

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Henry Taylor's Black L.A., at Home and in the Streets

Stephen West · Friday, November 11th, 2022

Henry Taylor, the subject of a major retrospective at the [Museum of Contemporary Art](#) in Los Angeles, is one of those artists who labors in near-anonymity until middle age and then seems almost suddenly to achieve widespread fame.

In the past decade, Taylor's paintings of the Black community in the streets of Los Angeles, his portraits of friends and family, and his visual meditations on the culture and politics of race have been shown at major galleries and museums including the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Biennial in New York. But it took a long time to get there.

Taylor was born in 1958 in Ventura, California, and grew up in nearby Oxnard. He was the youngest of eight children in a Black working-class family who moved from East Texas during World War II and provided subject matter for his paintings throughout his career. After high school, a bit of college, and a series of jobs, Taylor worked at Camarillo State Mental Hospital, where he began to draw portraits of the patients. He attended art classes at local colleges and earned a BFA in painting from California Institute of the Arts in 1995. After several more years, he started to show his work in galleries.

His mature work can be sweet or angry, straightforward or complex. He paints in an improvisational style that can recall the thick brushwork of 1920s German Expressionists or the graffiti-like pictures of Jean-Michel Basquiat.



In an untitled painting from 2022, Taylor presents a doting Black father — perhaps himself — intently observing a young boy in a highchair as the kid finishes off his lunch. The background is a sea of green grass, with a single tree trunk in the upper left corner and a black bird flying overhead. It's a tranquil scene, a straightforward double portrait, and also a study in color contrasts: the boy's red shirt, the yellow plate, the green cup, the blue sky.

Warning Shots Not Required of 2011 (top image), in contrast, is a complex, angst-filled portrait of the Los Angeles Crips gang leader Stanley "Tookie" Williams. Convicted of four murders in 1981, Williams was imprisoned at San Quentin and eventually executed in 2005.

The huge painting, almost 22 feet wide, shows Williams in a prison yard, overprinted with the words of the picture's title. There's a gray wall in the background and a number of odd symbolic images: a yellow fish flying through the air, a black horse, a couple of black heads in profile, a

mysterious mask seemingly tethered to Williams's right elbow. It's hard to sort out the meaning and emotions of the work, but there's no doubt it's angry and possibly threatening.



Somewhere between sweet and sinister is *Watch Your Back* of 2013, a portrait of three very different Black people, along with a glimpse of the U.S. Capitol building in the background, partly obscured by a white wall.

The woman on the right seems like an ordinary tourist in the nation's capital, looking over her shoulder with a toothy smile and excited to be where she is. Her companion on the left, though, seems a bit crazed, with his mouth wide open and displaying a gigantic tongue. And the seated man (or woman?) between them, gawking in the background, is a mystery. Is he or she just another tourist on a park bench? A homeless person? It's hard to know, but the painting still grabs your attention.



Less ambiguous as a portrait, perhaps a self-portrait, is *The 4th*, in which a bulky man in a white T-shirt and baseball cap tends to a barbecue grill in his backyard on Independence Day. The grill is loaded with food, and the man holds a morsel in his left hand, getting ready to sample his dinner. It seems like a bucolic scene, yet behind the man, across the fence in the neighbor's backyard, is a black silhouette of a woman's head moving by. Taylor seemingly can't resist adding these ghostly figures to complicate his paintings.



Another self-portrait in a completely different style is *Untitled* of 2021, based on a late 16th-century portrait of the English king Henry V in the National Portrait Gallery in London. Henry the painter poses in profile against an ornate gold and black background, just like the king. He's dressed in similarly ornate clothes with a heavy necklace resting on his shoulders. It's a joke with a straight face, similar to Taylor's riffs on other famous paintings such as Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* or Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*.

The sprawling exhibition includes more than 150 works from the late 1980s to the present. It's presented thematically rather than chronologically, with spacious galleries devoted to portraits of Taylor's friends and family, paintings of the Black community in Los Angeles, athletic stars like Jackie Robinson, Taylor's sculptures, the Camarillo drawings, and more. It's an impressive show, and not to be missed.

Henry Taylor B Side runs through April 30, 2023, at the [Museum of Contemporary Art](#), 250 South Grand Avenue, Los Angeles. Admission is free. The exhibition then travels to the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, where it will be on view from October 4, 2023, to January 28, 2024. An extensive catalog is published by MoCA and DelMonico Books.

Top image: Henry Taylor, Warning Shots Not Required, 2011, acrylic, charcoal, and collage on canvas; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, purchase with funds provided by the Acquisition and Collection Committee. Image and work © Henry Taylor, courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth; photo by Brian Forrest.

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