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Review: Henry Taylor at Mesler & Hug

5:30 PM, May 14, 2009

Henry Taylor is showing nearly three dozen paintings made during the past decade (most since 2005), but they are displayed as part of a lively, jampacked installation that goes a long way toward underlining their personal and public meanings.

The main room at Mesler & Hug has been turned into an artist's studio and living space, complete with homemade sofa and bookshelves built from plastic crates, a thrift-shop coffee table, stained area rug, scruffy side chairs and a somewhat limp houseplant. Paintings, mostly small but a few as much as 5 feet square, are unevenly dispersed.

The rough-hewn canvases, almost all of them painterly small portraits and casual scenes of lounging men and women, are like a gathering of friends and acquaintances. Horace Pippin and Jean-Michel Basquiat are stylistically evoked in works that cross outsider art and graffiti.

Taylor is adept at conveying character with no muss and no fuss — the self-assured presentation of a woman with enormous gold earrings, the faceless embarrassment of a portrait with a note that reads "Momma, I apologize," the unceremonious aplomb of a bikini-clad (or maybe underwear-clad) young woman leaning back in a folding chair. He composes his figures in solid impasto hues, the forms interlocking with two-dimensional backgrounds.



Occupying a conceptual space midway between the paintings and the furniture are cluttered shrines and stacked-up totems that line the walls, a few of them venturing into the middle of the room. Made from painted cardboard boxes and bewigged mannequins mingled with found objects — lumps of black charcoal in a white lotus bowl, framed snapshots, incense sticks, bundled paper-towel tubes, a paper cup filled with gravel, party whistles and much more — they compose a

pack-rat's humble accumulation of used things. The assembly possesses an inescapably sociopolitical dimension, with leftovers given dignity through a simple gesture of paying attention.

Even the room's lighting is a mix of the found (battered lamps) and the fabricated (cardboard box chandeliers). The ordinarily solitary distraction of television is mocked through a hand-painted cardboard TV set over in the corner, its screen permanently fixed with a painting of the twin towers of the World Trade Center in mid-attack.

Taylor emerges in this show — his fourth L.A. gallery solo and his first at Mesler & Hug — as a kind of hunter-gatherer artist. Part Robert Rauschenberg and part Jason Rhoades, the installation hums with an unpretentious enthusiasm for the satisfactions of engagement.

— Christopher Knight