



Blazing Talent

Henry Taylor sets the L.A. art scene on fire.

BY SARAH DOUGLAS

HENRY TAYLOR'S PAINTINGS address community in its most expansive sense. The wide cast of characters that populate his work range from denizens of the Los Angeles art world to sports heroes and historical figures to people from his downtown L.A. neighborhood. The stunned-looking woman seated in a chair in a 2010 canvas, for example, is a crack addict Taylor met on the street and paid to pose late one night. Asked whether he worries about letting strangers into his loft, which also functions as his studio, Taylor, 52, shrugs. "I wanted to work. You gotta get what you gotta get. So far so good. One girl stole my CD player."

Family members also appear in Taylor's pictures. The youngest of seven siblings, the artist was raised by a single mother in the city of Oxnard, in southern California. He enrolled in 1990 at California Institute of the Arts, whose theory-heavy program failed to dampen his zeal for figurative painting. At night he worked the swing shift as a psychiatric technician at Camarillo State Hospital, where he sketched patients, some of whom turn up in later paintings, such as *Tasered*, 2005.

By then Taylor had begun exhibiting regularly in Los Angeles; his breakthrough show, "Sis and Bra," took place in 2007 at the Studio Museum in Harlem. Most of the paintings displayed there depicted family members and friends at neighborhood gatherings, but Taylor

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
Double Up, 2009. Acrylic on canvas, 91½ x 78½ in.

Miss Kelley, 2010. Acrylic on canvas, 78 x 96 in.

Jesse Owens in '36, 2010. Acrylic on canvas, 87½ x 77 in.

OPPOSITE:
Henry Taylor in his studio.



ALL IMAGES IN STORY HENRY TAYLOR AND BLUM & POE, LOS ANGELES, AND UNTITLED, NEW YORK.
CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM RIGHT: JUERG ISLER; TWO IMAGES, ADAM REICH. OPPOSITE: © DENNIS HOLLINGSWORTH





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
My father, Hershaf Taylor, 2010. Acrylic on canvas, 75 x 46½ in.

Brother, Brother, Brother, 2009. Acrylic on suitcase, 28 x 9 x 21 in.

The Long Jump by Carl Lewis, 2010. Acrylic on canvas, 87½ x 77 in.



also included *Homage to a Brother*, which memorializes Sean Bell—the African-American man killed by detectives in New York in 2006 the night before his wedding—pictured beneath his first name spelled out in gold sports-jersey-style lettering. “I woke up one morning and thought, ‘That could have been my fucking nephew,’” Taylor says.

With its swathes of rich color and impastoed surfaces, Taylor’s canvases evince an obvious joy in paint. Some works are straightforward portraits; others are textured, incorporating free-associative elements. In one of the latter, *My Brother Gene the former “Tunnel Rat,”* 2010, the subject sits at a table looking pensive. Behind him, across a wide street, its signage partly visible, is a Walmart store in a strip mall; next to him, an oversized lightbulb; below him, a soldier crawling on the ground, recalling Gene’s experiences in the Vietnam War. Still other pictures, such as one of the Olympic sprinter and long jumper Carl Lewis, derive from newspaper images. “When I look at an athlete, I’m reminded of his gracefulness, not so much that he was a champion,” Taylor says, drawing a parallel between that grace and his own practice. “Sometimes I start slow, I’m just eager to work. But I get energetic and burst out, like Carl, attack things, take off.”

The artist’s verbal fluency—evident as he leaps from black history to music to family stories—is reflected in his painting. Words hover in pictures like the 2008 *She Mixed*, in which a black and white couple recline on a floating bed next to letters spelling out the title. Words also inspire Taylor’s work in more indirect ways. In a second studio he recently took in Chinatown is a 24-foot canvas tacked to the wall on which Taylor has scrawled a phrase gleaned from an article about overcrowding

in prison: Warning Shots Not Required. As this slogan suggests, he considers himself a political artist, albeit not a strident one. “I’ve never wanted to be dogmatic,” he says. “You don’t have to beat nobody over the head. I don’t have a real agenda. My work is me.”

The show “Couch Paintings,” at the L.A. nonprofit WPA last fall, which featured portraits of people posed on his beaten-up couch, captured the centrality of his home studio to Taylor’s artistic approach. The studio is a sort of hoarder’s haven, and a visitor soon realizes that Taylor doesn’t limit his art to canvas. He applies his brush to suitcases, cigarette boxes, cereal boxes, three-legged tables, and any other detritus he picks up. These sculptural collages were presented among a profusion of unaltered objects in a spring 2009 exhibition at the now-defunct L.A. gallery Mesler & Hug. Paintings hung by a potted plant, a couch, a chair, a coffee table, wiggled mannequin heads. In the corner stood a stand-in for Taylor’s television set: a painted sketch of the burning World Trade Center towers atop a St. Ides malt-liquor box. *Los Angeles Times* critic Christopher Knight called the display “a pack rat’s humble accumulation of used things . . . part Robert Rauschenberg and part Jason Rhoades.”

Taylor’s use of unconventional materials, as well as his willfully unsophisticated painting style, often gets him pegged as an outsider artist. “I try to embrace the naive,” he says. “There’s sincerity there. But I could go from that to Brancusi.” He’s been compared to other African-American painters, like Robert Colescott, Bob Thompson, and Jean-Michel Basquiat, but his work engages with art history generally. A 2007 painting of the Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver—one of Taylor’s brothers flirted with the movement—is compositionally the spitting image of Whistler’s *Mother*. The stacked malt-liquor boxes on which he paints recall Brancusi’s *Endless Column*, Rauschenberg’s cardboard pieces, Warhol’s Brillo Box, and African sculpture. A visit to the grocery store can turn up tribal totems. “Water containers or a Purex detergent bottle—they all look like African sculptures to me,” he says.

With his debut at Blum & Poe in March, Taylor is marking a milestone. He’s also the first African-American to have a solo show at the gallery, one of L.A.’s most prominent. “What do I think about that? I’m just grateful to work,” he says with a wry humor that only partly masks his pride. “I thought about Jackie Robinson. Not like sliding home or any of that shit, but jokingly, to make the major leagues. You’re grateful that there is, maybe, no color line anymore.” MP

