The ‘Slow Burn’ That Is Henry Taylor

The artist’s survey at MOCA, with its empathetic portraits and quirky sculptures, speaks to the larger struggle of Black artists to achieve a level of recognition that is long overdue.

By Robin Pogrebin

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LOS ANGELES — It is midafternoon on a warm day in the West Adams neighborhood, and Henry Taylor’s capable studio director, Brandi Morris, would clearly prefer that the artist not take the wheel.

This seems less because Taylor had consumed a joint of marijuana and a bottle of beer a few hours before, or because he will want to light up yet another Natural American Spirit cigarette (he prefers the “Mellow Original” in the yellow box to the “Full-bodied Original” in the blue) on the way to lunch, but because the artist has so many thoughts spilling out of him that it might be easier for him to concentrate on what he has to say when he’s not navigating through the infamously congested Los Angeles traffic.

But Taylor doesn’t even entertain Morris’s gentle suggestion that she drive instead. He is headstrong that way. This stubborn independence is integral to Taylor personally and now, as he opens his first major West Coast retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles on Nov. 6, it seems to be paying off professionally.

“It’s been a slow burn with him,” said the artist Mark Bradford, a friend. “He’s been going down that road and now people are taking notice.”

The market is also paying close attention. Taylor’s deceptively simple portraits of ordinary people have become among the most sought after by collectors. In 2018, 11 bidders at Sotheby’s vied for his 2004 canvas “I’ll Put a Spell on You,” which ultimately sold for nearly $1 million, about five times the high estimate. In 2020, the mega gallery Hauser & Wirth added Taylor to its prestigious stable.

The artist’s subject matter now seems especially resonant, having included police violence (his portrait of Philando Castile was featured in the 2017 Whitney Biennial) and incarceration (“Every Brother Has a Record,” part of the New Museum’s 2021 show “Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America”).

Moreover, Taylor’s portraiture — like the work of Kerry James Marshall and Barkley L. Hendricks — has helped fuel an explosion of interest in Black figuration by younger artists like Amy Sherald, Jordan Casteel, Jennifer Packer and Noah Davis.

Henry Taylor's "The Times Thay Aint a Changing, Fast Enough!" (2017), a portrait and cri de coeur for Philando Castile, was featured in the 2017 Whitney Biennial. Henry Taylor, via Whitney Museum of American Art

The fact that Taylor is only now getting his first retrospective in his own hometown — 22 years after his first gallery show in Los Angeles and a decade after an acclaimed survey at MoMA PS1 — speaks to the larger struggle of Black artists to achieve a level of recognition that is long overdue. Only over the last few years — and most recently accelerated by the Black Lives Matter movement — have museums and galleries begun to recognize the importance of diversifying their audiences, acquisitions, exhibitions, boards and staffs.

Just as younger Black artists are benefiting from that heightened level of awareness, so too are older ones, including Taylor, at 64.

The MOCA exhibition, "Henry Taylor: B Side," captures the sweep of Taylor's career thus far, featuring more than 150 pieces that include drawings and — for the first time in any meaningful way — sculpture, as well as what he calls "painted objects" on small cigarette packs, cereal boxes and beer crates.

"The goal is to survey work that is known and beloved but also to show another side,"

said Bennett Simpson, the MOCA curator who organized the exhibition. “Henry is often called a portraitist, and it’s not really a label that he likes, because he tends to do a lot of different painting.”

“In our show, there are groupings of pictures of his family members, portraits of artists,” Simpson continued, “but also more allegorical scenes of street life or more politically charged scenes that deal with national identity.”

“A Jack Move – Proved It” (2011), from “Henry Taylor: B Side” at the Museum of Contemporary Art. In 1947, Jackie Robinson became the first Black player signed to a major league baseball team, the Brooklyn Dodgers. Taylor captures his triumph and endurance. Henry Taylor, via Hauser & Wirth

In “Gettin It Done” (2016), one of Taylor’s incisive studies of people, a woman braids a man’s hair on his stoop. Henry Taylor, via Hauser & Wirth

The show, hatched in 2018 and originally scheduled for 2021, was delayed by the pandemic. In the four years since, Taylor has made new installation work, some of which will be featured in the MOCA show, including his “afro trees” — arboreal sculptures made of synthetic hair. But even his older work has a timelessness that makes it feel contemporary.

“It’s very immediate and yet kind of slanted,” Simpson said. “It’s figurative painting, which foregrounds recognition and identity and visibility, but then Henry’s work is also strange. It’s fast, it can look improvised, it can look kind of cockeyed, it has a lot of movement and a lot of noise in it, and that makes it kind of curious.”

This extemporaneous, explosive quality of Taylor’s painting is reflected in his personality. Trying to follow his train of thought is like trying to hold on during a Tilt-a-Whirl ride. His stream of consciousness jerkily encompasses, at one point or another, Michael Jackson, Bill Clinton, Medgar Evers and his mother’s pinto beans.

He talks about how he went to church the other day. How he went to McDonald’s and had a fish sandwich. How he recently bought some French hats on Amazon like the

ones worn by Napoleon. How he just watched the 1988 film “War Party.” How he went to Haiti about six years ago with the photographer Deana Lawson.

One of Henry Taylor’s sculptures-in-progress in his studio, made from bicycle rims and children’s toys. The assemblages coalesce over time. Ricardo Nagaoka for The New York Times

With sunglasses perched on his forehead, a gold chain around his neck and purple sneakers on his feet, Taylor makes references to Rashid Johnson and Rodin; Dubuffet

and Diebenkorn. He cites lyrics and often breaks into song, humming “Put Your Foot on the Rock” by the jazz performer Ben Sidran, for example, or “Still Be a Lady/Girls Can’t Do What the Guys Do” by the Jamaican reggae singer Yellowman.

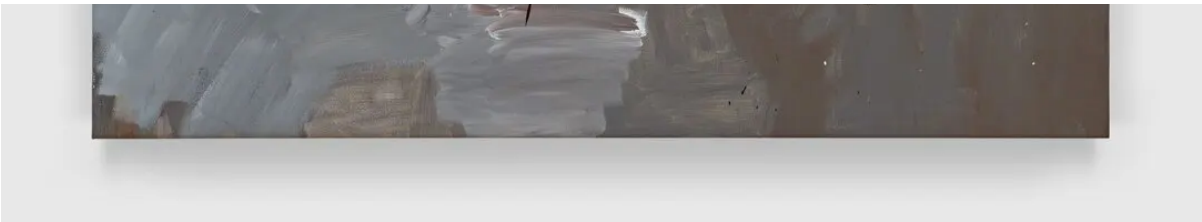
Yet for all his seemingly peripatetic energy, Taylor also has the capacity to zero in on what he’s doing and to produce a prodigious amount of work. “It’s a combination of being very focused and also very porous,” said Peter Eleey, who with Laura Hoptman organized Taylor’s MoMA PS1 survey in 2012. “He’s taking in so much all the time.”

(Ken Johnson in The New York Times called Taylor’s work in that show “exuberantly vital,” adding that he was “a Social Realist in the best sense of that oft-maligned term. He paints roughly the rough world of his own experience, but he does so with a rare spirit of generosity and love.”)

Inevitably, when discussing Taylor, people in the art world refer to the pathos and empathy of his paintings, how he captures the essence of people — even those he’s just met. “When you look at a Henry Taylor picture, you’re not looking for a perfect likeness,” Hoptman said. “With Henry, it’s about composition and about color but mostly about making subjects human.

“He paints everybody because he knows who’s in pain, who’s happy,” she added. “There are communities of people, including his own family, who he has depicted with magnificence — his brother who was in the Black Panthers and two who were in Vietnam; homages to his mom — and they just break your heart.”

Henry Taylor, “Untitled” (2022). From “Henry Taylor: B Side” at MOCA. Henry Taylor, via Hauser & Wirth



"The 4th" (2012), from "Henry Taylor: B Side." His subjects "were people who were part of his lived experience," said Charles Gaines, who taught Taylor at CalArts. "He tries to know the people he paints and uses paintings as the means to do this." Henry Taylor, via Hauser & Wirth

Born in 1958 in Ventura, Calif., Taylor was the last of eight children (he occasionally calls himself "Henry the Eighth") born to his father, a commercial painter, and his mother, a housekeeper. "My daddy needed help, but we didn't know it," Taylor said. "He called all of us six boys 'bullets,' and it wasn't until I tried to write a short story about him that I understood why my daddy was so mean — because they killed his daddy when he was nine.

"My mother suffered," he continued. "She was born in 1923 at the height of the depression and wasn't allowed to go to school because she didn't have no mama, and they exploited her."

Taylor started out wanting to write — the children's book he wrote in high school won an award. The artist can still recite it easily from memory. "Caesar the centipede knight," he said. "He was brave and wanted to fight …"

He studied journalism, anthropology and set design at Oxnard College, where he also met James Jarvaise, the abstract painter who had been part of the Museum of Modern Art's important "Sixteen Americans" exhibition in 1959. Then the head of the department of fine and performing arts at the college, Jarvaise proved instrumental, encouraging Taylor to pursue art. In 1995, Taylor earned a bachelor of fine arts degree at the California Institute of the Arts, or CalArts.

“Untitled” (2021), mixed media, from “Henry Taylor: B Side” at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, pays homage to the U.S.C. Trojans football star Clint Strozier, Taylor’s former next-door neighbor. Henry Taylor, via Hauser & Wirth; Photo by Ken Adlard

“I was very interested in how he regarded his subjects, that they were people who

were part of his lived experience, not just subject matter," said the artist Charles Gaines, who taught Taylor at CalArts. "He tries to know the people he paints and uses paintings as the means to do this."

Taylor is deeply grounded in art history; he's been influenced by classical artists like Chaïm Soutine, Modigliani and Matisse, as well as by more contemporary figures like Bob Thompson ("he was representational but he abstracted everything," Taylor said); the Expressionist Max Beckmann, the cartoonish Philip Guston and the realist Alice Neel.

For a decade, Taylor worked as a psychiatric technician at Camarillo State Mental Hospital, where he painted several of the patients and became keenly sensitive to the human condition.

The collector Bernard Lumpkin, who bought a Taylor work early on and now also owns the artist's drawings and sculptures, called Taylor a connector. "People gravitate around Henry the way planets surround the sun," he said. "Everybody is family to Henry.

"He centers people who are at the margins," Lumpkin added. "The caddies of the world, the maids of the world, the nameless people, the homeless people."

Taylor at his studio. In bold, direct images, he captures the essence of people, even those he's just met. "People gravitate around Henry the way planets surround the sun," the collector Bernard Lumpkin said. Ricardo Nagaoka for The New York Times

Taylor is constantly working — picking up a pencil and starting to sketch in a restaurant; drawing his friends while he's socializing with them; bringing canvases in his suitcase on vacations.

"He'll paint through our meetings," Simpson, the MOCA curator, said. "It's a special

thing to witness."

Taylor has three children: two who are grown, from previous relationships; and a 2-year-old girl named Epic, with his partner, the artist Liz Glynn.

Unquestionably, his success has magnified over the last few years, bringing a new level of financial comfort and fame that is not lost on him. This year, he added two West Adams work spaces to his downtown studio, one for painting and another for sculpture.

His sculpture is large, quirky and often composed of found objects — bicycle rims, a discarded mattress, a bird house, basketballs — making it resemble outsider art. Taylor said he has been known to jump into trash cans for things and was inspired by the sculpture of Cy Twombly, Robert Rauschenberg and Marcel Duchamp. The bicycle rims are a reference to the many homeless encampments he sees downtown. "I'm voracious," he said.

He acknowledged that it was exciting to meet Diana Widmaier Picasso, the granddaughter of Pablo Picasso, and to have Jay-Z visit his studio. "I might call Swizz and say, 'What's up,'" he said, referring to the music producer Swizz Beatz, adding that "it's cool" to have a friend like the artist Kehinde Wiley "look out for you and say, 'Hey, somebody wants to talk to you,' and it's Barack Obama."

"I had just smoked a big fatty," Taylor said. "I'm like, 'Damn, wassup brother Mr. President?'"

Other artists feel a strong affinity with Taylor — Mary Weatherford called him "one of the greatest living painters, period."

"The work is so incredibly direct," she said, "like an arrow through the heart."

Taylor has become a particularly powerful role model for a younger generation of Black artists, several of whom Lumpkin collects. "I've heard how they talk about Henry," Lumpkin said. "They see someone who has freedom, someone who has control, someone who is the author of his own destiny."

But Taylor said achieving prominence was never his aspiration. "There are people that have big major goals, and that's great," he said. "Me, I just want to get to a place where I can pay rent. That was my thing for a long time. It was nothing grandiose.

"My mom always told me to stay out of jail, and I've done that," he added. "I know that I want to take care of myself. I'm happy to show work. I'm happy to sell work. I'm happy to feed my kids, feed myself and have a few friends and family. If it allows me to do that, I can't frown on that."