CRITIC'S PICK

Henry Taylor's 'B Side' Is Full of Grade-A Paintings

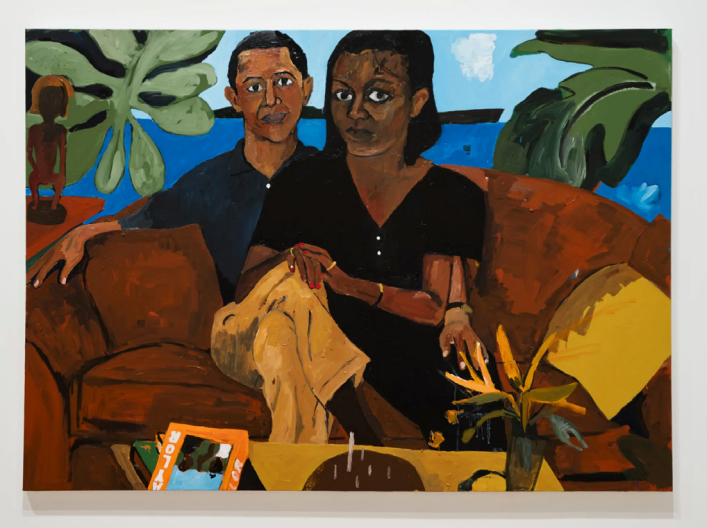
The artist brings an energy to painting that reverberates through his exuberant yet sobering survey at the Whitney Museum.

As long as there are artists like Henry Taylor around, painting is in little danger of dying. That is because Taylor, like most great painters, has reinvented the medium for his own purposes, reshaped it to his own particular needs.

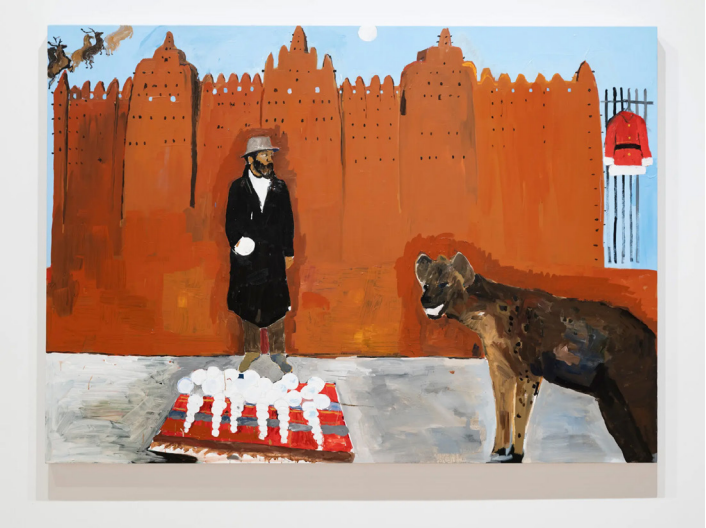
Those needs seem complex, encompassing and exceptionally empathetic. They are those of an ambitious artist attempting to give as full an account as he can of Black life in America, starting with his own, and spiraling out to family, friends and fellow artists (some of whom are white) as well as Black figures from politics and culture, and urgent issues like incarceration and racial violence.

In "Henry Taylor: B Side," a thrilling survey at the Whitney Museum, you will see paintings of the artist watching his toddler daughter feed herself; Barack and Michelle Obama sitting cozy on a couch; Philando Castile dying in his car after being shot by a Minneapolis policeman; a self-portrait based on a 16th-century portrait of King Henry V in profile wearing royal regalia; and the great Chuck Berry performing for a group of slightly dazed-looking white teenagers.

One of the best-known paintings in the show is "Hammons meets a hyena on holiday" (2016). It monumentalizes an indelible photograph of the artist David Hammons selling snowballs on the Bowery, a 1983 performance piece. But Taylor makes Hammons even more remarkable, taking Hammons back to his symbolic roots — in front of the red ocher facade of the Great Mosque at Djenné in Mali — with a grinning hyena nearby. He understands the futility of snowballs in Africa.



"Untitled" (2020), a double portrait of Barack and Michelle Obama. Karsten Moran for The New York Times



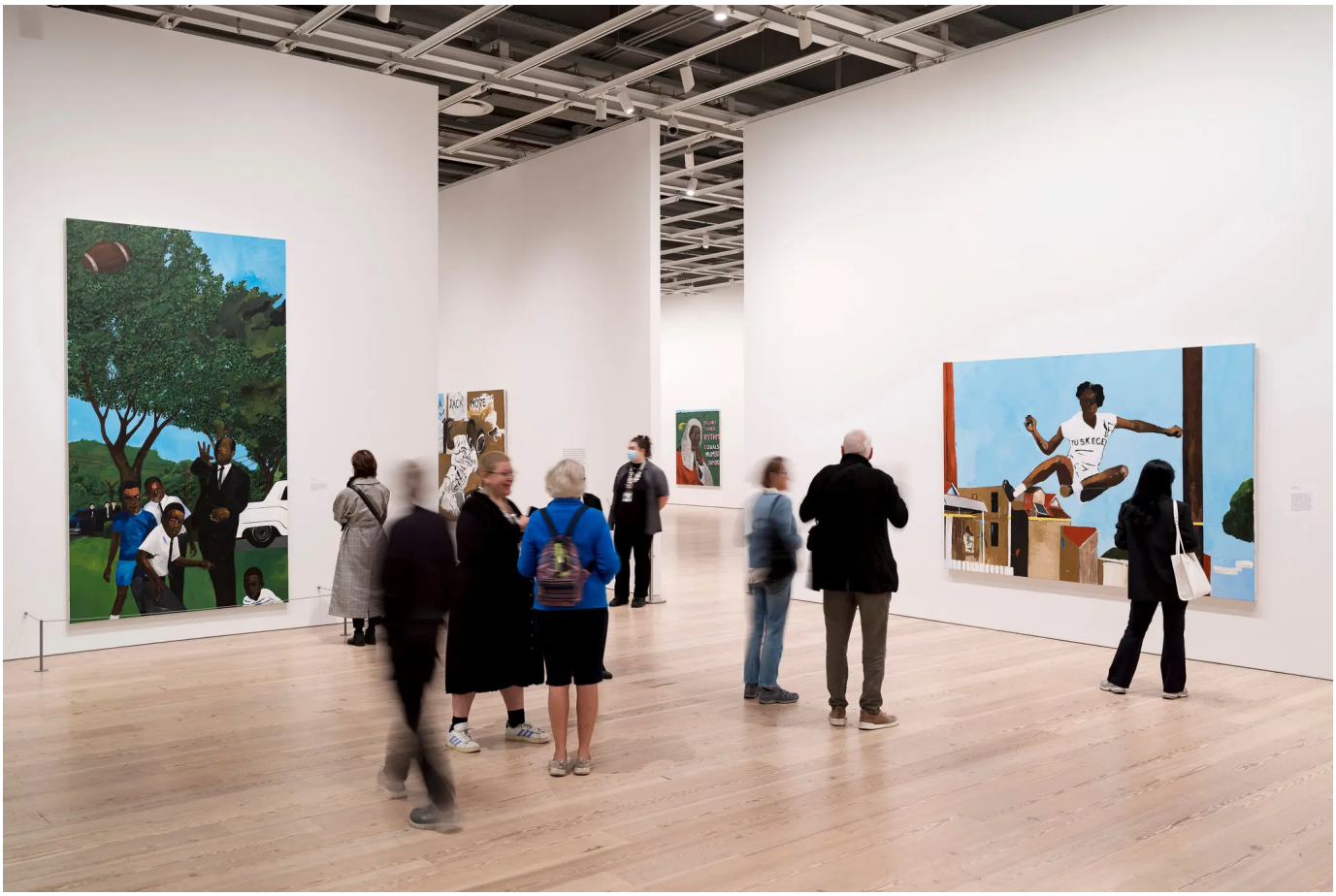
"Hammons meets a hyena on holiday," 2016, before the Great Mosque at Djenné in Mali. Karsten Moran for The New York Times

All these images gain power from Taylor's paint handling, which tends to be startlingly tough and direct. It proceeds in slabs of untempered color and skirmishes of brushwork, sidestepping traditional notions of finish and beauty. It conveys something of the harshness his sitters often face in this country and the resiliency that springs from it. Taylor's paint also makes his figures very present. As do their staring, often dissimilar eyes. They suggest a strong bond between artist and his subject, with paint as the exteriors are rough, his sitters are granted a fully developed interiority, which takes delicacy and can keep you pondering their expressions — and the feelings behind them.

The show's marvelous catalog, edited by Bennett Simpson, who organized this show in thematic sequences at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles (where he is a senior curator) is mostly written by artists, poets or artist-poets. Walter Price, inspired to paint by Taylor's example, contributes a poem about his first impressions: "Each painting aggressive, swift, bold/I was pushed."

Smith, Roberta. "Henry Taylor's 'B Side' Is Full of Grade-A Paintings." *The New York Times*, October 17, 2023: Web.

The Whitney stop of “Henry Taylor” contains over 70 canvases made from 1991 to 2022 overseen here by the veteran curator Barbara Haskell. She has rejiggered the show to a slightly larger size while concentrating Simpson’s thematic groups in separate galleries, giving each a noticeable change of subject and mood.



At left, “Untitled,” 2016–22, portrays the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in a moment of play, with sinister details. At right, “See Alice Jump,” 2011, a tribute to Alice Coachman, the first Black woman to win an Olympic gold medal. Karsten Moran for The New York Times

The implication of “B Side” in the show’s title is that we’re seeing the less-known, less popular, possibly more experimental half his work, not the A-side (the hit song on a vinyl record) but this is A-side all the way down.

The show’s first three paintings signal prominent themes for Taylor — family, achievement and the fight for social justice — and also his unusual color sense. (His paintings tend to become more colorful as you look at them.) “Gettin It Done” (2016) focuses on family dynamics, zeroing in on a woman using a hair dryer on the braids of a younger, seemingly bored male relative. The picture has a quietly smoldering quality, as if both sitters would rather be doing something else.

“See Alice Jump” (2011) shows off a vivid blue sky that is something of a Taylor staple, but mainly honors barrier-breaking Black excellence. The honoree is Alice Coachman, whose record-setting high jump earned her a gold medal at the 1948 London Olympics, the first for a Black woman. Here she wears a track uniform of her alma mater, Tuskegee Institute, and soars over some nondescript buildings — leaving home.

The third in this introduction, “Untitled” (2016-22), revolves around history: In a parklike setting dominated by a darkish, cushioning green (another Taylor staple), a man in a dark suit tosses a football high above the heads of four scattering boys. The man is the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., as the label confirms. But three white men, possibly chauffeurs, watch, disturbing the distance, and there’s also some foreboding in the foreground: Shadows distort the boys’ faces, making them seem prematurely scarred, even one-eyed. Other portraits of a political sort include the Obamas; “Huey Newton” (2007), and “Eldridge Cleaver” (2007), showing the mercurial author of “Soul on Ice” seated in profile in an interior; the whole scene is inspired by James McNeill Whistler’s portrait of his demure mother.

The show also includes 19 portrait drawings of patients at the Camarillo State Mental Hospital, where Taylor worked from 1984 to 1995 while he was studying art at Oxnard Community College and the California Institute of the Arts, earning a B.F.A. in 1995. These are some of his earliest surviving works and while some feel unfinished, they all reflect Taylor’s sensitivity to interiority.

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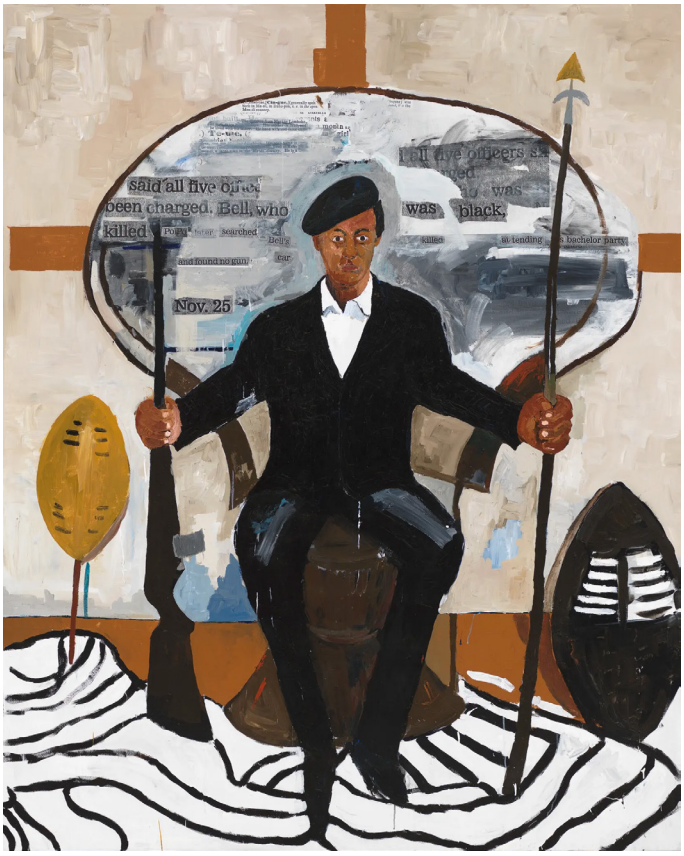
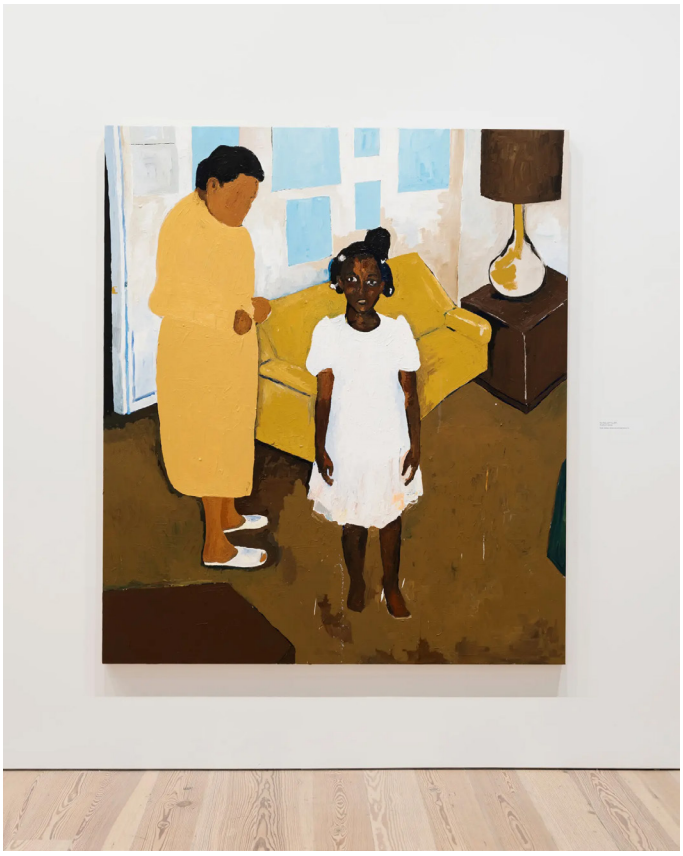
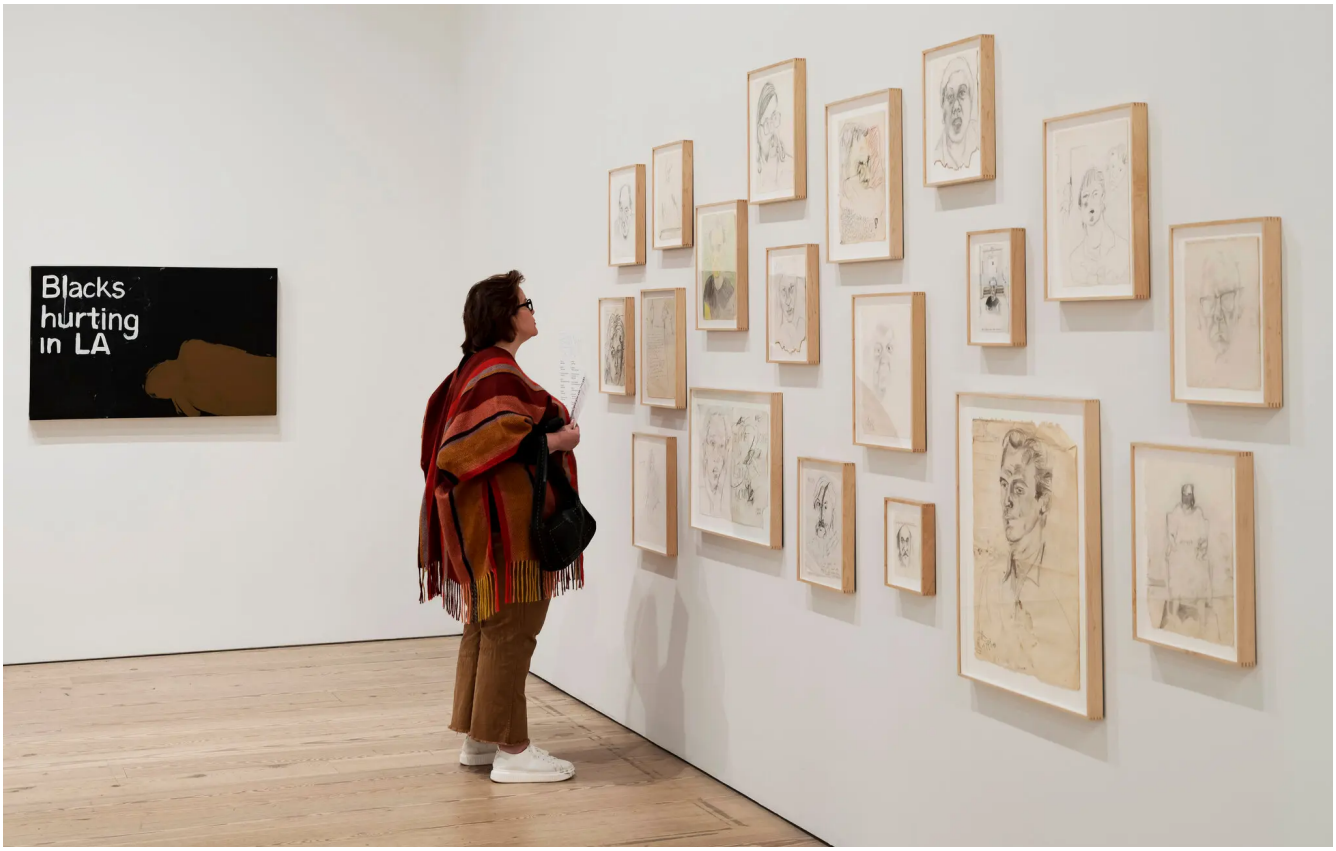


"Huey Newton," 2007, based on a photograph of the co-founder of the Black Panthers. Henry Taylor; via Hauser & Wirth, New York



In "the dress, ain't me," 2011, a young girl seems displeased while a grandmother looks on. Karsten Moran for The New York Times



At left, an untitled, undated painting broadcasts the predicament of Black people in Los Angeles. At right, portrait drawings of patients at the Camarillo State Mental Hospital, where Taylor worked from 1984 to 1995. Karsten Moran for The New York Times

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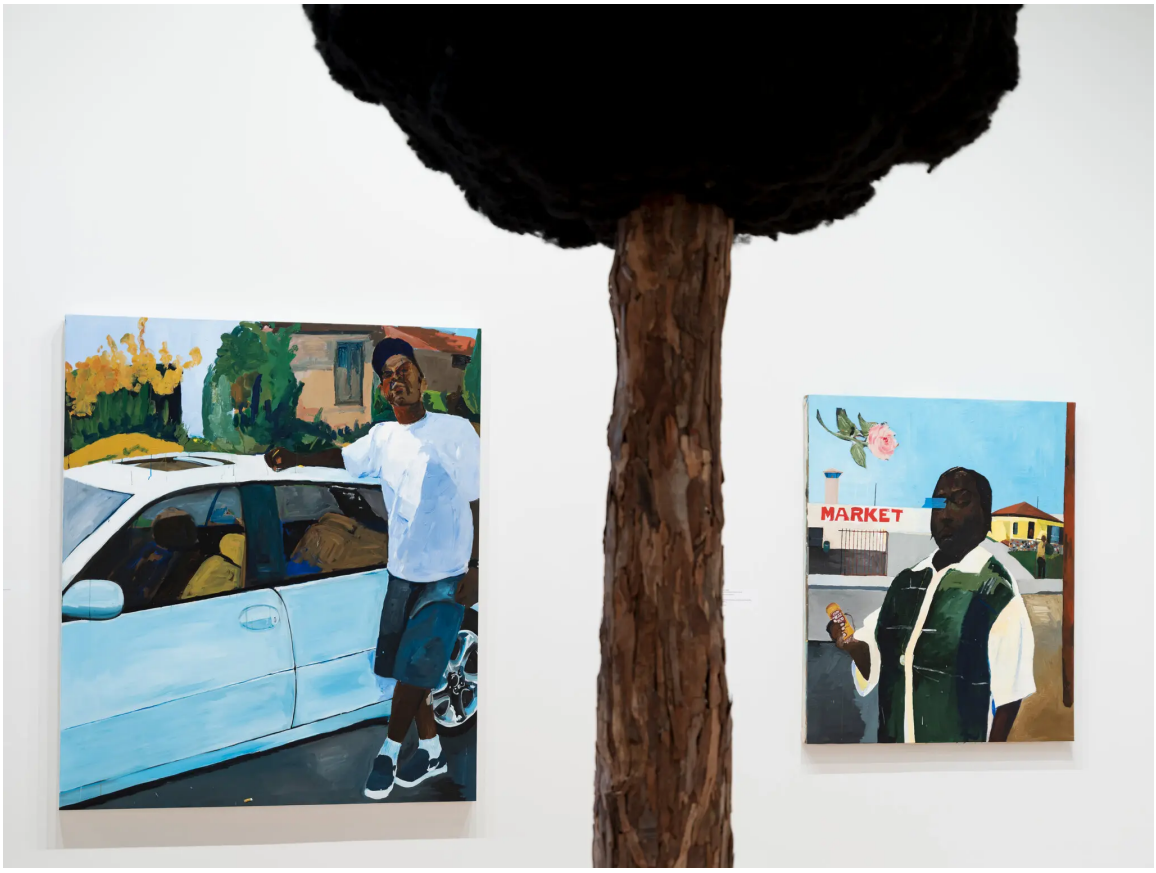
There are excursions into three dimensional works that suggest that Taylor has never had an impulse he didn't follow: At the show's center is a large installation that pays homage to the Black Panthers with numerous mannequins outfitted in black leather jackets. It is at once heartfelt and slapdash, but didactic, unredeemed by art. The three found-object sculptures here could have been by almost anyone. The fourth sculpture is the exception and actually *made*: a tall cartoon tree whose trunk consists of short glued-on strips of bark, topped off by a deep, deep green mass of synthetic hair in a shape that resembles Marge Simpson's towering coiffure.

But Taylor's best impulses are the ones he answers in two dimensions, like a modest undated black canvas painted with the words, in white, "Blacks Hurting in LA," lower down, a brown shape that could be a figure lying prone on the ground, either wounded or grieving. Or the Whitney show's big bonus: an extended, mostly charcoal wall drawing that Taylor improvised a few days before the exhibition opened.



From left, "Untitled," 2022; a partial view of a sculpture of a tree; and "Fatty" (2006), Karsten Moran for The New York Times

Using another image of Djenné's Great Mosque, it loosely delineates the forced journey of many Africans from their homeland to a Southern plantation. Then comes the Great Migration that began after World War I. Passing reference is made (in an alluring little landscape) to "Big Momma's House" in Naples, Texas, from which Taylor's parents migrated to Oxnard, Calif., in the 1950s. The finale is Chicago and Whitney Houston as a large presiding angel. Here, dashed-off, stream-of-consciousness is perfect. It's part of a history that all Americans should know by heart.

In the gallery of family portraits and scenes, don't miss the generational contretemps — familiar to mothers and daughters — of "the dress, ain't me" (2011) — a veritable short story. It shows a determined-looking little girl in a prim white dress, standing stiffly in a living room while a grandmotherly woman stands nearby. The body language is superb. With her hands gently clenched, the older woman inspects the dress. The work's palette of browns, ochers, white and light blue is an exemplar of Taylor's odd, frugal color.

In the large gallery focusing on racism and incarceration, "Warning Shots Not Required" is Taylor's daunting, unmissable mural of mostly brown and gray. It features the musclebound Stanley Tookie Williams, co-founder of the notorious Los Angeles street gang the Crips, who later turned against gang life; after more than two decades on death row, he was executed for murder. He is half hidden by enormous stenciled letters of the painting's chilling title, which is itself a kind of death sentence.

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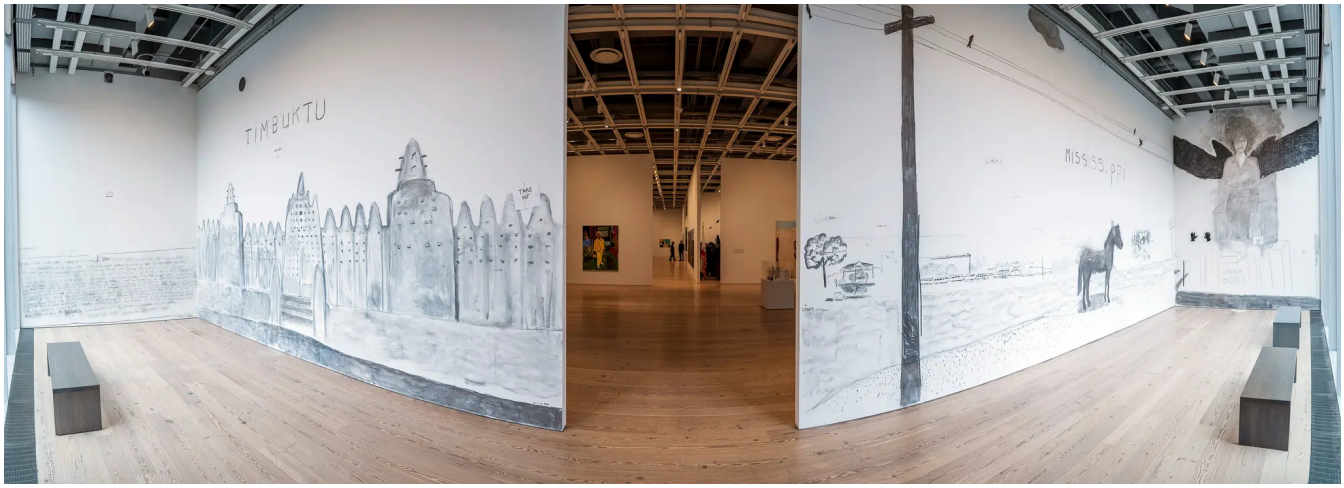
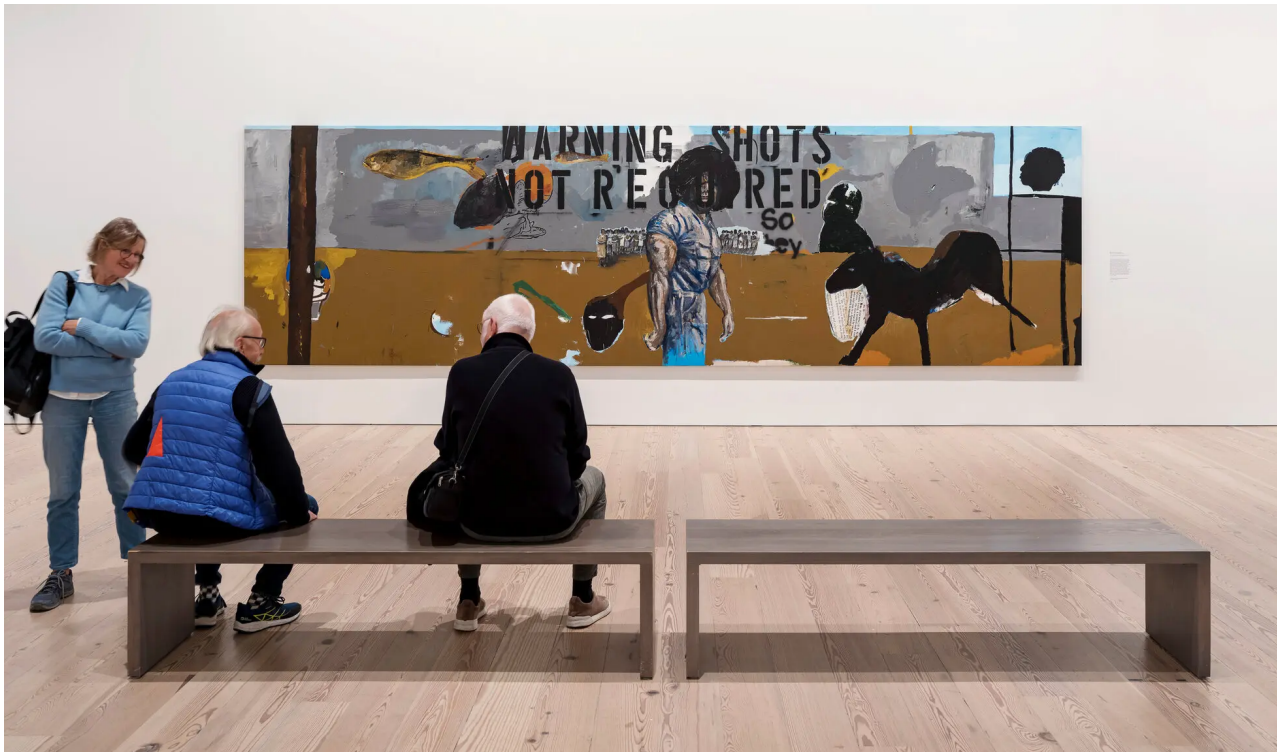


A view of the site-specific untitled mural that Henry Taylor drew on the walls of a window lounge in the days before the Whitney exhibition opened. Karsten Moran for The New York Times

In the show's second big gallery, with portraits and paintings of people Taylor knows from the neighborhood, one of the strongest depicts the mysterious figure of "Fatty" (2006). It shows an imposing heavyset man in a rich-looking green and white shirt, standing, it seems, in the street. Behind him are two different worlds: a big white grocery store and a little scene of a picture-perfect bungalow with a man standing in the yard. Fatty's inscrutable gaze is made more so by small pieces of blue duct tape covering his right eye, like a pirate's patch. His left eye glares down at us while he seems to crush a beer can in one hand.



An installation view of "Warning shots not required," 2011, centers on Stanley Tookie Williams, co-founder of the notorious Los Angeles street gang the Crips, who later turned against gang life. Karsten Moran for The New York Times

Also in this gallery are 37 small gessoed boxes (mostly for cigarettes and cereal) on which Taylor has painted pithy words and images. They split the difference between two and three dimensions while creating the impression of someone who must always be working, making something. "HATE ME" baits one small box. "See you wasting yo time." Whatever else it does, hatred first poisons the hater.

Henry Taylor is often called a figurative painter. But realist seems a more fitting label. Starting with the reality of paint, he reaches in all directions, pulling everything that interests him. His art is broadly autobiographical, so broad that you almost forget about him. It seems logical that he came so late to painting — well into his 30s. Before then he probably hadn't seen enough of life to paint it.

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