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HENDRICKS, Barkley Leonard

From the Archives: A Studio Visit with Barkley L. Hendricks, in 2008

By The Editors of Art News



Barkley L. Hendricks, *Lunch with Picasso: Curry Goat for Two*, 2003.
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There are passive portraits, where subjects blankly look off in the distance, and then there are Barkley L. Hendricks's paintings. His subjects, many of whom are black, stare directly at viewers, their eyes locked on the viewer's face, as if each painting is an intense showdown. His dramatic, poetic portraits are about the very act of seeing images of people. How much can we really ever know by looking at a picture of someone? A lot, Hendricks would suggest—but also not as much as we might think. In remembrance of Hendricks, who died this week at age 72, below is Ann Landi's studio visit with Hendricks, which appeared in the June 2008 issue of ARTnews. The article follows in full, reprinted with the author's permission. —Alex Greenberger

“Hip Off the Old Block” By Ann Landi June 2008

Barkley Hendricks has forged a career painting confrontational, iconic, and sometimes hyperreal portraits of African Americans

“I love painting women,” says Barkley Hendricks.

He is telling the story behind his portrait of a woman chewing gum, *Sweet Thang (Lynn Jenkins)*, which is included in his exhibition at Duke University’s Nasher Museum of Art (through the 13th of this month). The model had arrived at Hendricks’s studio close to tears for some reason, he recalls, “and all of a sudden she blew this big pink bubble, and it changed the mood constantly.”



Barkley L. Hendricks, *Sweet Thang (Lynn Jenkins)*, 1975–76.
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Hendricks painted the woman, whose face was still troubled, at the moment when the gooey sphere was about to burst. Like most of his portrait subjects, she is a familiar, down-to-earth character who might have stepped right off the streets of New London, Connecticut, where he lives now, or Philadelphia, where he grew up.

For the last 40 years most of Hendricks’s subjects have been African Americans painted life-size in poses that are both iconic and confrontational. “There’s an air of otherworldliness about his paintings,” says Trevor Schoonmaker, the Nasher curator who organized the show. Some of the subjects are “so hyperreal that they’re like from another planet, especially those isolated against a monochromatic background.”

Many of them hail from the North Philadelphia neighborhood of his childhood and reflect what was hip about black life from the 1950s through the ’70s. “There was a pride in keeping up with all things cool in North Philly,” the 62-year-old artist wrote in an essay for the exhibition catalogue. “Musical taste, dress, and dialogue were all a reflection of the prevailing school of thought. Coolness and hipness went hand in hand; to be unhip was to be uncool.” The show is called “Barkley L. Hendricks: Birth of the Cool.”

Clothes and accessories were a big part of the program. So in *Misc. Tyrone (Tyrone Smith)*, Hendricks painted an AIDS activist almost striding out of the picture plane in skinny denim overalls, his bald head polished to a fierce gleam, and in *North Philly Niggah (William Corbett)*, he dressed a neighborhood pal in a lavishly fur-trimmed camel hair coat. (When it is remarked that Corbett looks like a pimp, Hendricks admonishes, “Be careful about that word ‘pimp.’ I once saw Ronald Reagan in a long coat with a fur collar, and nobody would say he looked like a pimp.”)



Hendricks.
COURTESY JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK

The son of a construction-worker-turned-contractor, Hendricks always wanted to be an artist and headed off to the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts after graduating from high school in 1963. At PAFA he received a thorough grounding in painting and drawing, studying with teachers like Will Barnet and Ben Kamihira. He spent summers and vacations working with his father on home-rendering projects. “I definitely didn’t like construction work,” he says, “but I found that I could do it well, and now I’m thankful that I have that skill.” Hendricks build many of his own picture frames and has put considerable work into his house in New London, a bright yellow building with black trim that stands out from its more austere Victorian neighbors.

Before attending Yale University School of Art from 1970 to 1972, the artist worked with the Philadelphia Recreation Department, which created a job for him as an arts and crafts specialist. During the winter he had little to do except draw the action on the basketball court outside his studio window, and the game provided colors and geometric arrangements for his compositions. Some of the images were included in the portfolio he submitted to Yale, where one of his professors later remarked, “Oh, it looks like you’ve been studying Josef Albers.” Hendricks had no idea who Josef Albers was. “My images were based on my enjoyment of basketball, looking at the basic geometry of the game and trying different compositional focuses.” He did, however, take course in color given by Richard Lytle, based on Albers’s principles of color interaction, which “added to my deeper love and understanding of color in all of my art,” Hendricks says.

The artist settled into his style of portraiture early in his career, which made it somewhat difficult for him to gain broader recognition. “He was a figurative artist at a time when abstraction ruled,” says Schoonmaker, who first encountered Hendricks’s work in the mid-’90s. “He never really fit in with the photorealists because what he was doing was more emotionally and physically charged. And his work didn’t fit in with other African American artists, who were engaged with the struggle for black power.”

Hendricks has steadily pursued his own muse while teaching fine arts at Connecticut College. His work has generated considerable interest in exhibitions at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Whitney Museum in New York, particularly the latter's controversial "Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary Art" in 1994–95. Early in his career, he says, a critic described him as "brilliantly endowed," which led to his then girlfriend teasing him in bed, "How did he know you're brilliantly endowed?" and to Hendricks title a nude portrait of himself—what else?—*Brilliantly Endowed*.

Though he is known for his portraiture, Hendricks is a consummate draftsman, particularly of the female nude, as well as a talented landscape painter. He is also an avid photographer. At Yale, he says, he "spent more time with photographers than with painters," including a year of study with Walker Evans. "I was the only student that brought in a tondo photograph. Everyone else was doing squares and rectangles." While he considers the camera primarily a "mechanical sketchbook," he has photographed many memorable portraits of jazz greats, such as Miles Davis, Charles Mingus, and Cannonball Adderley. ("Birth of the Cool," the subtitle of the Nasher exhibition, is the title of a famous Miles Davis album.) Hendricks himself is a dedicated musician who plays drums, saxophone, and trumpet with local groups. He met his wife, Susan, in a jazz club and married her in 1982.

Barkley L. Hendricks, *Brilliantly Endowed*, 1977.
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For the past two decades, the couple has spent about three weeks every winter in Jamaica, on the southern shore of the island, where Hendricks paints the largely rural, unspoiled landscape. He has found the Caribbean a healing place, especially after his brother Dwight was murdered in a gunfight in 1999. "I like the immediate gratification of *plein air* painting," he says. "With the figure, you have to plan the pose, the props, the clothing. In Jamaica I can finish a painting a day." The Nasher show will include about 13 landscapes, which Schoonmaker sees as Hendricks's means of setting up "a formal exercise to challenge himself as a painter, a new way to explore light and color."

At his gallery, the Project in New York, where Hendricks has a solo show through the 6th of this month, his paintings sell for up to \$125,000. Drawings and photos go for \$1,500 to \$9,000.

"Barkley has opened up a lot of doors for younger African American painters, like Kehinde Wiley and Jeff Sonhouse," Schoonmaker says. "Because he challenged the status quo, he allowed others to work with the figure in new ways, and they think incredibly highly of him."



Barkley L. Hendricks, *New Year's Marl Hole*, 2007.
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