

Henry Taylor

RENTAL

Henry Taylor's touch is heavy. His acrylic buildups are sludgy, pasty, and crusty. Characters' irises bleed into their sclerae, and canvases are flecked with sloppy stains of wayward drips. Landscapes are dense color fields: the milky blue of a daytime sky, the hard emerald of a pastoral field, the deadened gray of concrete. Taylor's paintings communicate an overall feeling of laboriousness—of Faulknerian weight and burden. His figuration is cartoonish, a loose take on *South Park*'s illustrative style, although his characters couldn't be more different from that show's lightweight windbags. Taylor's protagonists feel alternately melancholy, harried by inexplicable urban surrealism, or palpably threatened by their bleak surroundings.

At Rental, Taylor showed a suite of paintings (a few of which were precariously placed on a heap of beer cases, some of which were themselves painted) as one part of a three-part exhibition. At Cardenas Bellanger in Paris were Taylor's small, scrappy sculptures made with cheap materials like cigarette packs, and a mock version of his studio itself was on display at Mesler&Hug in Los Angeles, where he lives. Taylor's painting style falls somewhere between the disparate examples of Jacob Lawrence and Hernan Bas, although his surfaces are more dramatically caked than either artist's. He often leaves key areas (figural, especially) evocatively unfinished or simply blank, and sometimes renders characters with missing limbs or faces.

These faces tend to be androgynous—inanimate masks more than a living set of features—like the tersely grinning subject of *Tennessee Rebel* (all works 2009). The central character of *Served Up* sports an arm that abruptly ends at the forearm, echoing the nearby fracture of a chain-link fence demarcating a pathetically diminutive patch of grass within the asphalt-covered cityscape. An androgynous head, weirdly grisaille, appears near the bottom of the canvas but seems to belong to an entirely different psychological register; the two figures operate in different dimensions. Meanwhile an enormous plate of spaghetti thrust to the center by a disembodied hand, illustrating the phrase

SPAGHETTI written (backward) near the top of the painting, which is rendered like classic LA signage: a Warhol/Ruscha mashup without the cool veneer. Another street face-off goes down in *Noah*, where a glowering square-jawed twenty-something stares down what looks like the famously expressionless profile of George Washington in the concrete sea of an abandoned parking lot. An astounded onlooker with Gumby-long arms observes the brewing scrum with saucer-like eyes.

The show's most memorable, and haunting, painting was 65. A clownlike peaches-and-cream-colored woman pokes a head and a bare knee out of a doorway.

Bland architecture boxes in the character, whose face is locked in a frozen mask of a smile. While the exhibition included a portrait of Fred Hampton (an assassinated hero of virtuous struggle, and one of several Black Power leaders Taylor has painted) with a mouthful of gritted teeth, it's the unsparingly hard sunlight, bleak infrastructure, and social incongruity of pieces like *Noah* or 65 that most effectively communicate something like the plight of the urban dweller on the low rung of the socioeconomic ladder. The heaviness of his execution gives these people a melancholy gravitas; whether dealing with Fred Hampton or an anonymous tenement dweller, Taylor's portraits place them on the same level: frail and human.

—Nick Stillman

Henry Taylor, 65, 2009, acrylic on canvas, 76 x 73".

