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HENDRICKS, Barkley Leonnard

## Barkley L. Hendricks, Whose Tender and Immaculate Portraits Define an Age, Dies at 72

By Andrew Russeth

“No artist deserves anything,” Barkley L. Hendricks said in an interview in 2008. “Van Gogh didn’t get squat in his lifetime.” At the time, the 63-year-old was at the start of a career resurgence—he had been in the Whitney Biennial two years earlier and an astounding retrospective that began at the the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University in North Carolina was touring the United States, confirming to a wider audience a fact that had long been known only to a limited group: that his tender and immaculate paintings of men and women of color stand as some of the most indelible images of the 20th century.

This morning, Hendricks died, ending a freewheeling, original career that stretched across half a century. He had turned 72 two days ago.

“I’m just trying to do the best painting of the individuals who have piqued my curiosity and made me want to paint them,” Hendricks said in an interview with the Tate last year. His models regularly appear in natty attire against bold monochromatic backdrops, often of the same color.

Hendricks at his Nasher retrospective in 2008 with *Bahsir* (Robert Gowens), 1975.  
DUKE PHOTOGRAPHY



*Steve* (1976), which is owned by the Whitney Museum, is a life-size portrait of a man wearing a white trench coat, white pants, and dark aviators in front of a white background. *Blood* (Donald Formey), 1975, has a man in a red and orange patterned jacket and pants against a red rectangle. And *Photo Bloke* (2016), which he showed at his final exhibition, in New York, has a man wearing a perfect pink suit and white shirt before a pink ground that is a slightly warmer pink.

But even more astounding than Hendricks’s astute color sense, and his intricate handling of his subjects’ sartorial choices, was the almost-preternatural skill he had for crafting portraits that exude psychic states—whether confident, joyful, proud, quietly defiant, vulnerable, flirtatious, or quite regularly some mixture of those things. His men and women take a distinct pleasure in being seen.



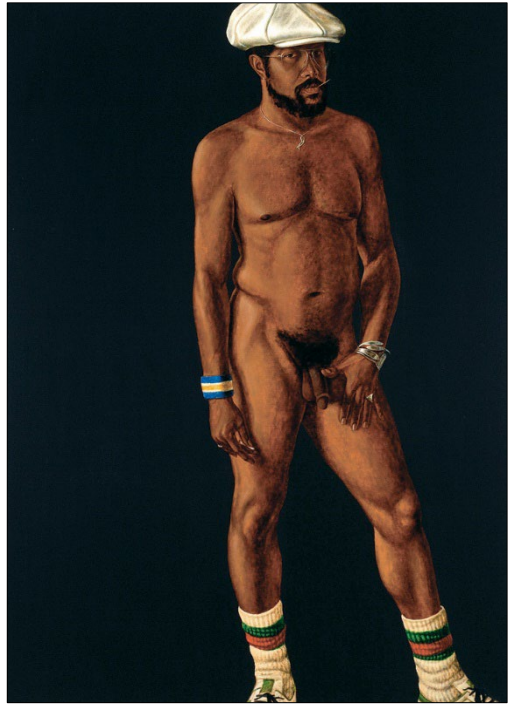
Barkley Hendricks, *Steve*, 1976.  
COURTESY WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

Though some critics saw Hendricks's work as engaged with the Black Power movements of the 1960s and '70s, Hendricks regularly bristled at suggestions that he was politically engaged. "Let me correct the assumption that my early work was explicitly political," he said last year. "I was only political because, in the 1960s, America was fucked up and didn't see what some artists or what black artists were doing. It was political in their minds. My paintings were about people that were part of my life."

In many of Hendricks's best works, and certainly his most controversial, there was little clothing involved. The most infamous instance is in his 1977 self-portrait in which he appears against a midnight-black background, fully nude, save for a cap, tennis shoes, socks—all white—and some jewelry. He has a toothpick in his mouth and the look he is giving through his glasses is a model of seductive prepossession. He titled the work *Brilliantly Endowed* (1977), borrowing a phrase that Hilton Kramer had used to describe him in a review in the *New York Times* the same year.

Hendricks's self-portraits never fail to delight. He also painted himself in a chic white suit, sans shirt, in 1977, and around 1980 photographed himself in a black hat, hand across his bare chest, giving the camera a remarkable stare. (That photo was shot in New London, the home of Connecticut College, where he taught for 39 years.) He was known for his debonair style, regularly sporting bracelets, the odd necklace, a superb array of colors, and a beret.

Barkley L. Hendricks was born on April 16, 1945, in Philadelphia. His father was a construction worker and contractor. He grew up in the city and attended the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, where he studied with artists like Julian Levi, Ben Kamihira, and Will Barnett, whose spare, alluring paintings have perhaps a tangential relation to Hendricks's.



Barkley L. Hendricks, *Brilliantly Endowed* (Self Portrait), 1977.



Barkley L. Hendricks, *Icon for My Man Superman* (Superman never saved any black people — Bobby Seale), 1969.

COURTESY JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY

After PAFA, he earned a B.F.A. and M.F.A. at Yale, where, he said, he spent more time focusing on photography (he studied at one point with Walker Evans) since the painting department then was largely dominated by abstract painters. Photography would remain an enduring interest for him, and later in his career he regularly worked with snapshots instead of using live models.

Though it was his emotionally resonant, unabashedly beautiful large-scale portraits that made his name, Hendricks also painted landscapes and the occasional still life, and played music—trumpet, especially, but also drums and saxophone—in various jazz-inflected groups.

Jack Shainman, who had represented Hendricks since 2005, said in a statement, “He was a true artist’s artist, always dedicated to his singular vision; he was a figurative painter when it was trendy and especially when it wasn’t.”

Trevor Schoonmaker, the chief curator of the Nasher Museum, who organized the 2008 survey, which traveled to the Studio Museum in Harlem, the Santa Monica Museum of Art in California, PAFA, and the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, said that Hendricks “changed the course of my life. With so many artists and writers now responding to his paintings and photography, Barkley stands out as an artist well ahead of his time.”

The influence of Hendricks’s art is profound, flowing into the work of artists like Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Whitfield Lovell, Kehinde Wiley, and many, many more. Looking historically, his close eye for the detail of vernacular life connects him with both the Pop and Photo Realist movements, though his focused approach evades a firm identification with either category. Asked about his own influences in a 2009 interview with the Smithsonian, he cited Old Masters like Velazquez, Caravaggio, Rembrandt, and Vermeer.

Like August Sander, Richard Avedon, Philip Pearlstein, Sylvia Sleigh, Archibald Motley, and Kerry James Marshall, he carefully, indefatigably, and with great élan documented the world around him, assembling a body of work that now defines an age.

In later years, his work did take an explicitly political turn. One recent portrait had a man wearing a “FUCK FOX NEWS” shirt while grabbing his crotch. Other recent paintings featured young men in hoodies, raising their hands, as if confronted by the police. In one tondo hung over a Confederate Flag, the man’s head appears to be in the cross hairs of a gun. Discussing those works with the *Brooklyn Rail*, Hendricks recalled his time in Philadelphia as a young man. “Anywhere you went in areas of color you had to address the police,” he said. “You had to watch out for the police and you had to watch out for the thugs. In a way the police and the thugs were one and the same.”



Barkley L. Hendricks, *Slick*, 1977.  
COURTESY JACK SHAINMAN



Barkley L. Hendricks, *Lawdy Mama*, 1969.  
THE STUDIO MUSEUM IN HARLEM

Asked about his early years getting involved in art, Hendricks said “from the onset it’s been a kind of an adventure that deals with favoring basically what I like.”

In one of his finest works, *Lawdy Mama* (1969), he shows a young black woman with a large afro as a kind of saint, against a gold-leaf backdrop. (“The gold leaf kicked my ass,” he told a group at the Art Institute of Chicago last year, with a smile.) Though he said that many viewers have identified her as Angela Davis or Kathleen Cleaver over the years, it was in fact a portrait of his cousin. This feels like classic Hendricks: monumentalizing everyday people and everyday moments. Making them last forever.

Just last month he gave a talk at Harvard, according to *The Harvard Crimson*, where he opened by telling the crowd, “Give yourself a round of applause for coming out,” a warm welcome he used on more than one occasion. Asked at one point about the most difficult thing he ever had to do as an artist he answered, “It wasn’t difficult for me.”