ten years later, I sat with Aidan in his own restaurant in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, accompanied by Taylor and a colleague. We drank half pints of lager outside on the patio, smoking and passing around two of Taylor's cigars. Taylor sketched us in his spiral book. I was struck not only by his speed and ease at capturing a person's face and aura on the page, but also his attentiveness. It was as if he was both thinking and not thinking about every line on the page.



Henry Taylor, *Untitled*, 1991, graphite on paper, 36 × 29 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Hauser & Wirth © Henry Taylor; photograph: Jeff McLane

This experience later made me think of Taylor's early series 'Camarillo Drawings' (1984–95): intimate sketches of patients at the Camarillo State Mental Hospital in California, where Taylor worked as a psychiatric technician. The 'Camarillo Drawings' are on view for the first time in 'Henry Taylor: B Side' at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles (MOCA), the artist's first major survey of his work in his hometown. The series not only marks Taylor's own beginnings as an artist, but identifies an integral element to the artist's life and practice: connecting with people.

As I queued for the opening of 'Henry Taylor: B Side', I spotted Taylor moving through the throngs of people. He was standing at the south entrance of the museum with his partner, fellow artist Liz Glynn. Taylor wore his typical outfit: Comme de Garçons threads and his iconic felt bucket hat. He also sported a pair of large, wraparound shades that almost covered his entire face. He didn't seem like his convivial self when I approached him; he was nervous, as if hiding behind his sunglasses and away from the mob gathering to see the more than 150 paintings, sculptures, drawings and installations on display. In a brief instance, he revealed a side of himself that few rarely see: one of insecurity and doubt. His humility and vulnerability in that moment was palpable – if not entirely surprising.

Months before, I had spoken to Taylor over Zoom. In his magnanimous way, he initially focused the conversation on me. He asked about my soon-to-be-born daughter, whose due date was 11 September. 'You could call her DA BOMB,' he said without skipping a beat. He reminisced, as he now has a two-year-old daughter with Glynn named Epic. 'It's different bro; it's beautiful.' His first two children are closer to my own age and he spoke candidly about having another child at 64: 'It got me worried. I'm older now and I gotta quit smoking, be healthier. I'll be 80 years old, god willing, when she's in high school.'



Henry Taylor, 'B Side', 2022, exhibition view, Museum of Contemporary Art, LA. Courtesy: MOCA; photograph: Jeff McLane

When I asked about his MOCA retrospective and a solo outing at the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia, he was flushed with both enthusiasm and dread. His studio director, Brandi Morris, had sent me images of works-in-progress: a painting of his older brother, Randy, and a series of sculptures dubbed 'afro trees' (towering conifers with nappy, synthetic black hair for foliage). Taylor brimmed with excitement, telling me that he'd 'been going real hard for the last eight months' to create an exceptional exhibition. He later admitted that he felt he had a responsibility to 'represent' in his hometown, which explained his nerves at the opening. 'It ups the ante, so to speak. But I'm feeling the damn pressure, bro. I'm overwhelmed. I want to paint my sister, my brother ... I'm even getting sentimental about the whole thing.'

Sentimentality 'permeates his work', he confessed to me. And his show at MOCA unequivocally incites an affecting response, if not simply due to the sheer breadth of work, both old and new. There are long vitrines filled with his small paintings (often text-based works) on cereal boxes and empty cigarette packs – objects that harken to a time when the artist could barely afford brushes and paints, let alone canvases. These early works are grouped alongside portraits of friends and fellow artists, including *Portrait of Steve Cannon* (2013) – a sweeping and expressive depiction of the late Black poet in a seated position, hand to mouth (he was a habitual smoker) – and of the late painter Noah Davis, deep in thought (*Untitled (Noah Davis)*, 2013).



Henry Taylor, 'B Side', 2022, exhibition view, Museum of Contemporary Art, LA. Courtesy: MOCA; photograph: Jeff McLane

'B Side' also presents a new, large-scale installation comprising several coat-stands and mannequins wearing black leather jackets, each adorned with pins depicting photographs of Michael Brown, Breonna Taylor and other Black folk killed by police in recent years. Above the coats hangs a banner reading 'END WAR AND RACISM!!! Support The Black Panthers'. The work is an homage to his older brother, Randy, a former member of the Black Panthers and a role model to Taylor, who instilled in the artist a deference to political activism and art. 'He made us all more politically conscious. And I read everything he read – including Native American activists like Russell Means and Leonard Peltier – because I wanted to be just like him.'

Taylor was born in Ventura and later raised in Oxnard, California – a city just northwest of Los Angeles and south of Santa Barbara. He is the youngest of eight: ‘Gold Nugget’ was his sobriquet as a child. His father, Hershel, was a house painter; his mother, Cora, cleaned houses. They lived a modest and happy life in a large white house, as Taylor recalled, and, as the baby of the family, he often found himself simply watching everything that was going on. ‘I became the observer because I was trying to understand my own life and that’s why I started making pictures as a kid. I just like looking at people and I lived in a house where people came in and out, so I would listen to what was going on.’ He shared a story with me that he often recounts about his family history, where his grandfather, Ardmore, a horse trainer from Naples, Texas, was shot and killed. ‘My father was ambushed by a group of men and they shot off his arm. They wanted to steal his horses. He came back to his home and my grandma bandaged his wound, which she treated with kerosene. Afterwards my grandfather Ardmore or ‘Mo’ went out to confront the assailants and they shot him dead.’



Henry Taylor, *Too Sweet*, 2016, acrylic on canvas, 3.4 × 1.8 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Hauser & Wirth © Henry Taylor; photograph: Sam Kahn

In our conversation over Zoom, Taylor brought up the trauma in his life and work. His older brother Willie Gene was drafted in the Vietnam War and suffered from PTSD. His other brother Earl was shot at 22. 'He got shot on his birthday and died seven years later. I think about that a lot.' We begin to discuss his paintings of Sean Bell (*Homage to a Brother*, 2007) and Philando Castile (*THE TIMES THAY AIN'T A CHANGING, FAST ENOUGH!*, 2017) – two young Black men who were shot and killed by police. I was taken aback by his uncertainty as to what compelled him to make these works. 'Sometimes you read a story. [Bell] was just playing baseball. And I don't want to just paint about drama and trauma. The Castille: I didn't even want to paint that painting [...] I just did, man ...'

The words caught in his throat; he became teary-eyed. He stepped away from his laptop, off screen. When he returned, cigarette in mouth, he blurted out: 'Sometimes we could be stuck in some bullshit!' I remember seeing both paintings at the 2017 Whitney Biennial. That show was wracked by the controversy of Dana Schutz's painting of Emmett Till, a Black teenager who was lynched by white men in 1955 (*Open Casket*, 2016). Then, debates were in full swing over the merits of representing state violence against Black bodies. Taylor's image was powerful and visceral; I was taken aback by an overwhelming sense of sadness but transfixed by his ability to render such a horrible image digestible. It was both discomfoting and bewildering. Hearing him speak about his own doubt and struggles in making this painting made it all the more humane – Taylor had no choice but to work through this personal and collective trauma.



Henry Taylor, *Screaming Head*, 1999, oil on canvas, 76 × 61 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Hauser & Wirth © Henry Taylor; photograph: Jeff McLane

In a 2018 profile for *The New Yorker*, Zadie Smith remarks that Taylor's 'greatest subject is human personality'. Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah, in her beautiful essay on the artist – which first appeared in *Vulture* that same year – writes: 'When Henry Taylor paints, it is as though he had been born with caul over his eyes, as if it were nothing for him to access that low-down, murky place where we store who we are, the part we'd often most like to conceal from others.' What Ghansah and Smith both arrive at so eloquently is not only the core of Taylor's virtuosity as a portraitist but also his gift as a human being: how he is able see people, connect with them with great ease, intimacy and empathy, while also reflecting that feeling back into his artwork. As Smith puts it: 'Other people look; Taylor sees.' In his own words – published in this magazine in 2014 – Taylor coolly noted: 'I like the term "figurative painter" more than some of the things I've been called (that's if you're trying to label me a figurative painter).'

Taylor refuses to be defined in simple terms; he is full of surprises and contradictions. If he is tethered to anything at all, it is to his family, neighbours, friends and community – a dedication which knows no bounds. As he later states at the end of that same 2014 text for *frieze*: 'My community means a lot to me. If I made abstract paintings, I would get no love from my family or peeps.' This admission is poignant – a charitable emphasis on legibility over abstraction; an overall commitment to figurative painting in support of his own tribe, to share their stories of joy and hardship, and, more importantly, to relay his own beautiful and unique vision of Blackness, in all its variable parts.



Henry Taylor, *Untitled*, 2022, acrylic on canvas, 1.8 × 1.5 m. Courtesy: the artist and Hauser & Wirth © Henry Taylor; photograph: Jeff McLane

During our conversation, Taylor told me something revealing about his relationship to his work: 'Sometimes, I think about [my art in relation to] slavery. A lot of the time, as soon as I finish a painting, they [gallerists, collectors] come to my studio and they want to take it away. But I need to look at my work. I need to bond with it, like it's my child.' I thought of his recent self-portrait with his daughter Epic, Taylor looking intently at her as she sits in a highchair eating (*Untitled*, 2022). The painting sees the artist in a more youthful light, his face fresh and attentive. I think of my daughter and how I might look at her when she reaches Epic's age. I imagine, hope, that it is close to what Taylor has captured here.

Henry Taylor's *'B Side'* is on view at MOCA, LA, until 30 April 2023.