

los angeles artist

interview with henry taylor

INTERVIEW BY DOROTHÉE PERRET
PORTRAITS BY DANIEL TRESE

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HENRY TAYLOR'S SHOW OPENS IN SEPTEMBER
AT BLUM & POE, NEW YORK

Born in Ventura, California, in 1958, Henry Taylor paints on everything: cigarette packs, detergent boxes, suitcases, wood, furniture, and of course on canvas... and everyone: waitresses,

celebrities, the homeless, politicians ... but mostly African-Americans, often capturing the discrimination they constantly have to face. He paints freely, loosely, easily, and always with great empathy.



DOROTHÉE PERRET — I've read that you had a mentor at an early age who gave you direction. You were already drawing a lot.

HENRY TAYLOR — It was my seventh-grade teacher who really sparked my interest in art. She had a lot of books at her house. We didn't have art books at our house [in Oxnard, California], or anything like that. I was fortunate to have someone like that in my life. I was visiting her quite frequently from the time I was 13 years old. The first painting I ever made was at her house. It was based on a Truman Capote story, a robbery scene or something like that. She traveled a lot to Mexico and bring home pottery. And she was influential with what I read, like Carlos Castaneda. She opened my world up. I started out not really thinking about art as a career. I just wasn't that confident in myself. I grew up with the Hernandez brothers — Gilbert, Jaime, Richard, and Mario — who were comic book artists and started *Love and Rockets* in 1981. In seventh grade, when I saw Richard's drawings, I was totally blown away. I always thought I wasn't that good. I thought about being a journalist and then studied interior design because I was still afraid to major in art: "Nah, nah, I'll do something

art-related." I took two years, and I thought, "Why am I taking this?" I took my first art class as an adult at Laney College, an etching class, around 1977 or '78. I dropped out after a semester at UCSB [University of California, Santa Barbara], moved to Oakland, and took an art class there. I started painting, but only watercolors. I thought I'd take baby steps toward painting.

DOROTHÉE PERRET — Watercolors are not easy to work with. HENRY TAYLOR — No, but I wanted to do something other than just work with a pencil and pen. So, that was the cheapest way to get started. I kept the watercolors in my backpack. I was in my 20s.

DOROTHÉE PERRET — Did you have mentors at that time? Or were you really on your own?

HENRY TAYLOR — I was worried about my draftsmanship, so I was just trying to practice drawing and whatever it took to make me feel more confident. I talked to a lot of artists in Santa Barbara who were doing more than me, but I was almost an outsider, always inquiring and wanting to be around them. I didn't have a proper studio because my life was sort of unstable. Then I moved back home to be more stable. I saw this teacher in Oxnard, he seemed

cool — James Jarvaise, who was in [the 1959 MoMA show] "16 Americans" with Jasper Johns, Louise Nevelson, and Jay DeFeo — and I started taking classes with him. That's when I became more serious. I would hitchhike from Oxnard to LA because I didn't have a car to go to museums. I remember seeing David Hockney early on at places like LACMA [Los Angeles County Museum of Art] and MOCA [Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles] and stumbling on galleries, but none that I followed. It was just by chance.

DOROTHÉE PERRET — LA, at the time, was already an El Dorado for artists. What attracted you to the city?

HENRY TAYLOR — I wasn't aware of the scene. I was just trying to learn because there was nothing in Oxnard. With Jarvaise, I started painting, and he opened me up to more contemporary art, people like [Philip] Guston and [Richard] Diebenkorn. That was part of my education, looking at magazines like *Art in America*. I was intimidated by, and not really looking at, anything before the 20th century. When punk came out, it was something that could be achieved. People who became musicians didn't necessarily go to college or something formal. I

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WORKS IN PROGRESS AT HENRY TAYLOR'S STUDIO



grew up with people who had ska bands, and I thought, "If you can be in a ska band, you can be an artist." It was slowly becoming an option, and knowing Mr. Jarvaise made it seem even more of a possibility. We were all trying to learn the fundamentals of painting. Very soon after that, I would create my own narratives. I did a lot of portraits because I'd go to parties and, if I got bored, would sit in a corner and draw people. I'd practice drawing eyes, noses, and lips from books. I just wanted to know that I could copy. At least do that. And after that, I started to loosen up.

DOROTHÉE PERRET — Around what age was this?
 HENRY TAYLOR — I was feeling more confident around age 24. [Laughs] It took me a long time. I was taking classes from Jarvaise from the time I was 23, 24, until I transferred to CalArts. It was Jarvaise who told me to apply. He coached me: "Make a few paintings," and I did. I went to CalArts when I was in my early 30s, and I was also working as a nurse at the Camarillo State Mental Hospital, from three until midnight.

DOROTHÉE PERRET — That was a solid block of time in your life, and a lot of observations?
 HENRY TAYLOR — Yeah, from 1984 to '94. I was always drawing patients. Sometimes I'd watch somebody in restraints, so I'd draw people in restraints. If I'm sitting in the day hall, I'm drawing patients, so I did a lot of figurative work. A lot of observation, and stories that stay with you. I saw a lot. Kids were making their own toys. A lot of the kids in the mental hospital were, like, sculptors, and were really resourceful. It was paraphernalia to us, but to them it was their toys. They'd make guns and holsters out of eyeglass cases — just really amazing things.

DOROTHÉE PERRET — You were at school, and also in that hospital environment making art. Was it schizophrenic for you during that period?
 HENRY TAYLOR — It's schizophrenic now. [Laughs] Like when Picasso said he could draw really well at 10 but wanted to forget all that.

Sometimes what you learn, you want to unlearn. That's where the schizophrenia comes in. You might like something that's not as representational, like a figure with no face. Sometimes you might be compelled to be more elaborate or embellish something, but maybe that's not necessary. Like poetry, you don't have to be explicit, but allude to something. So, you're not really editing, but you're thinking about people you admire and say, "They never do eyes — why do I need an eye?" Sometimes you think something is empty, but it's not really empty — there can actually be beauty in that emptiness.

DOROTHÉE PERRET — In your work, the figure is present, but always in a space that's very abstract and minimal. It doesn't look like tension, but it feels like there's something going on — it's moving.
 HENRY TAYLOR — You could be in prison and have all the time in the world to work on something, and you're doing all these details. And other times, you may not have the time, so you have to come up with other solutions. That's an artist's job. You might be looking at a dark road, but you know that within that darkness are cars and trees. It's like painting over something that existed at one time. It's been there. It's like dropping a bomb on a place — there were buildings, but the buildings are no longer there. It becomes abstract. The only difference for me is time. Sometimes I'm okay with a very simple background, but you don't know when you're going to come back to something. So, maybe for a couple of years this was existent or nonexistent, and then it reappears.

DOROTHÉE PERRET — You do a lot of traveling. Does that inform your work?
 HENRY TAYLOR — Yes, but it's not going to be apparent immediately. Sometimes, when you come back from a trip, you might have to go back to work on something else, so it lies dormant. You've got to sit back and think about it and say, "Wait a minute, I remember seeing this." You might need a photograph to remind you, but certain things won't leave you, and I don't know when

you might incorporate that in your work. That's why it's so necessary to have downtime. There's a lot of things you just put on the shelf. A lot of things that I'm thinking about I might have been thinking about for years. Maybe some things are easier to get out. If you want to tell a story that's really hard to tell — because we're often afraid to look at certain subjects — we can get away with making something else. We're versatile. It's like a jazz musician who gets recruited for a funk band. Sometimes the subjects I want to tackle are difficult, so I might use something else until I'm ready.

DOROTHÉE PERRET — Would you call that a strategy, like playing chess?
 HENRY TAYLOR — It's a little bit of strategy, and it's also survival. You've got to put something out, and it may not necessarily be what you want to put out, but you're still okay with it. But sometimes you feel you have to go deeper. It's almost like therapy.

DOROTHÉE PERRET — Is art a good medium for you to negotiate?
 HENRY TAYLOR — Yeah. And I still often go back to "confidence." Sometimes you have to create your reference. Sometimes you've got to make up things or imagine what it must've been like. I'm drawn to portraits because there's immediate results. If I want to feel like I accomplished something, I'll do a portrait. Because it's painting, and I love the act of painting. People say that I like people, but sometimes you don't want to make it sound that simple. Maybe you like dogs, and you paint dogs. Just own up to it. There's a lot of owning up that I need to do.

DOROTHÉE PERRET — In the work, there's also a celebration of life.
 HENRY TAYLOR — If I'm sitting around with you and I play guitar, I'm going to pick up the guitar and play it. But I paint. I love hanging out. I have friends — most human beings do, we're social animals. If I have a bit of paint on the pallet, I might do a portrait real quick, just to paint. There's nothing crazy or academic about it. It's what I fucking do.

DOROTHÉE PERRET — That’s an amazing talent you have that you generously share. When you read poetry, it creates images. I have the same feeling with your work. It’s not just a single representation of someone. You manage to reveal more of the person. The portrait carries a narrative that’s close to poetry. Your pictures speak like poems. There’s a fluidity, like jazz, that creates space for a poem, that adds sounds and lyrics.

HENRY TAYLOR — I wish sometimes you could hear things in my paintings. It’s funny.. When I was studying acting, we’d have to follow people and create a narrative around the person we watched. I want to believe that there’s something. I know it affects me, and I think, sometimes, I just get lost. We can all have lyrics to a song, but everybody’s not going to sing that song the same. One person might sing it and make you cry; another might sing it, and you’d be like, “Fuck, he didn’t do anything to me.” So, I can’t say I’m responsible. I think everybody’s hardest thing is to articulate the final result. I just don’t know how it’s going to come out in the end, but I know that something is taking place [when making a portrait]. It varies from sitter to sitter, but you try to be honest, and think, simultaneously, about what your teachers taught you: “If you see it, put it down.” Some people want likeness. And some get mad: “That don’t look like me.” Sometimes it’s like surfing — you just don’t want to care. You just want to try and catch that wave.

DOROTHÉE PERRET — You’re enjoying it. You have a nice place to work. It makes it nicer, no? To work in these conditions? How does it change?

HENRY TAYLOR — My Chinatown studio was half this size, and everything was cluttered in there. And you’ll see something and say, “I made that there.” I can look back and say, “Damn, I made that back on Thanksgiving Day when I didn’t have no food.” Some things don’t change. You still got a person in front of you. They say, “More money, more power,” and you might start thinking about rent, you know? When I grew

up, my mama had eight kids. We lived in a three-bedroom house. Now I’ve got a five-bedroom house, and nobody lives with me. But you miss that intimacy. The love and the kids and the laughter. We could move to some resort, but that don’t mean we’re going to be any happier. So, really, I say I need to fuck this place up. Sometimes you gotta go back to that. Order ain’t necessarily good. Shit, you know, make a mess like a child. They came in here and cleaned up, but really, I make better work when it’s messy: “Oh, yeah, I can pick up this paper for a collage.” If you put everything away, you don’t see it. So, you start getting all formal and shit. There was work that I used to make in a clutter, but I can’t get there because where’s all that shit at to just grab? And I’m still learning. If I can’t have fun in here, what’s the fucking point? You can’t start editing yourself. If you don’t like it, at least you can say you’ve tried. You’ve gotta go for it in the painting, just like you go for it in life. If you think this should be red, put red, and if the red don’t look good, take it out. But try it. I’m always struggling. I don’t play golf, but sometimes you want to get the eye like a hole-in-one, instead of working it: “Ah, it didn’t come out right.” Sometimes I want it faster, just swoop, the first one. A lot of times you keep missing. One day, I want to get it right the first time.

DOROTHÉE PERRET — I wanted to have a conversation with you about art history and black art history.

HENRY TAYLOR — I don’t feel any allegiance to history anymore. I’ve looked at history for so long that I’ve had to just leave it alone. But when you’re in front of the canvas, you don’t know what’s going to permeate because you might turn it like Rembrandt but paint it like Kerry James Marshall. You’re taking elements. Picasso looked at African art — maybe I want to look at African art, too. Oftentimes, we’re going to the same well. Sometimes I just want to have the adrenaline pumping. Because after a while you’ve just got to break the mold and say: “Fuck it. To hell with this because I can’t do it, and it’s old anyway.”

DOROTHÉE PERRET — I’d like to ask you about a recent quote of yours: “I want to keep two things going: the health and the happiness.” Are you still in that state of mind?

HENRY TAYLOR — Yeah, because I love the studio, and I love working. I want to do this until I die. I didn’t have a real agenda. All I wanted to do was paint, and if I could make a living, that was cool. I didn’t say, “Oh, I hope I’ll be this” or “I hope I’ll be that.” The work mattered more than where it was showing. Most didn’t want to buy this shit. But now, my biggest goal is just giving somebody something to look at. If you can’t live with my shit, then it ain’t shit. I don’t want this because it’s somebody’s name. Tell me you got this because you love to look at it. So, I’ll work on it until I feel like a person would look at it. I don’t care what color they are — I want them to be able to look at a fucking painting. That’s all I want. I guess I feel lucky. I’m always studying people, and I’m never done. That’s probably why I’m always painting people. I don’t know what it is, but I can never get enough. Matisse, I think, could never get enough of drawing that line. Certain things aren’t important to me anymore. When I took Cassi [Gibson, the artist and Taylor’s partner] out to dinner, someone said, “Oh, the food here used to be really good.” I don’t want people to say, “Oh, the painting used to be really good.” My mom used to say, “He went from sugar to shit,” meaning he was a good kid gone bad. I don’t want to be some person that becomes an asshole. Being honest and real is the most important thing because it’s hard to be honest. Some people can’t be honest; they can’t tell the fucking truth. And the truth, sometimes, is hard to tell.

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