

# Henry Taylor: *B Side*: An exhibition of the US painter's work at the Whitney Museum in New York

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*Henry Taylor: B Side*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City, October 4, 2023–January 28, 2024

US painter Henry Taylor (born 1958) is currently receiving his first career retrospective at the Whitney Museum in New York City. His works are striking for their bold and empathetic depiction on a large scale of contemporary African American working class life. In the self-portrait *i'm yours* (2015), at the entrance to the exhibition, Taylor's face nearly fills the six-by-six foot canvas, his forthright gaze unnerving in those dimensions.

Size is not the only way that Taylor's work commands attention. Figures are boldly rendered, sometimes with colorful, abstract shapes or sketched with a black painted line. Some areas of faces are left blank or unfinished while other faces are carefully rendered. Lettering, newsprint text and handwriting sharpen a painting's message, which often expresses the strivings and accomplishments, as well as the inequality and violence, that continue to characterize the experience of black working class communities in America, and indeed that of every section of the working class.

In *See Alice Jump* (2011), for example, the artist represents the triumph of Alice Coachman vaulting over the rooftops to become the first African American woman to win an Olympic gold medal, in 1948. Other paintings, such as the at-home barbershop of *Gettin it Done* (2016), communicate the everyday aspects of life with a sense of intimacy and wry humor. The many portraits that Taylor has produced from in-person sittings are comparable in some ways to those painted by social realist Alice Neel (1900-1984). Neel turned the same keen eye on "celebrities" and performers, artists and art critics, as she did on family members and even on herself, painting a nude self-portrait at age 80.

Taylor is similarly egalitarian, observing fellow artists Noah Davis and Andrea Bowers, friends, neighbors and family, even those met in chance encounters on the streets near his studio on Los Angeles's Skid Row with the unique chemistry that portraiture creates between sitter and artist, both of whom are enriched by the interaction. *Portrait of George Acogny* (2019) and *Portrait of Steve Cannon* (2013) are notable examples of the first group, while several of the latter are his most affecting: *Emery: shoulda been a phd but society made him homeless* (2017) and *Lost found her in Skid Row. looked ready to go*, (n.d.) for instance.

And in the paintings *Haitian Working (washing my window) not begging* (2015) and *Too Sweet* (2016), the latter again a monumental 13 feet high, Taylor portrays the homeless and others making a few dollars on the street who are often not "seen" in everyday encounters.

He draws attention to this pretense of invisibility in *Too Sweet* by painting the man 11 feet high, as he might appear looming in one's car window while stopped at an intersection, his face and sign blank but his presence very real.

Taylor came to painting relatively late. For most working people, even those with obvious talent, being an artist is not a viable option, financially or otherwise. Instead, Taylor earned an associate's degree in the University of California system and worked from 1984 to 1995 as a psychiatric technician at Camarillo State Mental Hospital—where among others, the great jazz musician Charlie Parker had once been in detox for heroin. While working at the institution, Taylor was encouraged by James Jervaise (1924-2015), his painting teacher at Oxnard College, to apply to the California Institute for the Arts, where he obtained his Bachelor of Fine Arts in 1995, at the age of 37.

Upon graduation, Taylor established himself in the burgeoning L.A. gallery scene and was known for his studio's openness, especially to younger artists for whom he was something of an "uncle" figure. Success in the broader art world followed with a mid-career retrospective at MoMA PS1, a solo show at the Studio Museum in Harlem and group shows at the Whitney, the Corcoran, the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, the Hammer Museum and others. His work has been acquired by notable collectors and institutions. Since 2020, he has been represented by the prestigious Hauser & Wirth gallery.

The *Camarillo Drawings*, as they are called, mark Taylor's emerging ability and self-confidence as an artist. The sensitive pencil sketches of his patients are sometimes faint and searching, on other occasions more assured, reflecting both his own development and his subjects' complex mental states.

The current exhibition includes paintings in which he has placed black models into well-known compositions of Western modern painting, as in *Nude descending down the staircase* (2017) based on Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase, No.2* (1912) and *From Congo to the Capital, and back again* (2007) lifted from Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* (1907).

Taylor is not the only contemporary black artist to do this—Kehinde Wiley (born 1977) in particular has based his entire artistic oeuvre on recreating Old Masters in this way, without it may be said, adding much by way of meaning to the originals. Wiley is a different case, someone who, as we have argued, "hit upon a gimmick and has been handsomely rewarded for it."

For Taylor however, this practice is analogous to that of musicians who "cover," or perform, the iconic hits of their artistic

mentors, while his more significant and original work insightfully portrays various aspects of the community where he grew up and still lives. The role of family is central to many of these—*Cora (cornbread)* (2008) and *Wegrett* (2006) pay homage to his mother, while *My father, Herschel Taylor* (2010) is a more ambiguous figure. In *The Love of Cousin Tip* (2017), another impressive eight-foot-wide canvas, the multiple generations gathered on the porch speak to the family's historical roots in the Great Migration.

In Taylor's case, the migration was from Texarkana on the eastern border of Texas to Oxnard, a seaside city west of Los Angeles, where his family moved before he was born, the youngest of eight siblings. But it could be any number of medium-to-large cities that were the destinations for as many as six million African Americans who left the rural South from 1910 to the 1970s in search of economic opportunity and the prospect of greater equality in the industrial Northeast, Midwest and West.

As a sincere artist trying to convey essential truth about social and psychological conditions in the United States, Taylor inevitably returns, directly or not, to the themes of police violence and potential incarceration even while creating apparently unrelated, everyday scenes. In *Resting* (2011), a couple sits on a couch. But on closer look, they seem to be hiding a person behind them as a cushion, while outside the window stretches the perimeter wall and guard tower of San Quentin State Prison.

*Homage to a Brother* (2007) is dedicated to Sean Bell, killed in a hail of New York Police Department bullets in Queens, New York in 2006. In *THE TIMES THAY AINT A CHANGING, FAST ENOUGH!* (2017), the body of Philando Castile is thrown back by a police bullet fired at close range in a traffic stop. The eight-foot-by-six-foot painting is based on the image that Castile's girlfriend recorded on her cellphone as the event happened, provoking widespread outrage over social media.

In *The 4th* (2012), a woman tends the traditional barbecue grill, her face partially obscured by the brim of her white baseball cap while behind her stretches a prison yard, suggesting abolitionist Frederick Douglass' famed 1852 speech, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?"

In his day, Douglass denounced the hypocrisy of the American celebration of freedom and equality while 14 percent of the county's population were still enslaved.

Taylor's horror at police violence is entirely legitimate, and praiseworthy, but the full significance of that violence is not so easily grasped. Racism may be rife among the backward layers recruited to the police, but an increasing proportion of law enforcement is black and Latino, and their conduct is just as infamous. The brutality meted out by the police, the hired thugs of the ruling elite, has fundamentally a *class* and not a racial character. It is part of the effort of the powers that be to terrorize and intimidate the oppressed, and at the same time expresses their fears about the socially explosive character of the conditions they preside over.

On this score, one has to reproach Taylor for a certain superficiality, for adapting himself too much to the appearance of things and settling too easily for a semi-racialist, semi-nationalist approach. No artist is helped by ideological carelessness and lack of precise social insight. And Taylor's increasing success in the international art market will come with increasing pressure to tailor his work, and indeed may be contingent upon his adaptation to identity politics.

The largest number of the unarmed victims of police murder in the US are white, but because these killings disproportionately impact

African American and other minority groups, various political forces make it their business, for reactionary purposes, to convince the public that only black people are slain by cops. It takes a more profound perspective and orientation toward the unity of the *entire* working class against the *entire* political and economic establishment to place the problem of homicidal police conduct in its proper context.

Taylor said his reaction to Castile's killing "It was like, Damn, another brother?"

Taylor's stance on police killings speaks to his relatively uncritical attitude toward the black nationalism of the mid 1960-70s that played a significant role in shaping his youth, particularly through the influence of his older brother Randy who was a founding member of the Ventura, California branch of the Black Panther Party. The Panthers' leadership promoted an amalgam of black nationalism and Maoism that made it a target of assassination and infiltration by the FBI, but ultimately served to channel popular anger back into forms of middle class politics and the Democratic Party. (See *The Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution*: No lessons learned)

In addition to enabling Taylor to create a grotesquely sycophantic portrait of Michelle and Barack Obama, failure to make a more serious assessment leaves his work open to being co-opted by the identity politics now deeply ingrained in the art world, as exemplified by the curators of art institutions like the Whitney. One installation in particular, of an "army" of mannequins in black leather jackets invoking the Panthers, accompanied by a collage of black youth killed by police over the last decades and Taylor's rather weak painting of Eldridge Cleaver, feels like it was custom-made for the exhibit.

Taylor is a serious artist who has portrayed the working class communities of L.A. and Oxnard with sensitivity and insight. He has a commitment to people and their difficulties not fatally weighed down by racial or gender politics, unlike so many who have come to maturity in more recent decades, who appallingly insist that an artist cannot "cross lanes" and that he or she has no right to create art about an identity other than his or her own.

This issue erupted at the Whitney Biennial in 2017, where Taylor's work figured prominently for the first time, including both his paintings *THE TIMES THAY AINT A CHANGING, FAST ENOUGH!* and *The 4th*. At that time, Taylor defended Dana Schutz's painting *Open Casket*, based on the photograph of the murdered and mutilated black youth, Emmett Till, against demands that it be censored or even destroyed because Schutz was white.

This is Taylor's strong side, which finds expression in his humane and compassionate approach to people, places and things around him. The painter, 65, has been shaped by a certain era in political and cultural life. He is not responsible for the stagnant and reactionary character of those years, including the rise and dominance of racial and gender politics. What he has done in his most sympathetic and vibrant works is genuinely praiseworthy.



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