

ART TALK

KING HENRY

The Los Angeles-based artist Henry Taylor has long been a legend for his paintings and his personality. This spring, for the Whitney Biennial, he's bringing his outsize work to New York.

BY MICHAEL SLENSKE PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID BLACK



CHINATOWN TAYLOR
The artist in his 2,100-square-foot studio in downtown Los Angeles with several paintings in progress.

WHAT'S HAPPENING, bro?" booms the gravelly voice of Henry Taylor as he crosses South Los Angeles Street, a bustling offshoot of L.A.'s downtown Fashion District. Dressed in his uniform of work boots, baggy jeans and an unbuttoned oxford shirt, the 58-year-old artist has sunglasses balancing on the tip of his nose, a cigarette dangling from his lips and a young woman in tow who will sit for one of his portraits—or what he calls “slow chess games”—in his second-floor studio inside a former factory.

“I’m a quick starter, but I’m not a finisher,” Taylor says, pointing to a wall of several large works in progress as we walk inside his massive, double-height workspace. There are dozens of his deeply personal and political paintings and assemblage sculptures that, over the past decade, have earned him solo shows at Harlem’s Studio Museum, MoMA PS1 and the L.A. and New York gallery spaces of his primary dealer, Blum & Poe. “I’ve got too many things to work on,” he says. “Everywhere I travel I make work. I used to go to openings and take milk cartons full of paint because I just couldn’t stop painting—but I’ve never been under the gun like this.”

The recent pressure follows his acclaimed Blum & Poe solo show in Culver City, California, this past fall, and his inclusion in the Whitney Biennial, which runs from March 17 to June 11, in New York. He’s been working overtime since the summer preparing for both. As he bounds around the 2,100-square-foot space, Taylor riffs in an expletive-laced staccato about his works—six of which will be displayed at the Whitney. There’s a wall-size landscape that depicts

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an allegorical funeral procession for his grandfather, a horse trainer and gambler who was killed in Naples, Texas, in 1933; and an image of 32-year-old Philando Castile (who was fatally shot by a Minnesota police officer in July 2016) inside an automobile with a gun pointed toward him through the passenger window.

A portrait of Taylor’s late friend Noah Davis sits near the studio entrance. “That’s for his mom,” says Taylor, momentarily dropping his firecracker tone to reflect on Davis, the talented painter and installation artist who started L.A.’s Underground Museum and succumbed to cancer two years ago at the age of 32. “He taught me not to have so much anxiety.”

Still, Taylor seems nervous about the many deadlines he faces. In addition to showing at the Whitney Biennial this spring, he will make his solo debut at Zurich’s Galerie Eva Presenhuber in June. He also recently completed commissions for the Whitney’s Christmas card and a High Line Art mural in Chelsea that will be installed this spring, which features a self-portrait of Taylor floating on colorful pool noodles.



FAMILIAR FACES Taylor's paintings often capture not only family members and neighbors but also iconic figures. Clockwise from above: *The Love of Cousin Tip*, 2016–2017; *Food*, 2016; and *The Frances Stark*, 2016.

“Henry is having a moment right now because he has the capacity to create compelling paintings that not only embrace figuration but also diversify it,” says Naima Keith, the deputy director of exhibitions and programs at the California African American Museum, who has been friends with Taylor for nearly a decade. “More importantly, it seems figurative painters like Henry are portraying people in response to salient topics and issues of the 21st century—from race, gender and war to social activism.”

Taylor's oeuvre comprises snapshots, news clippings and ephemera that illuminate the lives of family, friends, homeless neighbors and legendary figures—including Olympic high jumper Alice Coachman in midair (a painting of whom sold for \$149,000 at a 2016 Christie's auction). “I am constantly intrigued by the ways he makes no distinction between iconic historical figures and the person sitting in front of him,” Keith says. “People from the neighborhood might wander in and become the subject of a portrait alongside Black Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver.”

Raised in Oxnard, California, Taylor is the youngest of eight children (“I'm Henry the Eighth,” he jokes). Some of his first memories of art are admiring the paintings in the wealthy homes his mother cleaned and watching his father work as an industrial painter at Naval Air Station Point Mugu. On the weekends, Taylor would help his father paint houses or bars around Ventura County. He



also got an early art education from his neighbors and classmates: Mario, Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez, the artist brothers behind the *Love and Rockets* comics.

“When I met artists like those guys, I became aware of a person's draftsmanship,” says Taylor, who drew sports idols alongside the Hernandez brothers during their adolescence. By high school, he was making ceramics and had completed his first painting—a mountainous landscape based on Truman Capote's essay *A Ride Through Spain*. In the early '80s, he studied cultural anthropology, journalism, set design and interior design at five schools between Oxnard and Oakland, including Laney College, where he took his first art course, in etching. Taylor spent the next decade working as a psychiatric technician at Camarillo State Hospital, the well-known mental health

facility north of Los Angeles.

“I tend to embrace [mentally ill people] easier because of my relationship with them at the hospital. I've found that a lot of them are just innocent, sweet human beings,” says Taylor, who painted portraits of schizophrenic and bipolar patients during his years at Camarillo, while studying for a B.F.A. at the California Institute of the Arts.

Although Taylor's tender early works, which he debuted at his home gallery in January 2016, have been validated by critics, collectors and curators alike, he remained insecure about his painting until he was 40. In fact, before every critique at CalArts, Taylor would load his artwork into an ice cream truck owned by his then girlfriend (the mother of his 25-year-old son, Noah, an artist who now assists Taylor with his paintings) and bring them to the home of his late Oxnard College mentor, James Jarvaise, the Southern California painter who was part of MoMA's seminal 1959 survey *Sixteen Americans*. “He'd look at every f—ing one,” says Taylor, who ultimately decided not to pursue an M.F.A. “He was the game changer.”

Taylor spent the '90s raising his son in Thousand Oaks—he also has a 28-year-old daughter, Jade, who is a social worker in New York—while hawking paintings on cigarette packs and cereal boxes around L.A. when he couldn't afford canvases. Slowly, he built a reputation as a raw talent with a big personality, aka “Chinatown Taylor,” the hard-partying bard of the downtown district.

“He was kind of a legend before he was a legend,” says Tim Blum, co-founder of Blum & Poe. “He's like a walking, living, breathing work of art, and alongside being a visual artist, he's a poet. He sort of embodies that wherever he goes. But Henry also has wrestled with a lot of demons.”

Having battled early financial setbacks and a few near-death experiences, Taylor has persevered, most recently resulting in his acclaimed Blum & Poe solo show this past fall. “He's never done such a total domination of a space,” says Blum. In addition to filling its galleries with massive paintings, Taylor turned one space into a skid row lot with a half-buried shopping cart, a dead tree, a homeless encampment and a graffiti homage to Michael Jackson. Another area served as a replica painting studio with art supplies and a constellation of small portraits. Taylor transformed



yet another gallery into a blacked-out screening room—enhanced with Jamaican musicians and marijuana smoke—for a short film he made with director Kahlil Joseph about a chance backstage encounter Taylor had with Bob Marley at the Santa Barbara Bowl when he was 20 years old.

While the exhibition left a considerable impression on critics and curators from coast to coast, the pressure of the deadlines has left Taylor searching for more. “Sometimes I feel like I haven't even touched the surface,” Taylor says as he surveys the unfinished works in his studio. “I'm just trying to get back in here and have some mother—ing fun.” ●