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Celebrating Barkley L. Hendricks at MassArt

By Cate McQuaid | Globe Correspondent
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Shawn Theodore's "Being Black Outweighs One's Blues"

When the painter Barkley L. Hendricks died last April, at 72, Instagram became a gathering place for grieving. Many artists remembered the first Hendricks piece they had seen. "It was in this painting that I first saw myself in art," Heather Hart wrote on Instagram alongside an image of Hendricks's 1969 painting "Lawdy Mama," depicting a stern young black woman with a magnificent Afro. The artist had shaped his canvas like an altarpiece and coated it in gold leaf.

Many mistook the woman to be a Black Power activist, either Angela Davis or Kathleen Cleaver, but she was Hendricks's second cousin. He painted people he knew, or people who caught his eye on the street, making proud, uncompromising life-size portraits lit up with pungent, sunny colors.

He set a tone of dignity and sparkle that inspired many. "Legacy of the Cool: A Tribute to Barkley L. Hendricks," in Massachusetts College of Arts' Bakalar & Paine Galleries, gathers two dozen artists whose work follows his example.

Hendricks did not consider himself a political artist, but for more than 40 years he painted subjects that a white art world had for centuries ignored. He sprang from a lineage of black artists — Jacob Lawrence, John Wilson — who spurned abstraction even at its height. People of color, long invisible, needed to be seen, and their stories needed to be told.

Hendricks's legacy, like his art, can't help but be political. Maybe especially now.

Darci Hanna, associate curator of the Bakalar & Paine Galleries, has put together a bright and breathtaking show that toggles between celebratory, Hendricks-style cool and a more urgent reckoning with racism. That reckoning takes a stunning turn near the end of the show, but let's begin with the celebration.

In photographs, Elia Alba, Delphine Diallo, Rashid Johnson, and Zanele Muholi honor their subjects' grave beauty. Diallo shot portraits of stylish men and women at an Afro-punk festival, and her photos of regal hair designs by Joanne Petit-Frère depict emblems of power and self-possession.

"Lawdy Mama" finds a granddaughter in Alba's "The Braddonian (LaToya Ruby Frazier)," in which Frazier, another artist who has turned a compassionate lens on her own community, reprises the steady gaze of Hendricks's iconic subject. The women in Muholi's black-and-white images of queer black South Africans know their own power and what they have come up against. They regard us, self-contained and weary.

Painting heroic portraits of everyday people of color, Hendricks rebuked portraiture's history of puffing up the privileged. Soon, Kehinde Wiley and Amy Sherald's official portraits of Barack and Michelle Obama will be unveiled at the National Portrait Gallery, and the images will certainly be heroic. Both artists share Hendricks's aesthetic — zingy and cool, with tangy hues, an eye to fashion, and large-scale figures.

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Hanna snared one of Sherald's paintings in this show. You can tell from the title, "Well Prepared and Maladjusted," that this subject resists heroism.

She's young, and despite her imposing pink blouse with an enormous bow (the well-prepared part of her), her gaze is guarded. She won't let us in. She is not self-possessed. Amid all the commanding figures here, "Well Prepared and Maladjusted" magnetizes because she hides.

Painting her at a large scale, Sherald honors young people plagued by doubt, and here "The Legacy of the Cool" segues smoothly from pride to the doubt, anger, and frustration prompted by living in a society plagued by racism.

For her "White Shoes" series of performance photographs, Nona Faustine posed nude, save for white high heels, at places in New York with ties to slavery. In "Over My Dead Body" we follow her up the stairs of Tweed Courthouse, erected atop an African burial ground. She carries shackles in one hand.

Two hundred years ago, Faustine's body would have been one among many disrespected, objectified, and abused. But today we can't help but see her, nude and bold on the courthouse steps, calling attention to that history with fierce eloquence.

Faustine brings the ghosts of her ancestors to life. Other ghosts, drained of pride and filled with helpless fury, appear near the end of the show. Their bloodless white faces do not belong at this party, but their presence at this exhibition is incisive.

Steve Locke, in a new series called "Killers," draws portraits of men who have murdered unarmed people of color. These small, cramped images depict the likes of Dylann Roof, who murdered nine worshipers at a church in Charleston, S.C., in 2015, and Jeremy Christian, alleged to have stabbed to death two on a commuter train in Portland, Ore., last year.

Locke's drawings are the antithesis of cool: colorless, small, floating in seas of white. In such a warm-blooded show, these are icy. Aesthetically, "Killers" isn't part of Hendricks's legacy, but including these drawings in "Legacy of the Cool," Hanna makes a cunning choice.

Hendricks and his acolytes plant gardens that celebrate the beauty and rectitude of people of color. Works in this show are lusty and declarative, even as they tangle with the choking weeds of racism. Locke's drawings, which seem especially frightening after last week's revelations of racist slurs in the Oval Office, remind us there's a snake in the weeds, and that the soil might be quicksand.

All the more reason to tend the garden.

LEGACY OF THE COOL: A TRIBUTE TO BARKLEY L. HENDRICKS

At Bakalar & Paine Galleries, Massachusetts College of Art and Design, 621 Huntington Ave., through March 3. 617-879-7337, www.massart.edu