

# WITH THE DA RT

At the height of his fame, L.A.'s favorite painter, **HENRY TAYLOR**, looks back on his long, strange trip to art world superstardom

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It's a quarter past 11 on a breezy January morning, and I'm standing outside MOCA Grand Avenue, awaiting the arrival of Henry Taylor. We have a date to tour his four-years-in-the-making retrospective, *Henry Taylor: B Side* (up through April 30), but he's running a bit late. Despite the "old man schedule" he's been keeping—he's a new father for the third time—he smoked a little weed last night and ate some spaghetti late and isn't feeling too hot. But, soon enough, I hear Taylor's gravelly vibrato roar from the northbound lane of Grand, "What's up?!"

Riding in the passenger seat of a Porsche SUV driven by his studio director, Taylor arrives blowing smoke rings from a Cohiba and bumping some reggae out the windows. When he steps from the car, he's dressed in his uniform of recent vintage: Louis Vuitton trainers, artfully tattered

blue jeans, and a blue button-down peeking out from a gray Comme des Garçons cardigan with a heart logo embroidered over the left breast.

After discreetly stashing his cigar in a planter outside the museum, he's greeted like a visiting dignitary—"Hello, Mr. Taylor!"—by a steady stream of museum staff and MOCA visitors, all of whom are a bit aflutter at their chance encounter with art stardom. They aren't the only ones. His November opening, DJ'd by Madlib, was elbow-to-elbow with more than 2,000 people in attendance.

"I've never been to a more crowded opening at MOCA, and it was half artists," says Bennett Simpson, the MOCA curator who helped the museum acquire its first painting from Taylor in 2012 and who organized *B Side*, the widest-ranging presentation of the artist's oeuvre to date. Simpson gathered more than 150 multimedia works that date back to 1985, then grouped them thematically. There are several portraits of friends, family, and his West Adams neighbors, whom he painted during COVID. Other portraits depict unhoused residents who've lived around his studios, many of whom he's employed to gather milk jugs or broom handles for his sculptures.

There are also several paintings

of other artists: some are friends; others reference art history, like a send-up of Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*. There are countless narrative paintings about the carceral state and victims of police violence, from a multimedia tribute to Sean Bell to an iPhone view of Philando Castile's execution. Scattered throughout the galleries are assemblage sculptures hewn from tires, furniture, chicken bones. There's even a vitrine of text paintings on gessoed cigarette packs, cereal cartons, and soap boxes that he used to sell, Basquiat-style, from a suitcase less than a mile from MOCA.

This B side—or "flip," in Taylor's parlance—on the greatest-hits-style retrospective, has engendered rave reviews. *Vanity Fair* dubbed it "probably the most talked-about show in town." The *Los Angeles Times* called it a "big, brash, vital retrospective," while *Artnet* opined, "There is something both universal and achingly individual, with many of his paintings serving as character studies spliced with social commentary."

Just as we were walking into the museum, Half Gallery owner Bill Powers flagged Taylor to say, "The show is incredible, Henry. It's my third time seeing it." A couple of weeks before this exchange, Taylor posted a photo of Brad Pitt mimicking his 1990 painting *Screaming Head*,

an early work the artist made about one of his patients at Camarillo State Mental Hospital. His caption: “The freaks don’t just come out at night.”

In the run up to *B Side*, Taylor has earned coveted spots in the 2019 Venice Biennale and 2017 Whitney Biennial—*B-Side* will travel to the Whitney in the fall—and joined the powerhouse gallery, Hauser & Wirth, which just sold a painting of his at the Frieze L.A. art fair for \$450,000. Despite, or perhaps because of, all this, Taylor just can’t stop.

“I’m motherfucking busy, man,” he tells me. He’s perpetually on the road—constantly posting photos from Ghana, Cuba, Ethiopia, Haiti, Morocco, while painting nearly everyone he meets. At home he’s been busy making 1,600-pound totemic sculptures for a show that just went up at the Fabric Workshop in Philadelphia. Part of that show is woven textile works that evoke the complex history of Black Watch tartan and its attachment to the Scottish roots of the Ku Klux Klan. And he’s been offering a platform—Henry Taylor Gallery—to friends like the once homeless painter Emery Lambus and the beloved multimedia talent Frances Stark, who had a show at the gallery last fall. Stark says with a laugh, “He was here packing my paintings into a U-Haul personally.”



#### FABRIC OF THINGS

Opposite: Paintings of Taylor’s mother as a child; with Jade and Noah; with Epic; and a self-portrait. Above: Taylor’s tartan; detail of a moving blanket and chainlink woven with gold-leaved fabric.



#### WHERE THE FOUND THINGS ARE

An unstretched painting and a totem made from a bale of crushed vinyl home siding, gilded cotton bricks, a mallet, tartan scraps, and a stuffed vinyl bag and flag from Taylor’s Fabric Workshop exhibition.

It all confirmed, if it wasn’t abundantly apparent, that, at 64, this favorite son of Oxnard—the eighth child of a housepainter father and a mother who cleaned the homes of Ventura County’s elite—had, after three decades of hustling, been anointed the people’s king of the L.A. art world, the Ed Ruscha of the Instagram era.

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ough a self-portrait of Taylor, modeled after a late sixteenth century picture of Henry V, now graces count-

less pole banners advertising *B Side* from Venice to Little Tokyo, he never dreamed of being art world royalty. In fact, he wanted to be a journalist early on. He was one of six boys whom his father dubbed “bullets”—an extended arm, in case of emergency—because Hershel Taylor ran with some “hard people” back in the day. “My father wasn’t afraid of nobody, and that shocked me because I seen him fight the police when I was like seven years old,” recalls Taylor.

Though there is a lot of clever wordplay in Taylor’s paintings, journalism wasn’t his calling. After a few pivotal relationships with artists at a young age, Taylor decided that painting was his medium. “I grew up with the Hernandez Brothers”—of *Love and Rockets* fame—“right around

the corner,” he told me years ago, noting they impressed upon him the importance of craftsmanship. He made his first painting, of some trains and a mountain inspired by the 1950 Truman Capote essay *A Ride Through Spain*, at the home of his middle school teacher, Teresa Escareno, who encouraged Taylor to keep going. He did just that, constantly sketching people at parties.

But once Taylor was at Oxnard College, the painter James Jarvaise turned him onto Philip Guston and Cy Twombly, opening up a whole new world. “I didn’t think art school was necessary until Jarvaise told me to get my ass there.” By the time he heeded that advice and enrolled at the California Institute of the Arts to pursue his BFA, Taylor was already in his thirties with a young family. He was also working the night shift as a psychiatric technician at Camarillo.

“It was after meds, when people start to mellow out. When they’re relaxing, you can go talk to them,” says Taylor, who explains that this afforded him the time and space to approach his patients not only as a medical professional but also as an artist, one who slowly built a body of drawings that capture the pathos and humanity of these people who were essentially discarded by society. As heartrending as they are, especially as a single group in the *B Side* show, at the time Taylor was making them, figurative painting was not en vogue at all, especially at the conceptually focused CalArts.



"At that time, I couldn't think of any figurative painters," says Jason Meadows, the UCLA-trained sculptor who met Taylor back when he had dreadlocks and lived in Chinatown (sometimes out of his Volvo station wagon) in the late 1990s. "It was all just nonobjective painting back then, like Mark Grotjahn."

Even Taylor was reluctant about being a painter in those days. "To be honest with you, I was so insecure. But I didn't want to all of a sudden be some conceptual artist," he told me a few years ago.

Taylor's circuitous journey to stardom began less than a mile from MOCA, in the plazas of Chinatown. This was back in the late '90s and early aughts, about a decade out of CalArts, when Taylor was feverishly hustling paintings out of his car and selling his painted cigarette packs and cereal boxes for whatever he could get. The artist Maynard Monrow remembers buying some to help Taylor, with whom he would later collaborate on the 2007 Michele O'Marah film *Repeat after me: I AM a Revolutionary*, which re-creates

a 1973 *Firing Line* interview with William F. Buckley (played by Monrow) as he interrogates Black Panther leader Huey P. Newton (played by a wig-wearing Taylor). There was a lot of partying between takes of the semi-absurdist film. "You can't get me to be serious all the time," says Monrow. "And Henry certainly can't be serious all the time either. Especially, you know, if there's additives going down on set."

"Henry is an iconic kind of artist personality," explains Andrea Bowers, a multimedia artist who dated him on and off for eight years beginning in the late aughts. "Back in the day, the artists would be wasted, wearing weird hats and outfits. But then came this professionalism. We were all supposed to dress right, and we would get scolded if we behaved badly. But Henry's gonna do things his way."

Despite his hard-partying path, Taylor is a self-proclaimed "working-class motherfucker." One who is always feverishly painting, always intently looking—whether it's eyeballing a subject from behind a canvas, gazing out the window of his

car for some trash he might turn into a new sculpture, or just zeroing in on a series of personal dramas and world events he can later collapse into an artwork that is as journalistic as it is humanistic.

"Everybody's like, 'Henry's a genius.' No, you know what? Henry paints every day," says Bowers, adding, "There was a whole group of artists back then who would sketch each other, and see how fast they could do it."

Andrew Hahn was one of those artists, and he introduced gallerist Kathryn Brennan to Taylor's work. At the time, Taylor was commuting between Chinatown, the place that gave him his nickname (see @chinatowntaylor), and the Thousand Oaks home he shared with the mother of his now-grown son, Noah. (In addition to Noah, Taylor



MOCA: JEFF MCCLANE STUDIO; ANDREA BOWERS, 2010, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND HAUSER & WIRTH. PHOTO BY ROBERT BEAN; UNTITLED, 2021, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND HAUSER & WIRTH. PHOTO BY JEFF MCCLANE.

has a two-year-old daughter, Epic, with artist Liz Glynn, and a grown daughter, Jade, from a previous relationship.) Shortly after, while he and Noah's mother were separating, he couch-surfed and sometimes lived out of his painting-packed station wagon, which only added to his radical empathy or what Meadows calls Taylor's "magical charisma."

Despite all that, he was gathering a rep as a painter's painter in the burgeoning art scene being birthed around that neighborhood by David Kordansky, China Art Objects, Black Dragon Society, and Brennan's Sister Gallery, which were fostering the nascent careers of superstars-in-the-making like Jorge Pardo, Eric Wesley, Pae White, Mary Weatherford, and, ultimately, Henry Taylor.

"Henry answered the door, and the first thing I saw was this painting on the back wall that just blew me away. It was so beautiful and so different from anything anyone else was doing at the time," says Brennan of the day she met Taylor and laid eyes on *Government Cheese*, a portrait which depicts a Black man nude from the waist up in the pose of a mugshot. Instead of holding up an inmate ID card, he's holding up a block of this "no frills" cheese. Brennan thought: "He's the Manet of our generation." She bought the painting off the wall, and agreed to give Taylor a show.

The painting would go on to be prominently featured in the entryway of Taylor's 2007 solo show at the Studio Museum in Harlem, the artist's institutional debut, which came on the heels of his sold-out solo debut, *Free 99*, at Sister Gallery, followed by a sold-out booth at the New Art Dealers Alliance fair in Miami during Art Basel. The Miami-based mega collectors Don and Mera Rubell bought two paintings from Taylor's sophomore show at Sister, *Get Black*, and later put Taylor in their *30 Americans* exhibition, which toured the country and showcased the work of, as they called it, "the most important African American artists of the last three decades." Just as the *16 Americans* show at MoMA put Taylor's mentor, Jarvaise, in the company of Jasper Johns and Frank Stella in 1959, *30 Americans* placed Taylor in conversation with Kerry James Marshall, Kara Walker,

Kehinde Wiley, and Noah Davis, the late painter and cofounder of the Underground Museum.

"I remember pulling up to the hotel and Henry walking out, screaming at Noah, 'Yo, what's up, motherfucker?'" recalls sculptor Karon Davis, who married Davis on that trip. "We skipped out on a couple dinners and would just hang out in Henry's hotel room

a series of canvases that sought to "honestly portray the reality of Black experience and the often iniquitous workings of American life."

Davis recalls one canvas—"This tribute to L.A., a love letter"—featuring Nipsey Hussle's Marathon Clothing store with her husband in the foreground. "It was down to the wire, and I went to just offer support, and the next thing I know, he's

## "Hell, I want to feel free when I'm on that fucking canvas. If nowhere else, I can go here and let it all out."



### THE BIG PICTURE

Opposite: An "Afro Tree" sculpture at *B-Side*; a painting of artist Andrea Bowers; self-portrait of Taylor that graces the cover of the MOCA catalog. Above: a multimedia installation referencing the Black Panther and Black Lives Matter movements.

and drink beers and smoke joints. I definitely feel like they were soulmates; they're both wild at heart."

A decade after their meeting, Taylor earned a spot in the 2019 Venice Biennale, where his practice was at the white-hot center of an all-star cast of Black artists that included Julie Mehretu, Njideka Akunyili Crosby, Davis's brother Kahlil Joseph, and Arthur Jafa, who won the Golden Lion that year. It was not only a watershed moment but also a tipping point. Taylor took a monumental approach to his Venice presentation, employing the formal structure of Robert Rauschenberg's epic 190-panel installation *The 1/4 Mile*, with

painting me into the painting too," says Davis. "All these other paintings were up, and this one was leaning against the wall. Immediately, when I walked in, I saw Noah, and I got all teary-eyed. I can remember that night and how dark the space was except for where Henry was painting. It was just very intimate and sweet." Though Noah Davis and Taylor both developed singular styles and became known for painting a certain Black experience, they both met art world racism early on—Taylor was often mislabeled an "outsider" artist—and because of these experiences they didn't want to be pigeonholed as simply Black figurative painters.



#### SNAP, CRACKLE, AND POP

Photos from Taylor's @chinatowntaylor Instagram feed. Clockwise from bottom left: Taylor with Tyler, the Creator; with Mason Plumlee; Brad Pitt, Thomas Houseago, and Albert Oehlen at *B Side*; with multimedia artist Frances Stark; with painters Emery Lambus and Andy Robert.

"All these motherfuckers be wanting this Black shit," Taylor told me during a smoke break outside MOCA, referring to the insatiable appetite for Black artists by rich white collectors. "I said I'm gonna do white-girl and white-guy paintings." Adds Stark, "Not to say it's not deserved, but there's a certain creepiness to some of this enthusiasm." Davis says, "I love that he doesn't give a fuck. He's just like, 'I'm gonna paint everyone.' Because that's what he's about, if you look at his circle of friends."

**N**ext day, when he takes me to his West Adams painting studio—he's also got another massive sculpture studio nearby filled with his never-ending collections of street finds—there are rows of the aforementioned paintings, mainly of female artists or his seven-foot-tall friend, Clippers center Mason Plumlee. These paintings, each of which carry the color-blocking and

energetic brushstrokes Taylor is known for, are stacked five or six deep along every wall, leaning against a pinball machine celebrating the Who, against a couple of vintage ironing boards, beneath a sign that reads "Dope, Dick & Dinero" beside a shelf containing every imaginable color of Nova Color paint. They're even stacked behind a yellow mannequin wearing a black "Compton" cap.

"I don't want anybody telling me not to paint something about a white man. I don't want anybody fucking telling me shit," Taylor told the LAXART director Hamza Walker in an interview that took place around the Whitney Biennial, when the white

artist Dana Schutz got into hot water for a painting she made of Emmett Till. Her work was installed near Taylor's painting of Philando Castile at the Whitney, and he said this in both of their defenses, "Hell, I want to feel free when I'm on that fucking canvas. If nowhere else, I can go here and let it all out."

As Zadie Smith observed of Taylor's process for a 2018 feature in *The New Yorker*, "There is a Picasso-like restlessness" to the artist and "a determined promiscuity of intention and execution." Or as his former studio assistant, the ascendant painter Andy Robert, suggests, "He's the kind of person that'll just put you on the back of his scooter, you know, and just go somewhere. You don't know where you're going, but you never want those nights to end," he says. "There's something about the way he lives and his excitement for life. I think that's his greatest lesson—how to live and love and care about people."

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ough it was slightly overwhelming for me to ride shotgun with Taylor as he was besieged at his show by dozens of strangers, he found time to make space for everyone, playing games with the security guards, singing and dancing around the galleries. When he wasn't cutting loose, Taylor was also disarmingly reverential in the museum, his rapid-fire cadence slowing to a whisper the minute he crossed the threshold of his exhibition. He loved seeing a 2006 painting of Brennan, which came from his personal collection. A prophetic fortune cookie fortune was affixed to the front: "Wise Man Say: Successful Person, One Who Recognized Chance, and Took It."

"That's him. I love how this painting is ripped, and the stretcher is coming through. He never sold this or let go of it," says Simpson, noting he ended the show with a portrait, commissioned by the *New York Times*, of Jay-Z, who owns several of Taylor's works. Taylor titled the portrait *I Am a Man*, a nod to the protest posters originally designed for the Memphis



#### HARD-ARTED

Taylor inside his West Adams painting studio.

Sanitation Workers Strike and later used during the 1968 Poor People's Campaign in Washington, D.C., but also a nod to the perceived charmed life of the rapper, who is no more beyond the reach of America's racism than Taylor. It's the last artwork one sees before exiting the *B Side* exhibition, one of many paintings of iconic Black figures—Jackie Robinson, Haile Selassie, Eldridge Cleaver, and a portrait of the Obamas, which was a birthday gift from the president to the first lady—in what Simpson calls the "Legends" gallery.

"I wanted you to come through the whole show and end up in the Legends room because that's where it's surprising. When you think that this artist is somebody who paints his family or people living on the street, you don't necessarily think he's also going to have access to people who are so elevated in society," says

Simpson. "I like that collapsing effect because it's so important to Henry. He doesn't think about people in different ways."

Taylor claims to have only visited *B Side* three times after the opening, and constantly remarks, "I'm tripping," as he sees the connections running through his oeuvre, whether it's a painting of his mother Cora's stove opposite one of him feeding Epic in a high chair or a 15-foot-tall "afro tree" next to a sprawling multimedia installation comprised of dozens of mannequins fitted with black jackets adorned with photographic pins of victims of police violence. There are murals of a sheriff's bus and homeless encampment surrounding the army of black jackets that draw a line between the poverty line, the Black Panthers (his brother Randy, a constant subject of Taylor's work, helped start the Ventura chapter), and the Black Lives

Matter movement. A banner reads "End War and Racism!!! Support the Black Panthers."

"I wish we could resurrect a movement like this. Emmett Till was one motherfucker that everybody got upset about. But look at all these people. We should all be mad as hell," says Taylor in a hushed voice, pointing to this cast of Black faces. While *L.A. Times* critic Christopher Knight labeled this work "less engaging," Taylor was clearly proud of it and looking forward to this next chapter in his unpredictable life.

"I am shifting," Taylor says the next day, about his recent pivots in the studio. As more reggae bumps on the stereo, he takes a slow sip of a beer and a long pull on a cigarette, just before his eyes widen with that Taylor-made animation. "Because, you know, it's like, 'Wait a minute, motherfucker—I am in control.' ■