

MoMA PS1 presents a major solo exhibition of artist Henry Taylor (American, b. 1958), bringing together more than 70 works by the Los Angeles-based artist. Organized by Peter Eleey, Curator of MoMA PS1 and Laura Hoptman, Curator in the Department of Painting and Sculpture at The Museum of Modern Art, Henry Taylor will open on January 29 and remain on view through April 9, 2012.

For a decade before and during his studies at the California Institute of the Arts, Taylor worked as an aide to the mentally ill at a hospital in Camarillo, California. A figurative painter with a generous, gregarious personality, this experience—so different from that of a typical art student—sharpened his interest in, and appreciation for, the diversity of individuals from all economic and social walks of life and encouraged a passion for an intensely empathetic style of portraiture that is energetic and immediate. That he has often painted his pictures on objects close at hand—from empty cigarette packages to detergent boxes—in addition to traditional stretched canvas reinforces the feeling of informality and a freshness that surrounds his practice. Taylor also uses commonplace materials and objects from his immediate environment to create sculptural assemblages, which are often similarly figurative in form.

Taylor's earliest mature works include group portraits of his large family, often painted from photographs, fellow students from art school and patients under his care, in addition to self-portraits. After leaving school, Taylor broadened his subjects to include not only friends and acquaintances, but people he met by chance—a waitress at a local restaurant, a homeless person he encountered on the sidewalk of his Chinatown neighborhood in Los Angeles. Quickly painted, often in a single sitting, these are nonetheless formal portraits; faces are closely studied and carefully painted, as are telling elements of clothing like a cap or a logo on a tee-shirt. Whether he is painting a portrait of his beloved brother or a homeless man whose name he never caught, all of his portraits communicate both an affection and familiarity. When asked recently for his criteria for choosing a portrait subject, Taylor answered simply, —I paint those subjects I have love and sympathy for.¶

Over the past ten years, Taylor has also painted portraits of figures he does not know, but who he deems important to a larger African-American community. A recent series of large, public-sized works commemorate sports figures and heroes of the Civil Rights and Black Panther movements, as well as martyrs to racially-motivated violence and police brutality. Painted from photographs, these hybrids of portraiture and history painting are more complexly composed than his works from life, and include narrative details that construct symbolic stories around recognizable personalities like the track and field star Carl Lewis or the Black Panther leader Huey Newton.

Taylor's paintings can be seen in a modern American portrait tradition that includes artists such as Alice Neel, whose intimate style and thick brushwork closely relates to his own. They can also be considered in the context of a specifically African-American history of portraiture alongside the work of Barkley L. Hendricks (b. 1945), for example, and Kerry James Marshall (b.1955), who spent his formative years in Los Angeles, and comes from roughly the same generation as Taylor. Although his work might fall easily in to a tradition of American figurative painting, Taylor's voice remains unique.

Henry Taylor (American, b. 1958) was born in Oxnard, California, and lives and works in Los Angeles. Solo presentations of Taylor's work include Grrrrrl, Santa Monica Museum, California (2010), and Sis and Bra, The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York (2007). Taylor's work has also been included in various group exhibitions, such as 30 Americans, Rubell Family Collection, Miami, FL (2008); and At Home/Not at Home, Hessel Museum of Art, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY (2010).

Henry Taylor is organized by Peter Eleey, Curator, MoMA PS1, and Laura Hoptman, Curator, Department of Painting and Sculpture, The Museum of Modern Art.

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