

Taylor is the youngest of eight children in a large extended family whose members—from his mother, father, siblings, aunts, uncles, and cousins to his own three children—appear frequently in his work. Taylor’s parents moved from the East Texas cotton town of Naples to Oxnard, California, in 1944, making them among the millions of Black Americans who left the segregated South in search of greater economic opportunities and social freedoms during the post-World War II phase 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 affecting Black Americans. As with his other works, Taylor paints his family from memory, in-person sittings, and snapshots.

From 1984 to 1995 Taylor worked as a psychiatric technician on the night shift at the now-shuttered Camarillo State Mental Hospital, where he cared for adults living with developmental disabilities or mental illness as well as those seeking treatment for substance use disorders. The pencil sketches he made of patients with whom he had close, sustained relationships are among his earliest works. Known as the “Camarillo Drawings,” many include quotes from the sitters or Taylor’s own stream-of-conscious notes. The empathetic observation of physical and psychological states that Taylor developed at Camarillo would become a hallmark of his art.

By day, Taylor studied at Oxnard Community College (1985–90) and the California Institute of the Arts (1990–95). The paintings he made during this period merge his sensitivity to emotions with bold color and the graphic vocabulary of popular culture.

Within Taylor's broad range of subjects are works that delve into political and social allegory and current events. In some, he addresses police brutality in ways that can be terrifyingly direct but also tender. Several paintings in this and the neighboring gallery memorialize young men murdered by the police and reference the U.S. penal system through images of prison walls, guard towers, and citizens with their hands up. In others, he packs images and text into surreal compositions whose elusive meanings coningle reportage, personal memory, and common outrage. Together, these works extend a long tradition of socially charged history paintings. As with Francisco Goya's *The Third of May 1808* (1814), which Taylor cites as a precedent, the emotional message is one of horror and grief.

In the early 1990s, Taylor began treating commonplace items like cigarette cartons, butter containers, and cereal boxes as painting surfaces. Often he would trade these works with fellow artists or sell them to his neighbors. Executed quickly, these small-scale, painted 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.

Most often based on iconic photographs of figures who have played a significant role in the larger cultural narrative, the paintings in this gallery serve as powerful visual symbols of Black accomplishment and aspiration. Historically, portraits have been used to communicate authority, achievement, and social standing. Taylor's depictions of legendary figures within the Black community who have broken barriers and achieved world-changing political, artistic, or athletic success, advance this tradition. In honoring these figures, Taylor signals to the remarkable feats of ambition and overcoming that have inspired him.

Over the years, Taylor has depicted many artists, critics, and curators from his community. This gallery features several of these portraits, including those of Andrea Bowers, Deana Lawson, and Robert Pruitt, all of whom have works in the Whitney's collection. However, Taylor's focus on the art world extends beyond those he knows personally. His "covers" of Dawoud Bey's photograph of David Hammons and Gerhard Richter's painting of his daughter, both also on view here, are examples of how he invokes a broader art-historical family by reinterpreting the art of others. Taken together, the works in this gallery form a map of Taylor's social and artistic circles.