

# WHITNEY

Whitney Museum  
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## PRESS RELEASE

### HENRY TAYLOR: B SIDE OPENS AT THE WHITNEY MUSEUM OCTOBER 4



*The acclaimed survey of leading contemporary artist Henry Taylor highlights the artist's experimental aesthetic, close observation, and sharp social critique.*

**New York, NY, August 9, 2023** — The Whitney Museum of American Art presents the landmark retrospective, *Henry Taylor: B Side*. As the first large-scale New York survey of leading contemporary artist Henry Taylor (b. 1958, based in Los Angeles), the exhibition celebrates the artist's unique aesthetic, social vision, and freewheeling experimentation. Through paintings, rarely seen drawings, sculpture, and a newly conceived installation, *Henry Taylor: B Side* captures an over thirty-year career and features many of the artist's most recognizable works, including paintings of family, fellow artists, legends, and public figures including Barack and Michelle Obama, JAY-Z, Martin Luther King, Jr., and more. Informed by the artist's life experience and immediate environment, his work conveys urgency and fundamental empathy through close examination and sharp social critique.

With over 130 works, *Henry Taylor: B Side* is the largest exhibition of Taylor's work to date. Though renowned for his figurative paintings, Taylor's work encompasses many genres and a wide range of art-historical influences. Within this stylistic diversity, Taylor's storytelling offers a juxtaposition between depictions of his family, friends, fellow artists, and the art world and his portrayal of the incarceration, poverty, and often deadly interactions with police that are disproportionality experienced by Black Americans.

“We are honored to welcome Henry Taylor back to the Whitney after his significant appearances in our Biennial and collection galleries,” said Scott Rothkopf, Senior Deputy Director and Nancy and Steve Crown Family Chief Curator. “His paintings brilliantly balance a sense of tenderness, care, and community with keen wit, pointed critique, and a sense of broad social awareness.”

This exhibition was originally organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in Los Angeles, and curated by Bennett Simpson, Senior Curator, with Anastasia Kahn, Curatorial Assistant, at MOCA. The presentation at the Whitney Museum of Art is organized by Barbara Haskell, Curator at the Whitney, with Colton Klein and Caroline Webb, Whitney Curatorial Assistants.

“Henry Taylor is guided by his deep-seated empathy for people and their histories,” says Haskell. “Painted with kinetic intensity from memory, newspaper clippings, snapshots, and in-person sittings, his portraits capture the humanity, social milieu, and mood of his subjects. They combine flat planes of vibrant, saturated color with areas of rich, intimate detail and loose brushstrokes to create paintings that really feel alive.”

### **Exhibition Overview – Henry Taylor: B Side**

Organized thematically, *Henry Taylor: B Side* highlights several of the artist’s major subjects. Among them are his family members and artistic community, street scenes from Los Angeles and beyond, icons of politics, literature, sports, and the music world, and encounters with anti-Black racism, policing, and American history. In addition to paintings, the exhibition features a new installation created specifically for the Whitney, a selection of Taylor’s assemblage sculptures, rarely seen early drawings, and a large grouping of his “painted objects,” which include pointed observations rendered on recycled cigarette packs, cereal boxes, and other everyday objects.

### **Legends**

Historically, portraits have been used to communicate authority, achievement, and social standing. Taylor’s depictions of iconic figures within the Black community who have achieved significant political, artistic, or athletic success are in this tradition. Works like *I Am a Man* (2017) and *It’s H. I. M.* (2012) are powerful visual symbols of Black accomplishment and aspiration. In honoring his subjects, Taylor points to their ambition and overcoming that have inspired his own life.

### **Social Critique**

Within Taylor’s subject matter are numerous works that delve into political and social allegory and current events. In some, he addresses actual events in ways that can be terrifyingly direct but also suggestive of daily reality. Several paintings memorialize young men murdered by the police, while others reference the United States penal system through images of prison walls, guard towers, and citizens with their hands up. Works like *THE TIMES THAY AINT A CHANGING, FAST ENOUGH!* (2017), which was part of the 2017 Whitney Biennial, *That Was Then* (2013), and *Warning shots not required* (2011) extend a long tradition of socially charged paintings marking moments in history and signaling an emotional message of outrage and grief.

### **Family Portraits**

Henry Taylor returns repeatedly to his most familiar subjects—his mother, father, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, and three children. In 1944, Taylor’s parents moved from the East Texas town of Naples to Oxnard, California, making them among the millions of Black Americans who left the South in the mid-twentieth century as part of the Great Migration. Their experiences, and the stories he heard from them growing up, instilled in Taylor a sensitivity to the cultural and political

currents that affected his community. Painted from memory, during in-person sittings, or from snapshots, works like *i'm yours* (2015), *Cora, (cornbread)* (2008), *The Love of Cousin Tip* (2017), and *the dress, ain't me* (2011) form a continuum with the figurative paintings of earlier artists such as Bob Thompson, Alice Neel, and Philip Guston.

### **Camarillo and CalArts**

From 1984 to 1995, Taylor worked as a psychiatric technician at the Camarillo State Mental Hospital, caring for adults with developmental disabilities and mental illness as well as those seeking substance abuse treatment. Taylor's rarely seen pencil sketches of patients in the psychiatric ward during this period are among his earliest artworks. Among these "Camarillo Drawings," many include quotes from the sitters or notes from Taylor's own stream-of-consciousness. Taken as a whole, the sketches reveal Taylor's empathetic observation of physical and psychological states—hallmarks of his work in general. While working the night shift at Camarillo State Mental Hospital, Taylor was also a student at Oxnard Community College (1985–1990) and the California Institute of the Arts (1990–1995). The paintings he made during this period merge his sensitivity to emotional states with bold color and the vocabulary of popular culture, particularly comic strips.

### **Downtown LA**

After graduating from CalArts in 1995, Taylor moved to downtown Los Angeles where he developed a significant rapport with his community. Some he would invite into his studio to have their portraits painted; others he depicted using intimate, informal snapshots. In more recent years, Taylor's extensive international travels have provided an equally rich source for his street scenes. Works like *Fatty* (2006), *Too Sweet* (2016), and *emery lambus* (2016) showcase Taylor's extended community through images that capture each subject's humanity and personality.

### **Painted Objects**

In the early 1990s, Taylor began treating commonplace materials like cigarette cartons, butter containers, and cereal boxes as painting surfaces. Often he would trade or sell these works to his neighbors and fellow artists. Executed quickly, these small-scale, painted cardboard objects function like sketches, providing an inexpensive way for Taylor to work out compositional and thematic ideas and to experiment with language, text, and abstraction.

### **Artists / Art World**

Taylor's portraits of artists, critics, and curators comprise a significant thread running through his work. Among his portrait subjects are a number of artists whose work is in the Whitney Museum collection, including Andrea Bowers, Deana Lawson, and Robert Pruitt. Taylor's personal network is joined by a collection of art-historical influences that Taylor invokes by reinterpreting or "covering" their art just as a musician would in performing a remix or adaptation of a previously recorded song. Works like *Before Gerhard Richter there was Cassi* (2017), *Hammons meets a hyena on holiday* (2016), and *Portrait of Kahlil Joseph* (2019) map Taylor's social and artistic circles and influences to suggest the range of styles and periods.

### **About the Artist**

Henry Taylor was born in Ventura, California, in 1958 and grew up in nearby Oxnard. While studying art at Oxnard Community College from 1984–1990 and the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts), he worked on the night shift at Camarillo State Mental Hospital as a psychiatric technician. After graduating from CalArts in 1995, he moved to downtown Los Angeles where he became a mainstay of that area's burgeoning art community. While continuing to maintain studios in downtown Los Angeles, Taylor has in more recent years traveled and painted widely

in New York, the Caribbean, and Africa, extending the international scope of his career. In 2017 Taylor's work *THE TIMES THAY AINT A CHANGING, FAST ENOUGH!* (2017), was featured in the seventy-eighth installment of the Whitney Biennial, the longest-running survey of American art.

## **Catalogue**

An accompanying exhibition catalogue, *Henry Taylor: B Side*, was co-published by The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and DelMonico Books and distributed by ARTBOOK | D.A.P. . Edited by Bennett Simpson, the catalogue features contributions by Wanda Coleman, Karon Davis, Charles Gaines, Harmony Holiday, Bob Kaufman, Walter Price, Bennett Simpson, and Frances Stark, along with a conversation between Henry Taylor and Hamza Walker. The publication includes illustrations of nearly three decades of Taylor's work in all media. Copies will be available for purchase online and in the Whitney Shop (\$60).

## **Free Public Programs**

A series of free virtual and in-person programs are offered in conjunction with *Henry Taylor: B Side*. More information about these programs and how to register will be available on the Museum's [website](#) as details are confirmed.

## **Exhibition Tickets**

Starting August 23, visitors can purchase timed tickets for *Henry Taylor: B Side*, which opens October 4, 2023. More [ticketing information](#) will be available on the Museum's website.

## **Press Preview**

The Whitney Museum will host a press preview on Wednesday, September 27, 10 am–1 pm. RSVP to the press preview by [filling out this form](#). A photography and broadcast hour will start at 9 am and requires registration. Please reach out to [pressoffice@whitney.org](mailto:pressoffice@whitney.org) for any questions about the photography and broadcast hour. Remarks by Adam D. Weinberg, the Alice Pratt Brown Director; Scott Rothkopf, Senior Deputy Director and Nancy and Steve Crown Family Chief Curator; and Barbara Haskell, Curator, will begin at 10:30 am.

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## **PRESS CONTACT**

For press materials and image requests, please visit our press site at [whitney.org/press](http://whitney.org/press) or contact:

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## EXHIBITION SUPPORT

*Henry Taylor: B Side* is organized by The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.

This exhibition is sponsored by



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## ABOUT THE WHITNEY

The Whitney Museum of American Art, founded in 1930 by the artist and philanthropist Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney (1875–1942), houses the foremost collection of American art from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Mrs. Whitney, an early and ardent supporter of modern American art, nurtured groundbreaking artists when audiences were still largely preoccupied with the Old Masters. From her vision arose the Whitney Museum of American Art, which has been championing the most innovative art of the United States for ninety years. The core of the Whitney's mission is to collect, preserve, interpret, and exhibit American art of our time and serve a wide variety of audiences in celebration of the complexity and diversity of art and culture in the United States. Through this mission and a steadfast commitment to artists, the Whitney has long been a powerful force in support of modern and contemporary art and continues to help define what is innovative and influential in American art today.

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## VISITOR INFORMATION

The Whitney Museum of American Art is located at 99 Gansevoort Street between Washington and West Streets, New York City. Public hours are: Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday, 10:30 am–6 pm; Friday, 10:30 am–10 pm; and Saturday and Sunday, 10:30 am–6 pm. Closed Tuesday. Visitors eighteen years and under and Whitney members: FREE. Admission is pay-what-you-wish on Fridays, 7–10 pm. COVID-19 vaccination and face coverings are not required but strongly recommended. We encourage all visitors to wear face coverings that cover the nose and mouth throughout their visit.

**Image caption:** Henry Taylor, *i'm yours*, 2015. Acrylic on canvas, 73 1/8 × 74 1/4 in. (185.74 × 188.6 cm). Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston; acquired through the generosity of the Acquisitions Circle. © Henry Taylor. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Photograph by Sam Kahn

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