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STAND UP NEXT TO A MOUNTAIN:  
The Art of Barkley L. Hendricks, 1964-1977

A Thesis Presented

by

Lori Louise Salmon

to

The Graduate School

in Partial Fulfillment of the

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Master of Arts

in

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Stony Brook University

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Abstract of the Thesis  
STAND UP NEXT TO A MOUNTAIN:  
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This thesis explores the creative accomplishments of American artist Barkley L. Hendricks and argues that the 1960s and 1970s represented a pivotal moment for figurative painting in American Art because of its relationship between nationality and race. In 1967, Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton's revolutionary work *Black Power* exposed the depths of systemic racism in the United States and provided a radical political framework for reform. I examine Hendricks' artistic efforts and achievements during this sociopolitical Movement. In particular, this thesis will investigate the following: the idiosyncrasies in Hendricks' art that demonstrate how the artist's representations of American life, in fact, construct African-American identity within a larger debate about the Black Diaspora; the epistemology of portraiture as means of investigating ethnicity and gender; and finally, the significance of various icons of American production in the context of Hendricks' artwork.

FOR  
MY MOTHER, DEBORAH ELENA

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## Introduction

This thesis, titled *Stand Up Next to a Mountain*,<sup>1</sup> examines the work of American artist Barkley Leonard Hendricks. Set within the sociopolitical and cultural contexts of the 1960s and 1970s, this study concentrates on Hendricks' work as a painter and photographer. His portraits show a visual history of African-American merit. His life-size paintings close the gap between art and life with a cool, decisive mark. In a sense Barkley Hendricks' work embraces *l'art pour l'art* (French expression meaning "art for art's sake") that can be judged by aesthetic criteria only. Yet, the work is also socially engaging. It provides a lyrical illumination of concerns within the world of art, as well as the broader world of ideas and social consequence. Hendricks represents individuals who are not seen as problems or detriments but as manifestations of a conscious creative choice. Therefore, this analysis adds to the current art–historical research on American portraiture and addresses the critical neglect that artists of color from this period endured.

The social milieu of the 1960s was composed of the Vietnam War abroad as well as the protests and discrimination it provoked at home. The Watergate scandal, rampant inflation, and a recession followed this turmoil in the 1970s. All of these events combined to shake American confidence.<sup>2</sup> Hendricks captures people during this period as the central means of humanity wrapped up in giving back life to the underrepresented body of American culture. Viewers are spellbound by his ability to capture the likeness of his

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<sup>1</sup> This project's title comes from the video *Sacsayhuaman (Stand Up Next 2 A Mountain)*, 2007, by artist William Cordova.

<sup>2</sup> "Chronology of Events (1963-1973)," in *Tradition and Conflict: Images of a Turbulent Decade, 1963-1973*, ed. Mary Schmidt Campbell ([New York]: Studio Museum in Harlem, 1985), 83-89.

sitters—whether they directly quote classical antiquity or are portrayed as *his* people walking the streets of North Philadelphia.

The purpose of this study is not to provide a comprehensive overview of all artwork produced by Barkley Hendricks. Rather, this study focuses on works from roughly the first decade of the artist's practice. One important aspect of the popularly categorized post-1945 New Realist style is to critically examine all works from this time. Hendricks' artwork was created among the figurative artists of the 1960s and 1970s, but it has been grossly overlooked. His painting and photographic techniques create a curious juxtaposition between abstraction and a pragmatic preoccupation with material reality.

For example, the matter-of-fact portrait, *Miss Brown to You*, 1970, seems quite contemporary compared to portraiture painting during the turn of the century (Fig. 1). This work exemplifies a dialectic in the artist's practice that occurs between the actual information in a communicative image and the set of facts or circumstances that surround each portrait. First, Hendricks chooses not to call the work by the person's name. Instead, he references Billie Holiday's musical composition, "Miss Brown to You," which was intimately associated with the person sitting for the portrait. Secondly, the model's facial expression is confirmed by her undivided frontal stance. Miss Brown's oblique glance and askance look were established in the art of ancient societies. This expression may be seen as a device that represents the figure's stirring emotions. *Miss Brown to You* introduced a female portrait that reflects harmony and emphasizes the affirmation and reinforcement of social values of artists such as Allan Crite, Kwasi Seitu Asantey, and Laura Wheeler Waring.

In the aesthetics of his artwork, Hendricks demonstrates a clear grasp of abstract treatment in his use of color and style. His divergence from Western art styles particularly manifests itself in the way he treats surfaces, as shown in his limited palette series. He is not bound by custom. Being bound by custom requires making iconographic statements with artists' materials that echo the art, spirit, and form of previous artists. As an alternative, Hendricks' images seem personal. They provocatively analyze the outer edges of the long-standing vision found in American figurative art during the postwar period and Vietnam era (1945-1977). In addition, Hendricks' rhythmic compositions highly contrast with what American portraitists have recognized in art. His paintings and photographs offer figures juxtaposed in bright colors and fashions that evoke a literal translation of the iconography of African art and African-American life.

Hendricks incorporates the Color-Field method of painting in the imaginative way he uses bold colors to achieve the effect of "auras" around his subjects. This method informs beyond the broader understanding one experiences in Abstract painting by artists such as Jacob Lawrence, Mark Rothko, and Barnett Newman. Hendricks' use of color, line, shape, and texture creates an alternative way of creating compositions that make up his identifiable representational style. The resulting artwork is the establishment of color in what artist John Graham declared "optical delusion,"<sup>3</sup> which gives a sensuous nature to planes that come together in a particular point in space. In Barkley Hendricks' case, this point in space is the figure itself. His way of incorporating modernism's flatness and cropping initially was fostered by the influence of non-Western art traditions. While he reproduces his figures in their gendered explicitness, he also provides them with

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<sup>3</sup> John Graham, *System and Dialectics of Art* (New York: Delphic Studios, 1937), 65.

expressionist content by a process of objectification. Sometimes he renders only one part of the anatomy at a time. For example, *Miss Brown to You* shows only the upper section of the body. Often, this further personalization becomes especially sharp witted when it involves specific body parts, such as the head or lower torso. Sometimes this method appropriates materials from the environment or staging actions. This pictorial manipulation of the figure is quite perplexing. Later, Hendricks' images become so realistic that the viewer may be fooled into thinking that the represented point of view is the actual sitter or a photographic likeness.

The first section of this thesis introduces Barkley Hendricks and his 1964 inaugural work, *My Black Nun*. The chapter includes an analysis of the importance of images in his representational works. These works are not primarily educational and do not instruct specifically about the treatment of figures in an artistic arrangement. As Floyd R. Thomas Jr. commented, "Hendricks is the contemporary counterpart of a West African griot who documents, preserves, and visually articulates the history of his people."<sup>4</sup> His use of symbols and signs from particular cultural lineages make the subject matter more desirable and interesting. However, they are not the only direct contributions Hendricks makes to the figurative art of the 1960s and 1970s.

As an example of Hendricks' contribution to the art of his era, *New York Times* critic Vivian Raynor suggested that Barkley Hendricks' figures are apolitical. She proposed that Hendricks' representations had nondescript personas demonstrated by their

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<sup>4</sup> Floyd R. Thomas, Jr., "A Personal Reflection on the Barkley L. Hendricks Experience—As I See It," in *The Barkley L. Hendricks Experience* (New London: Connecticut College, 2001), 7.

attire; however, the critic could not see each work as a unique form.<sup>5</sup> The artist uses compositional concepts such as line, shape, and color to provoke his viewers. Hendricks, through his work, attempts to decentralize his portraits. He does not organize them according to an artistic process or time, as some artists frequently do. Hendricks pushes his compositions further. This essay explores how such concepts are linked to nurturing and promoting Black collective interests and values and to securing autonomy among Americans during the Black Liberation Movements.

The second chapter delves into the history of portraiture. In reality, art history as a discipline is not all-inclusive, as demonstrated by published works including artists and group exhibition catalogs and survey books. The literature on this topic must be analyzed critically, and an art-historical perspective must be expanded to include a wider range of historians. Also, this essay assesses standard conventions of posing and expressions found in the characters of Barkley Hendricks' work while examining their relationships to American figurative paintings. Such paintings were dominant at some stages of the 1970s.

The last section of this paper concludes with a discussion of Hendricks' painting *Bashir (Robert Gowens)*, 1975, which appears to exemplify a *gesamtkunstwerk* (German term for "total work of art") that investigates how the relative brevity of portraiture allows for intense manipulation of styles. Moreover, Hendricks' portraits are expressions of specific moments; they purposefully or subconsciously move in step with political order, social disposition, popular culture, and technological progress. Barkley Hendricks'

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<sup>5</sup> Vivian Raynor, "Art: Barkley Hendricks, a Tale of Two Artists," *New York Times*, March 26, 1982, Art Section, C23.

artwork shows those art styles are distinguishable by their originality—both conceptually and formally. This thesis reiterates that Barkley Hendricks’ artwork narrates stories about people. By “looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world,”<sup>6</sup> one leaves behind a physical record of an individual’s past as well as a desired future.

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<sup>6</sup> W.E. Burghardt Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk Essays and Sketches* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1907), 3.

## I. My Black Nun

In 1964, artist Barkley L. Hendricks created his first portrait painting. This work, *My Black Nun*, is a miniature oil on masonite with cracks and antiquarian shine from the past few decades (Fig. 2). It features a young African-American woman with a bold and spirited demeanor. She confronts the viewer in right profile against a murky brownish background with her arms crossed at her chest. She wears a distinctive black habit, a wimple, and a long gold chain with a jeweled cross pendant that dangles from her waist. The sparkling links of the chain, which are twisted around the middle of her dark dress, seem to rustle as she moves. This character appears capable of working through her struggle for self-determination as a woman and person of color and against all odds in mid twentieth-century America.

Hendricks produced *My Black Nun* in the year that President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 into law. John F. Kennedy had initiated this legislation in June of 1963; Johnson signed it on July 2, 1964. The law ensured civil rights not only for African-Americans, but for all people. For instance, Jewish support for Black causes allowed Jews to broaden their rights without becoming conspicuous by advocating for their own group's interests. The Civil Rights Act addressed voting rights, access to public facilities, federal aid to schools that were in the process of desegregating, discrimination in federally funded programs, and inequality in employment. Furthermore, it performed the following: (1) reinforced earlier voter registration protections; (2) made racial bias in restaurants, hotels, and motels illegal; (3) provided for equal access to



public parks, pools, and other facilities; (4) outlined unlawful employment practices; and (5) mandated the creation of the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.<sup>1</sup>

The seminal period of civil rights in American history began just before the deaths of revolutionaries who were crucial to the struggle: Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. died in 1965 and 1968, respectively. Malcolm X remarked, “1964 threatens to be the most explosive year America has ever witnessed...It’s also a political year.”<sup>2</sup> Black Americans’ struggles were marked by police brutality prompted by race riots in major U.S. cities. Several civil rights activists, including Fannie Lou Hamer, James Meredith, Eldridge Cleaver, and Shirley Chisholm, repeated the title of another Hendricks painting and the famous question, “What’s Going On?” posed by singer-songwriter Marvin Gaye. Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton offered one answer: “Many blacks are now calling themselves African-Americans, Afro-Americans or black people because that is our image of ourselves. When we begin to define our image, the stereotypes—that is, lies—that our oppressor has developed will begin in the white community and end there. The black community will have a positive image of itself that it has created.”<sup>3</sup>

The subject of *My Black Nun* is a product of the artist’s imagination, but one can also observe that Hendricks’ interest lay in depicting people like those he saw in his everyday life. He found the most complete expression of the Philadelphia Black nun in his own community; by no means did he artificially invent or create the life-form itself. Hendricks’ painting engages in a dialectic between gender, race, and the protagonist’s

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<sup>1</sup> *Civil Rights Act of 1964*, Public Law No. 88-352, *United States Statutes at Large*, 78 Stat. (1964), 241.

<sup>2</sup> Malcolm X, “The Ballot or The Bullet: April 3, 1964, Cleveland,” in *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements*, ed. George Breitman (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 25.

<sup>3</sup> Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 37.

relationship in public and private settings. The artist forces each viewer to consider how this work arrives at the truth within a historical and art-historical context. The figure is a person who has taken special vows that commit her to a religious life. She may be an austere person who voluntarily chooses to leave mainstream society and live her life in prayer and contemplation. However, we must also keep in mind that she is Black. What should women like Hendricks' *My Black Nun* be doing in relation to the struggle of Black people? The church is supposed to transform society for all. Its members, Black and White, are supposed to respect these religious servants in the name of God. Individuals like Hendricks' sitter had to deal with the day-to-day controversies that arise from being Black. Her White counterparts had to learn how to respond to the Black female body that, even when clothed in black and white religious garments, did not have value or rights in 1964.

In addition to the contradictions about how Black people are perceived, Hendricks introduces images of Blacks in empowering ways. We examine this person as a small and intimate composition on board. The artist reaches back in time to artifacts that represent continuous traditions of developments in both Eastern and Western painting.<sup>4</sup> For example, from the East, *My Black Nun* borrows the importance of the dark brown space in the area around the figure that forms her shape. From the West, this composition suggests a new truth in its way of depicting the *real* through the traditional use of oil painting on a wood panel. Hendricks' little portrait *My Black Nun* shows the

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<sup>4</sup> Several references are referred to or cited throughout this project. A few works that have influenced this particular argument include Roland Barthes's *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977); Hal Foster's *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996); and Alfred Gell's *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

interpenetration between his panel and miniature painting. The artist portrays a young woman whose plainness is evident in her religious attire; there is no doubt that this individual will be overlooked. With remarkable objectivity, Hendricks has not added anything of himself or subtracted anything from his figure's image. He sees her and portrays her as she appears in a solemn mood in the tarnished light of his studio.

This first portrait plays a central role in Hendricks' artistic identity. He was born in 1945 in North Philadelphia. He began earnest study of art at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia, which he attended from 1963 to 1967. He then became the first African-American to be awarded the William Emlen Cresson Memorial Traveling Scholarship (1966) and the J. Henry Scheidt Memorial Traveling Scholarship (1967). The grants financed trips to destinations in Europe and then to "Mama Africa" and such places as Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia. At the time, he was also involved with the Lee Cultural Center in West Philadelphia. Art historian Michael D. Harris observed, "From 1964 to 1967 the center was a vibrant, creative center for the African-American cultural community in Philadelphia and attracted musicians, dancers, poets, drama people and visual artists."<sup>5</sup> After this period, Hendricks attended Yale University from 1970 to 1972, where he earned both the Bachelor of Fine Arts and the Master of Fine Arts degrees. At Yale he studied painting and photography with Toni Brown and Walker Evans.

Hendricks' daily routine conformed to his academic schedule; he split his time between school, his family, and the New Jersey National Guard. Hendricks commuted to

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<sup>5</sup> Michael D. Harris, "Double Consciousness to Double Vision: The Africentric Artist," *African Arts*, Vol. 27(2) (Apr. 1994): 49. Harris is also a member of the visual arts group Africobra, which is committed to incorporating African aesthetics and iconography in response to African-American life.

New Haven from New Jersey in his effort to be a professional artist and to avoid getting drafted. He was exempt from the draft because he was a student. This exemption was beneficial for any person of color; at the time, the U.S. armed forces included a disproportionate number of Blacks and Latinos, including the unemployed and people without steady work.

After graduation, Hendricks remained in Connecticut. He accepted a teaching position in the art department at Connecticut College. He had assimilated the styles of his teachers and academia; he focused on content and form as well as on composition and the use of light. He added ideas that helped him create visual records of African-Americans. Set against the established customs, Hendricks, among others, redefined a consciousness that raised issues of autonomy and cultural difference.

As demonstrated in *My Black Nun*, Hendricks' work acts as information about history and provides a visual understanding of reality that we have not experienced directly. By looking at Hendricks' paintings, individuals are able to conceive that they can know who the sitters are today and who they were previously. Even if fashioning oneself is most often linked with personal snapshots, the effort to picture one's self is also a collective activity within the public domain. Photorealism offers us the ability to reconsider who we are today; moreover, we can do so as individuals, as members of social and cultural groups, and as Americans. Hendricks and artists like him made works of resistance and identity that restored verisimilitude by confronting the fragmented ways in which visual representations have been constructed within American history. Art from this other standpoint is often not considered politically effective; it speaks a different language to a different audience that is ground-breaking rather than confrontational. Still,

culture is a stronger medium for change than the force itself. By entering the larger art world with an alternative experience, many of these artists have in fact altered the way mainstream art functions, although their efforts may remain understated and unaccredited.

Hendricks was deeply influenced by his neighbors in New Haven and New London. The work that he produced during his years in Connecticut is evidence of his progress. Hendricks' sensitive and informative portraits of the 1960s and 1970s create new modes of agency that investigate the politics of the period and articulate the anxieties of under-represented people. *Miss Brown to You*, 1970, for example, bears a realistic likeness to the pains and passions that animated many demonstrators, supporters, friends, family, and advisors during this period. The painting's title itself alludes to the fact that this individual is not to be reckoned with and should be addressed by her proper name. The half-length portrait depicts a curious, tight-lipped woman positioned to the right and slightly off center. She has a natural hairstyle shaped like a mass of smoke. Her head tilts slightly forward, and she casts a searing gaze on the viewer. The vast, deep red Color-Field background blends with the similar tonality of the figure's shoulders, like acid splashed against velvet. Her arms and chest enclose her, suggesting an armored suit. Her hand, placed on her waist, becomes undistinguishable as her body drifts off the picture plane. The pigment metaphorically dresses the character as a means of concealment. With clothes, an individual can hide or camouflage her or his identity.

The expressive play of line and silhouette in this work indicates the period's use of Abstract and Realist styles. Be that as it may, the sitter's facial expression shows the complexity and poise of an individual in an unstable environment. Viewers must examine

this feature for themselves. Because the viewer inserts his or her own experience when viewing the work, this composition neither begins nor ends with the character's appearance. While the works of Emmanuel Levinas and Stuart Hall share little in common, both writers acknowledge theories of how individual encounters relate to the experience of one's own identity. This concept serves as the temporal foundation for Barkley Hendricks' models in his artwork.

Philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, in his essay "Reality and its Shadow," states that "The intention of the one who contemplates an image is said to go directly through the image, as though a window, into the world it represents, and aims at an *object*. Yet nothing is more mysterious than the term 'world it represents'—since representation expresses just that function of an image that still remains to be determined."<sup>6</sup> Levinas suggests that, when looking at this artwork, the gazer—artist or viewer—is looking at an "other" in a world where the person or people represented look for ways to be encountered. This type of figurative painting defies categories while attempting to deal materially with an object. The figure is an image or a sign in a space that is always shifting to better understand the object being represented. Hendricks evokes a psychological dichotomy of knowledge and power in his viewers by placing his protagonist at the viewer's center vis-à-vis the painting itself.

In Stuart Hall's essay, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," he defines the term "cultural identity" because it is not uncommon now to assume that this idea is easily understood. Although he highlights the fact that identity is a process of production, Hall

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<sup>6</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "Reality and its Shadow," in *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*, ed. Clive Cazeaux (London: Routledge, 2000), 120.

also stresses that the cultural identity of Black people is always in dialogue with the Black Diaspora, the history and experience of Black people living outside of Africa.

Hendricks and Hall understand that similarities and differences exist among Black people; however, ultimately Black people are always at the core of discussion in their ideas. For both the artist and the critic, the notion of cultural identity is a discontinuous point of identification. Preconceived ideas on race are always being reevaluated. Identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by and situate ourselves within historical narratives. Stuart Hall claims, “This kind of knowledge is internal, not external. It is one thing to position a subject or set of peoples as the Other of a dominant discourse. It is quite another thing to subject them to that ‘knowledge,’ not only as a matter of imposed will and domination, by the power of inner compulsion and subjective con-formation to the norm.”<sup>7</sup> Cultural identities are points of recognition made to position individuals within social and cultural discourses.

This is why the value of *Miss Brown to You* cannot be pigeonholed: the work has its own voice. The subject’s level stare negotiates the mixture of culturally diverse ethnicities on a frequency that is mutually understood. The painting’s title, which is also the title of a song by Billie Holiday, is not a coincidence. Holiday’s sarcastic words, “loveable, huggable, Emily Brown,” reverberate throughout the composition’s form and content, recontextualizing the name.<sup>8</sup> For most spectators, *Miss Brown to You* may be

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<sup>7</sup> Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 395.

<sup>8</sup> Trevor Schoonmaker, ed., *Barkley L. Hendricks: Birth of the Cool* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 37. Additionally, wordplay and joking are consistent features of Hendricks’ artwork titles. It is hard to pinpoint which he takes more pleasure in—the opportunity to make a clever pun or the chance to make an interesting reference for the appropriate audience.

seen as a defensive and unapproachable Black woman. At the same time, these viewers must look deeper, continuously moving through the artwork to find some similarity to this world. The observer must question the ethical and political relevance of what the sitter lays down as imperative: respect, as asserted in the painting's title. As Levinas affirms, "Reality would not be only what it is, what it is disclosed to be the truth, but would be also its double, its shadow, its image."<sup>9</sup> Instead, Hendricks follows different conventions to emphasize the total work of art. All of the senses and all perceptual elements are unified in an overall intensified form of visual, cognitive, and physical interaction with the painting on display. This leaves the viewer with an unanswered question rather than an explanation of what happened to the character or why it happened. The questions about *Miss Brown to You* are multiplied. They are never clarified or resolved.

This dialogue between Hendricks' work and the spectator is instrumental because the truth of opinions, contradictions, and their solutions are being investigated. *Miss Brown to You* confronts the same problems as Hendricks' other paintings and creates its own terms to define itself and its relationship to society.

Another way to make this point is through combining identities that form two other Hendricks compositions, *Brother John Keys, Over*, 1971, and *Salina/Star*, 1975. Both portraits point to differences—between people, languages, and cultures—that can be seen only when translating the idea of cultural identity in greater detail. Hall writes,

There are at least two different ways of thinking about "cultural identity." The first position defines "cultural identity" in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of

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<sup>9</sup> Levinas, "Reality and its Shadow," 121.



collective “selves,” which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common...[the] second position recognises that, as well as the many points of similarity are also critical points of deep and significant difference which constitute “what we really are,” or rather—since history has intervened—“what we have become.”<sup>10</sup>

By merely looking at both works, it is impossible to assume that these sitters are tailored to meet the specific needs of a particular location or audience (as art historian Richard Brilliant posits<sup>11</sup>). Yet, similarities lie in their articulation. This idea will be expanded upon in the next chapter. However, within this context Hall explains the process of identity formation by using Jacques Derrida’s concept of *différance* as a theoretical approach. He sees the temporary positioning of identity as a strategy that is derived from the meaning of random choices that are challenged. In these paintings, each individual has his or her own history, but their identities continuously change. The likeness that Hendricks encapsulates is only a snapshot from the past and the preface to the future. Hendricks paints identities of the Diaspora experience that are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew through transformation and difference.

The portrait *Brother John Keys, Over*, 1971, for example, introduces a young artist (Fig. 3). Born in Newport, Rhode Island, Keys later moved to New Haven, Connecticut, where he converted to Islam. A Black Muslim, he was a member of the Nation of Islam, an African-American sect developed by Elijah Muhammad that preaches a form of Islam and shared aims among all Black people. *Brother John Keys, Over*, is referred to as *John W3W*.<sup>12</sup> In the painting, he sits on a stool, as if in a studio; the

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<sup>10</sup> Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” 393-394.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 37.

<sup>12</sup> The biographical information about this work is from a letter Hendricks wrote on March 17, 1972, to Ulrich Museum of Art’s former director Martin Bush. I thank the curator of modern and contemporary art

background represents a large neutral area that suggests an absence of time and space. This neutral space does not draw attention from the subject. As evident in his name, the figure has made a transition. His legs are crossed so that the sole of each foot turns downward. He holds a cigarette in his left hand and dangles his left arm over his legs; his right hand covers his mouth in the posture of a pensive thinker. John Keys wears a dashiki—roughly meaning “freedom garment”—a loosely shaped long-sleeved shirt jacket styled with electrifying colors that allude to fractals in abstraction. John Keys also wears a brimless, short round cap, brownish-yellow khaki pants, and a pair of emerald green aviator sunglasses. He wears products specifically designed for African-Americans and made by African-Americans. These are elements of success in a new revolution of Black nationalists. There is no sense of where “African” ends and “American” begins. This interest in Africa stems from a desire to comprehend the beauty of the continent’s diverse backgrounds and a need, both personally and publically, to foster manifestations of cultural wealth. Additionally, in this figure’s cool intellectual pose, he sees the world through a dark lens. This perception relates to the power acquired by the artist himself, who inherited his own culture and sought the universal canons of the visual arts.

These nuances in Hendricks’ work are connected to the period he lived in and the people who are capable of understanding it. For example, artists painting artists was not a new approach in Modern art. For whatever reasons—ready availability to each other as models or a desire to affirm friendships—this practice has an honorable history. At all events, it is a history usually more associated with late nineteenth-century European

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at this institution, Emily Stamey, for graciously allowing me access to this source from the Ulrich object files.

studio conventions than today's art scene. Degas, for instance, not only tended to produce cool, carefully posed self-depictions throughout his long career; he often painted his artist colleagues. Prominent among these colleagues were artist Mary Cassatt, as well as the fashionable society poet Stéphane Mallarmé and artist James Tissot.<sup>13</sup>

Rendering the figure as a spirited and dynamic, independent persona, Hendricks interacts in a social context. The sitter can see the viewer and everything beyond, but the viewer may have difficulty seeing anything in return. Hendricks interrogates the pictorial space by causing the figure to dominate the top half of the work. Only the canvas corners are bare of any details. John Keys does not seem to be positioned by the artist. Instead, he is portrayed as he was naturally; for instance, the view of his cap is interrupted.

*Salina/Star*, 1975, was painted a couple of years later. It shows a brown-skinned female looking over her shoulder at the onlooker (Fig. 4). Her head is in full profile; she has an endearingly conventional smile. Her body is counterpoised at a slight right angle. Her right arm is motionless, and her left arm is bent so that her hand rests on the folds of her top. She wears a blue short-sleeved blouse tucked into yellow pants, a pair of casual Japanese zori sandals with dark-colored thongs, a delicate gold necklace with a gold dove pendant, and a gold ring. Her trousers resemble the background, evoking a pleasant and cheerful attitude within this space. Hendricks' use of yellow is effective in *Salina/Star* to highlight the dazzling freshness of the figure.

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<sup>13</sup> See Linda Nochlin, *Impressionism and Post-Impressionism: 1874-1904: Sources and Documents in the History of Art Series*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966), 60-61, 65, 66. Also, these portraits are in distinguished collections such as the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; Musée d'Orsay, and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, respectively.

In this painting, the artist establishes the female representation by allowing the figure to come out of the picture plane. No passivity is found in this subject. This composition may be a precursor to African-American models on the cover of celebrated American magazines. However, Hendricks is not forcing *Salina* into the role of another. Instead, the artist conveys her as an individual who is not aloof or unnaturally self-possessed. She has no glass ceiling to limit her personal advancement.

The figures in both paintings are shown as a means of inclusion or exclusion, which is particularly relevant to the artist's intention. These works evoke a sense of belonging, where the models communicate feelings of respect and self-worth. Hendricks depicts each character so that viewers can be a part of this supportive energy and commitment to each other. These artworks also offset the exclusionary process. In such a process, particular social and cultural groups are pushed to the margins of society and are prevented from participating fully by virtue of their gender and race.

*Salina's* posture, for example, confronts us with her active gaze even while she conciliatorily dominates the foreground. John Keys, on the other hand, eludes the viewer's gaze in a more reserved way. The angular forms of the figure dominate the center of the canvas, suggesting an Egyptian sculpture of a seated scribe. Still, when only one figure is depicted, as in these works, the viewer may not consider each sitter's beliefs because they are not obvious or easy to recognize.

As critic Michelle Wallace notes, "We must first acknowledge that African-Americans have never had any kind of chance to recover from the traumatic wounds of slavery. Nor has the African continent even begun to recover from European imperialism.

Psychological trauma, which remains unaddressed by the conscious mind, does not just go away, it just hangs around.”<sup>14</sup> Her statement confronts the global problem of race, which people experience unevenly because of their different historical relationships with their respective nations. I propose that for John Keys the relevance of being a Black Muslim lies in a heritage that readdresses the long history of oppression that African-Americans have suffered, linking Islam with the Black consciousness. Conversely, *Salina/Star* evokes beauty, strength, and pride. It also refers historically to the important work, talent, and culture of people of African descent who were brought to the United States.

In addition, these paintings’ figures have visible symbols from Asian and Latino cultures that are made up of culturally cohesive communities and guided by traditional rules or procedures. In representing these abstract ideas Hendricks elusively portrays individuals who ought to be accepted by the larger society in a pluralist culture. From this point of view, the artist offers interpretations of how he and his sitters would like to be perceived in society. Hendricks presents his own experience of rediscovering Africa and being a person of color during the 1960s and 1970s.

Historian Brent Hayes Edwards’ *The Practice of Diaspora* illuminates this subject well. He discusses the impact of Harlem Renaissance writers on their readers, “Black periodicals were a threat above all because of the transnational and anti-imperialist linkages and alliances they practiced: carrying ‘facts’ from one colony to another, from

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<sup>14</sup> Michelle Wallace, “The Culture War Within the Culture Wars: Race,” in *Art Matters: How the Culture Wars Changed America*, ed. Brian Wallis, Marianne Weems, and Philip Yenawine (New York and London: New York University Press, 1999), 171.

[the] French colonial system to the British, from Africa to the United States.”<sup>15</sup> This publishing model successfully brought attention to issues about people of color around the world. The distribution of such materials also played an instrumental part in the political moment that surrounded Hendricks’ work.

As an example of this influence, the September 4, 1976, issue of *Black Panther* contains artwork by revolutionary artist Emory Douglas. The work consists of a set of six matchbooks made from collages of photographs and the artist’s drawings. Several of the match sticks are exposed with tips of fire. The photocollage depicts the harsh and severe practices of the South African government. The work foreshadows the international movement to end apartheid that arose in the next 18 years. Douglas was from the Black Arts movement and had a huge influence amongst artists of color. He was able to summarize Black people in aesthetics, emotion, and subject matter. As Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) affirms, “Emory’s art was a combination of expressionist agitpop and homeboy familiarity...Emory’s work functioned as if you were in the middle of a rumble and somebody tossed you a machine pistol. It armed your mind and demeanor. Ruthlessly funny, but at the same time functional as the .45 slugs pouring out of that weapon.”<sup>16</sup> Emory Douglas provided typical examples for the kind of work he and other innovative artists, such as Barkley Hendricks, should be making to create a Black consciousness.

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<sup>15</sup> Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA, and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2003), 9.

<sup>16</sup> Amiri Baraka, “Emory Douglas: A “Good Brother,” A “Bad” Artist,” in *Black Panther: The Revolutionary Art of Emory Douglas*, ed. Emory Douglas, Bobby Seale, Sam Durant, and Sonia Sanchez (New York: Rizzoli, 2007), 180.

One work by Barkley Hendricks that articulates his perception of individuals during this period is *Michael BPP (Black Panther Party)*, 1971 (Fig. 5). The subject of the portrait is rendered at just about three-quarter length, cut off right below his coat hemline. The self-assured figure wears a red hat and a black coat, with his hands in the garment's pockets. The background glows like a blister of yellowish sunshine. Shaded by his hat, the figure is reminiscent of a photograph. It appears literally as an image composed by natural light. This light, though, does not emphasize on the subject's clothing as much as it does on his face. His cool expression gives the viewer an abundance of detail, such as each hair of his mustache and goatee, his full lips, his broad nose, his almond eyes, and his curly hair.

The artist depicts this man without bias. He provides mere suggestions from the painting's title and the use of color. The subject thus is not overtly connected to his political party—only with the idea of turning his gaze to us. With closer examination, the viewer can see emphasis in Hendricks' characters by their positioning, coloring, and shape. For example, Michael has his hands in his coat pockets; he is holding himself, not letting go. He wears a red hat, a black coat, and, underneath, a striped shirt in the red, black, and green nationalist colors that symbolize universal Black solidarity. Like the work of the Harlem Renaissance writers, Hendricks' paintings reinvestigate social mobility by empowering his witnesses with faces like the people of the Harlem Renaissance. Such people were made up of a collective conscious that explored the psychological and emotional uniqueness of the African-American community. His artwork allows viewers to see status and power amongst their own. Hendricks does so not in a monetary sense, but by recognizing social and cultural groups in portrayals of

individuals in ways that show prestige, social honor, or popularity. Also, these works suggest that Hendricks' protagonists have the ability to get their way despite resistance from others.

Returning to the example of the Harlem Renaissance, during the 1920s and early 1930s people of color had an acute desire to educate and mobilize in the United States and abroad. European counterparts may have considered Black writers, such as Langston Hughes and Paulette Nardal, to be on the periphery. However, these writers had immense intellectual power because of their readers. This is also true for Hendricks' paintings. No matter where this artist's work is on view, the portraits fill a hole in the market for such art.

Barkley Hendricks' works are reminiscent of the beautiful forms in a kaleidoscope; his paintings are imbued with a forceful compositional space that is both personal and symbolic. These paintings, whether they are from the artist's imagination or based on real subjects, comprise a bold palette and radiating figures placed unexpectedly within the picture frame. These portraits act as a "collective unconscious"<sup>17</sup> that holds Hendricks' private memories, in which lies a universal spirit comprising the artist and his sitters as sources of his creativity. *Brother John Keys*, *Over*, *Salina/Star*, and *Michael BPP (Black Panther Party)* bespeak an independent, always-present self. As Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton noted in *Black Power*, "There is a terminology and ethos particular to the black community of which black people are beginning to be no longer ashamed. Black communities are the only large segments of this society where

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<sup>17</sup> Carl Gustav Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, trans. Richard Francis Carrington Hull (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 42.



people refer to each other as brother—soul-brother, soul-sister. Some people may look upon this as *ersatz*, as make believe, but it is not that. It is real. It is a growing sense of community.”<sup>18</sup> As examples of Hendricks’ work, these portraits act as advertisements for that global order. The sitters are not just random images on a billboard; the portraits reveal a strong sense of what it means to be an American with an independent inner self.

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<sup>18</sup> Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, 38.

## II. Almost Out of the Sky

*It is power, not justice,  
which keeps rearranging the map...*

- James Baldwin

The critical and theoretical comments of Barkley Hendricks reveal meaningful insights into his artistic practice and daily life. His own words in the form of letters, articles, and exhibition essays provide a number of explanations about his work. An eloquent writer and spokesperson, Hendricks makes it evident that the communication between his work and the viewer should rely on the artwork itself—which can include painting, drawing, photography, or assemblage—and its vulnerabilities when dealing with the subject matter of portraits under the analysis of art critics, art historians, and viewers alike.

In American portraiture, identity is tied to the totality of ideas, perspectives, attitudes, and other phenomena that mainstream audiences prefer. In this century, it has become customary to believe that if appearances are deceitful, reality is no less deceitful. The need for covering up all or part of the face no longer exists; faces are enigmatic enough. For example, during the 1960s and 1970s, a potpourri of events occurred that have shaped the country's culture—the British rock band “The Beatles” on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, race riots around the United States, Stanley Kubrick's epic science fiction film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the Stonewall Rebellion, and Alex Haley's television program adapted from the acclaimed novel *Roots* conveyed a certain impression to individuals and communities. People's mental frameworks are affected by previous experiences, by the controlled nature of such interactions, and by the general need to categorize people to fit them into a larger context.

When artists make portraits, the viewer must be receptive to how individuals are being depicted and who is representing them. Artists who were not a part of the status quo working through their own American experience did not see this need as a problem; for audiences, this need argued in favor of only one viewpoint. Despite the omission of many artists of color in a larger discussion of this genre, Hendricks demonstrates that the standard conventions of posing and expression found in his work are significant to other American artists during the 1960s and 1970s; additionally, they investigate themes related to ethnicity and gender.

To formulate such inquiries, one may ask relevant questions such as, “Who is that?” “What does the work express?” or “Does the portrait reveal anything at all?” An artist like Barkley Hendricks might say that the soul is the substance portraits are made of, based on their appearance and the environment of that given time. The transition from a conscious creative choice to inviolableness is seen in *New Michael*, 1971 (Fig. 6). It shows a figure in profile view, directly quoting ancient Roman and Greek coins, which frequently was adapted in fifteenth-century tondo paintings. This depiction of a man in profile is a distinction used for nobility, and Hendricks expresses the round portrait miniature in a similar form.

His mark of authenticity features a tactful gentleman wearing a lofty-finish brown jacket, a black-and-white checked collarless shirt, and a cream-colored hat with a lavish ribbon and a red-checkered stripe on a deep brownish field. The hat is pinched at the front and pushed forward on the head. The front of the brim is bent down and makes a canopy over large black-rim eyeglasses and the point of his nose, hiding half of his face. One who observes this painting may be left with an alternative view to objects of

antiquity that provides evidence of changes in taste, such as the people portrayed and their modes of dress. This portrait represents a social reality; Barkley Hendricks' work features the formality and evident seriousness displayed by Michael as a significant mode of self-fashioning. He is an individual who conforms to the expectations of society whenever its respectable members appear in public. It also proposes that one's demeanor is multilayered and can be seen as a cultural exploration, sometimes found where it is least expected.

Another example can be found in Barkley Hendricks' work, *Lawdy Mama*, 1969 (Fig. 7). In this portrait of Kathy Williams,<sup>1</sup> we are presented with a model that is both virtuous and unconventional. This portrait may be the most important painting of Hendricks' career thus far. *Lawdy Mama* depicts a young woman in a three-quarter-length wall painting. It is a contemporary Byzantine icon or altarpiece from the modern world with distinctive features studied from life. The composition allows for direct engagement between the figure and onlooker. As an oil and gold leaf painting on linen canvas, it intends to represent Platonic truth. Moreover, the painting allows for exceptional detail, comparable with that of fifteenth-century Flemish painting.

Whether somebody's belief is true does not mean the viewer must accept it as truthful. On the other hand, if a truth is publicly acknowledged, then it definitively cannot be false. Hendricks tells the viewer that Kathy Williams is not just a sanctified person, but also an individual who deserves to be depicted in this august manner. The painting's onlookers have a sense that makes one experience that this work's truthfulness should

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<sup>1</sup> Kathy Williams is the artist's second cousin twice removed. She passed away in 2009, but we are left with Barkley Hendricks' portraits to celebrate her life.

command the same attention as the artist's belief. This painting fulfills viewers' expectations in its rendering of costume, posture, and expression as well as physiognomy. As viewers we examine Hendricks' sitters and look even further to the point where one will find that beauty contained in the beautiful body is not original. It is shared by every beautiful being. Knowledge concerning other things is similarly gained by progressing from a collective understanding of the thing sought to the eventual form of the thing sought, or the thing sought itself. The projection of Williams' body from the sun-beaten background behind her as well as her contemplative facial expression are echoed in her assertive grip on her right arm. She has a natural hairstyle in which her brown hair extends out from her head like a halo. She wears a black dress with black and red stripes that stretch with her elongated body.

These attributes give this person a graceful affect, which accentuates the slender frame of her broad shoulders and her curving shape. The figure assumes an unusual pose for a female sitter. It clearly conveys the self-assured nature of a woman freely proclaiming her own presence. The artwork may be meant to be the focal point, flanked on both sides by images of a religious composition in a small triptych. However, it strikes a balance between the rich and confident modernity placed front and center like a massive but powerful statuette. The figure fills the whole panel. She creates a special aura and brings emphasis to the portrait in its own right. To look at a painting is to see a picture and imagine the person being depicted. Barkley Hendricks' work demonstrates that a living person can be held as sacred and is worthy of respect or dedication, as if for religious means. For the most part, people connect portraits to historical paintings of saints or dignitaries; that is why paintings had to be abstract or generalized even though

they may have expressed extreme feelings. Throughout an individual's life, she or he is engaged in altering herself or himself within their tradition as fulfilling the highest aspirations; therefore, the individuals (e.g., Hendricks' models) are partly composed of an undefined syncretism. Only when one has reached another world beyond the conventional perceptions of reality does that person's image and the consensus regarding fate become one.

At second glance, Kathy Williams' physiognomy is quite intriguing. She adopts a facial expression as a voluntary action. The enigmatic spreading of her lips departs from the vivid serenity seen elsewhere in the painting. One characteristic of Hendricks' portraits is a sense of reality with the apparent intention of depicting the unique appearance of a particular person. In each portrait, the artist expresses an individual identity. However, as Erwin Panofsky noted, he also "seeks to bring out whatever the sitter has in common with the rest of humanity and what remains in [them] regardless of place and time."<sup>2</sup> The sitter's expression is closely tied to the emotion of confidence; therefore, she shows her noble demeanor. The painting's title, *Lawdy Mama*, makes it impossible to avoid a reaction to this representation with certain emotions (even when it would be strongly desirable to do so). A person walking down the street who sees this woman or a viewer looking at this artwork might show a brief expression of pleasure or even say, "Oh Lawdy, she is fine," before being able to reassume a neutral expression. This painting is about self-confidence. It is a statement of spiritual reawakening through the medium—a connection with the subconscious mind from which numerous emotions and thoughts arise. The term "Lawdy" is slang for Lordy or Lord, a religious vernacular

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<sup>2</sup> Shearer West, *Portraiture: Oxford History of Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 24.

for the Virgin Mary specific to African-Americans and a testimony transmitted visually from one generation to another. Adapting Western religion and its language is about transforming a unique expression. Barkley Hendricks portrays the Black form, specifically the female body, as a site of power and possibility.

This painting is breathtaking in its striking appeal; the route from an everyday person to icon is replayed hundreds of times in various genres developed through African-Americans and the idea or object that the painting symbolizes.<sup>3</sup> Also, these works that depict people of Barkley Hendricks' environment translate scenes from everyday life to the grand scale formerly reserved for religious painting beginning in the fourteenth century. The cult of Hendricks' figures help us understand what we see, giving a visual description or analysis of a particular person like a card or badge used to identify the bearer. His solidarity with his sitters is mainly based around kinship and shared values.<sup>4</sup> This kinship begins with the artist, who brings about a more complex understanding of the delicateness of the processes of making a living body into a product of the human imagination. The kinship continues with the affirmative consequences of an artist's construction from their viewers.

In "An Eye on History/Since 1805 or Boola, boola (Thanks Tarzan)," an essay from the Housatonic Museum of Art, 1988, Hendricks recalls two circumstances related to the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts exhibition "Contemporary American

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<sup>3</sup> For example, in fictive and autobiographical works, African-American authors have given readers vibrant portraits of women, such as in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou, *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, and *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker. Also, music that has empowered many African-Americans with strong Black icons includes, "To Be Young, Gifted and Black" by Nina Simone, "Mighty Mighty" by Earth Wind and Fire, and "When the Revolution Comes" by The Last Poets.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Brilliant. *Portraiture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 37.

Realism since 1960.” This presentation was organized by art historian Frank H. Goodyear Jr. and showcased various works that fit within the post-1960s New Realist movement.

Art critic Hilton Kramer poignantly described it in a *New York Times* review,

Its very size is at once impressive and problematical. It contains just about everything [...], from Andrew Wyeth’s genteel version of American pastorage to Duane Hanson’s ugly Super-Realist effigies of American city dwellers[...]Mr. Goodyear’s aim, one gathers, is to be encyclopedic, and there can be no question about the diligence of his research. (The book he has written to accompany the show includes even more artists and more works of art than he has managed to cram into this very large show.) But the resolve is a show that verges at times on sheer incoherence.<sup>5</sup>

The first example, which the previous review does not address, is the fact that all participants of this exhibit were not included within the context of the show’s printed matter. Barkley Hendricks was one artist that was not included in this context. The curator’s reasoning for this exclusion was not clear. Its omission has been noticed by historians who have looked for meaningful insights on the various styles that were present during this time.

The second instance related to a conversation with fellow exhibition participant and artist Chuck Close, with whom Hendricks began to converse about their shared alma mater. Close responded by saying, “Boola, boola.”<sup>6</sup> Both points resonate over time, especially in the case of Barkley Hendricks. They illustrate the fact that some individuals cannot guarantee access to the benefits of success based on their accomplishments or the right of their work alone, whereas others take it for granted.

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<sup>5</sup> Hilton Kramer, “ART VIEW: The Return of the Realists—And a New Battle Shaping Up.” *New York Times*, October 25, 1981, Arts and Leisure, Section 2, East coast, Late Edition.

<sup>6</sup> Barkley L. Hendricks, *Barkley L. Hendricks Presents Barkley L. Hendricks, 1967–1987: At the Housatonic Museum of Art, January 25 – February 26, 1988* (Bridgeport, CT: Housatonic Community College, 1988).



Painter Chuck Close's work is seen as a pinnacle of New Realism. The artist's range of methods for investigating the portrayed sitter's facial expressions from photography to printing provides the means for a process rather than any predetermined composition or plan found by converting a photograph into a prototype for a final painting. In these expansive works, Chuck Close transposes the image to a canvas or another surface using a grid.

The appearance of each of these grids was a defining moment. The grid has origins in the pinhole camera and camera obscura, the first clear description and correct analysis that has been credited to Ibn al-Haytham (Alhazen, 965–1039), including a description of how an image is formed in the eye using the camera obscura as an analogy. However, early forms of camera obscura have been known to scholars since the time of Aristotle.<sup>7</sup>

One can also understand the gridiron as belonging to a present-day understanding of tablets, blocks, and city grids that make sturdy housing, the standardization of language, and urban development possible. Maps, musical compositions, television displays, financial ledgers, and moveable type promoted the organization of space, music, time, international trade, and mass literacy. Perspective painting brought forth the science of the modern age, classical mechanics, and the study of the moving image. Through the use of a power system composed of a pattern of regular-spaced horizontal and vertical

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<sup>7</sup> Leslie Hewitt (presentation at The New School, Tishman Auditorium, Alvin Johnson/J. M. Kaplan Hall for the series *Confounding Expectations: The Obsolescence of the Photographic Object* organized by Aperture in collaboration with Vera List Center for Art and Politics, February 25, 2009). Also see Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press: 1990).

lines, Chuck Close can turn the canvas into a computer-like serialization. This process accommodates interruptions without changing the end product.

*Frank*, 1969, for example, depicts the portrait with facial elements composed of a myriad of deep black, dark crevices and thick white highlights. When experiencing a painting by this artist, one is aware of pigment and may lose the sense that it is the depicted flesh of a living being. Chuck Close sought to reconcile the conceptual ramifications of the artist's mark with the representation of the sitter. The likeness recorded by the camera is a species of naturalistic evidence—it is that of an eyewitness, presumably one superior in objectivity to a human witness.

With his black-and-white portraits, Close established the basic elements of his familiar style, using primarily friends as subjects on large-scale, anonymous-surface “formula” compositions with photographic truthfulness. Less familiar faces would have allowed too many imperfections. The relative anonymity of his subjects forces viewers to observe first the painting, then the portraits. As critic Thomas B. Hess observed, “Chuck Close’s subjects are assuming the air of the existentialist pantheon, a Soho apotheosis.”<sup>8</sup>

*Lawdy Mama* is an example of how artists face the challenge of giving the sitter distinction based on the figure's attributes, specifically what kinds of personalities or social circumstances were accredited to each sitter. In contrast, Chuck Close's mathematical understanding of his subjects negates any such conversation and leaves his compositions tedious in response to 1970s Photorealism. Close's figures were not well groomed and were seen as a youth subculture that wore long hair and aged denims. They

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas B. Hess, “Art: Up Close with Richard, Philip, Nancy, and Klaus,” *New York Magazine*, May 30, 1977, 96.

represented a generation of outcasts, even if today some of the individuals in his paintings have claimed celebrity status amongst some art world communities. Taken as a whole, Close decided to create these everyday people to monumentalize them. As noted in the previous chapter, Hendricks' rendering of the body promotes a variety of purposes. These purposes begin with the sitter's individuality, then explore even further how these representations offer the artistic ends to public and political viewpoints about each model. These portraits act as emblems for the inner values of a character; the external ones are uncovered through physical attributes that are treated as part of a communicable persona found as an extension of the mind and body.

This is also true for *Supadupaman*, 1971, in which Hendricks presents a mature figure—himself (Fig. 8). He appears serious and self-assured, debonair even. The black-and-white photographic print is striking in its elegant simplicity; it portrays a man whose appearance exhibits a close bond to the fictional character. This bond exists not for supernatural powers but rather due to the unwillingness of other people to notice him because he is a Black man with the ability to paint. He wears a plain T-shirt with a Superman symbol hand-painted on it—a red S on a yellow police-badge symbol that resembles a shield or coat of arms, set against an abstract painting with the Black male's presence in front of it. This viewpoint was not far from cofounder of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense Bobby Seale's ideas during the opening morning session of his court trial on October 27, 1969. He spoke of the U.S. administration's politics in running the government and its people: "We're hip to the fact that Superman never saved no

Black people. You got that?”<sup>9</sup> Barkley Hendricks “got that” as an artist and as a man. He made the next superhero to imitate the opinions Bobby Seale spoke about—the doppelgänger that haunts its living counterpart. This vintage photograph, mounted on paperboard, is inseparable from Hendricks and from the artist’s sense of enthusiasm regarding the current period. The photograph is anchored solidly in actual time. Therefore, the photograph is more expressive of the work’s original intentions; it is part of a particular interval of the past.

The camera falsifies through the credibility of likeness. It reflects reality. A painting stops short more decisively with what appears on the canvas. This is particularly true today. Everyone is trained to respond to visual elements such as line, color, and form rather than to objects that are not essential in themselves. These objects (e.g., a canvas bag, a garter-belt harness, a pipe, or a short tie knotted in a bow at the neck) add to the beauty, convenience, or effectiveness of other things. The art in painting generates distance, both between the painting and the spectator and between the painting and its subject. In contrast, a photograph leads the mind into the actual world. For example, a Black man with a Superman T-shirt will make one think of the Black body, not art. The difference in relation to reality is summed up in the notion that painting as an art has been freed of its literary aspects by the advent of the camera.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Jason Epstein, “A Special Supplement: The Trial of Bobby Seal,” in *The New York Review of Books*, December 4, 1969.

<sup>10</sup> Lázoló Moholy-Nagy, “A New Instrument of Vision,” in *The Photography Reader*, ed. Liz Wells (London: Routledge, 2003), 94-95.

As Ralph Ellison wrote at the beginning of *Invisible Man*,<sup>11</sup> “I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allen Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquid—and I might even be said to possess a mind.” Like the narrator in his head, Hendricks presents viewers with the full-length format of painted canvas. This option is always costly and grandiose, which increases the sitter’s air of power and self-possession. Akin to the arresting *Slick (Self-Portrait)*, 1977, the artist projects himself as a “pressed” silhouette with toothpick in mouth against a white background (Fig. 9). With a delicate palette, the artist’s painting recalls the complex Yoruba color theory. However, the lively and even positive aspect of his work is distinctly his own. Color operates not only on an aesthetic level but also reveals the underlying nature and character of the personages depicted. Hendricks captures the concept of being beautifully dressed, in clean, well-starched white clothes from top to bottom. He produces subliminally and spiritually an individual who is transparently honest or wise in an ultimately cool manner. Such an image reflects West African concepts of purification. Among the Yoruba, the color white represents positive principles and protects against people and malevolent forces.<sup>12</sup> Undertaking an examination of the meaning of individual existence, the artist locates the tension of race relations in similar conditions of purity, invisibility, and blindness.

This artwork involves the conflict between how audiences perceive the artist and how he perceives himself. Some attitudes cause viewers to examine him in terms of biased stereotypes, but Hendricks desires recognition of his individuality rather than

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<sup>11</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage International, 1995), 3.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 9, 11, & 232–33.

recognition based on these stereotypes. Therefore, he stares at the viewer. In return the viewer sees the reflection in his eyeglasses of the gothic windows of the artist's studio. Hendricks captures his own likeness in this self-portrait, among others in which he freely pursued his own ends. He claims a particular status, showcasing technical mastery and seeking self-reflection in this particular situation. Furthermore, he evokes the idea that others are blind; they can not see the artist without imposing these alien identities on him. Reflecting the details of tracery in the gothic windows on lenses of his sunglasses allows the viewer to see the artist's memento of the New Haven cityscape. This glimpse of the cityscape accentuates this self-portrait's materiality and unity as an official record of a particular time and place for the present and the future. The English art critic John Ruskin once stated that, "The true ideal of landscape is precisely the same as that of human form; it is the expression of the specific—not the individual, but the specific—characters of every object, in their perfection."<sup>13</sup> In British painting of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the recurrence of images of man's struggle against the awe-inspiring power of nature manifests this sensibility. Similarly in the twentieth century, Barkley Hendricks' highly personal view of nature accords with the individuality that is a central tenet of portraiture. Moreover, it offers an alternative to one's preconceptions of the ordered world of Enlightenment thought for expressing a range of psychological and emotional states.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Lorenz Eitner, ed., *Restoration/Twilight of Humanism*, vol. 2 of *Neoclassicism and Romanticism: 1750-1850; Sources and Documents* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1970), 72.

<sup>14</sup> Another facet of this Romantic attitude toward nature emerges in the landscapes of Barkley Hendricks, whose art sketches directly from nature (*en plein air*) express his response to the Jamaican countryside among other settings in the Caribbean. Scenic views, such as *Fire Down Below and Black River*, 2000, fuse keepsakes of the lush green vegetation of the island, which Hendricks had visited on numerous occasions. These works featured the serene skies and peaceful moods characteristic of the concept of the sublime. See

This interest in individuality and subjectivity makes a probing juxtaposition to Alfred Leslie's self-portrait, *Alfred Leslie/1966-67*. It pictures a monstrous figure who is powerful as a brute. He possesses unflattering features that in a curious way are both threatening and pitiful. The artist's transition to a large-scale figurative style marks a reaction to the broadening mainstream acceptance of Abstract Expressionism. However, something was lost, as if the work had been completed over too many sessions without time for the paint to dry. The paint has a thick consistency from a rhythmic motion determined by sketching or under-painting smears. A viewer's understanding of this figure, which happens to be the artist, is constructed in that it is contingent on aesthetic conventions, human perception, and social experience. Along the same lines as Barkley Hendricks' work, Leslie proposes new definitions for knowledge and truth that form a new paradigm based on intersubjectivity instead of classical objectivity, and on viability instead of truth. This view may deal with matters regarding their practical consequences; nonetheless, such a perspective is important in considering Barkley Hendricks' work in a larger paradigm.

For example, one can make further distinctions by arguing about how women are portrayed in Hendricks' artwork. Specifically, "How do images of women define 'being female'?"<sup>15</sup> In the painting, *Miss T*, 1969, Hendricks puts forth an image of a young woman who stands in place as she looks off to the side, beyond the picture frame (Fig. 10). This pose creates a mood of withdrawal and mystery. The artist supplements the

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Barkley L. Hendricks, "Selected Artist Chronology," in *Barkley L. Hendricks: Birth of the Cool*, ed. Trevor Schoonmaker (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 120.

<sup>15</sup> See Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Robert Stam and Toby Miller (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 483-494.

Western tradition of the female body, and this instead becomes a critique of the natural standards of beauty. She has a small bulbous nose, dark eyes, and an aloof countenance. Her hair is big and puffy like a wad of cotton wrapped around one end of a small rod; it resembles a curly waved frizz.

To expand upon this thought, in the artist's painting titled *Claire*, 1971, a viewer bears witness to such ideas related to the levels of attractiveness that are recognized as the cultural norm (Fig. 11). Hendricks beautifully captures the women's age and expression within this purple palette without jeering at the figure's robust physical appearance. He gives his subject a level stare, which effectively places her on the same social level as the viewer. Overall, in Hendricks' portraits he adopts a high viewpoint. The gesture—and to some extent the costume and expression in the present picture—recall Hendricks' *Michael BPP (Black Panther Party)*. This model wears contemporary attire. However, his attire reveals a penchant for the turtleneck sweater and pants suggested here. In addition, *Claire* demonstrates the assortment of people that Barkley Hendricks portrays. The artist did not only capture the likeness of people of color, but White individuals as well.

Nonetheless both representations, Miss T and Claire, are concerned with the gaze and the idea that the male artist looks actively whereas the women are to-be-looked-at. Surely the viewer who is looking at the picture sees power in the woman rather than the man. For Miss T, this is evident through her attention directed into middle distance, as in a state of reverie by focusing elsewhere than the viewer. Claire takes a more active approach by looking out of the frame as if at the viewer.



One methodological alternative to the Western point of view toward standards of beauty is to speak less of the image than of the voice. Shifting the attention from the domination of the gaze to a people's history as a way of restoring voice to the voiceless (or almost voiceless) can be rather affective. The concept of voice suggests a metaphor of liberation across boundaries that reposition themselves. Thus, visual organization of space is revisited.<sup>16</sup> The interplay of Barkley Hendricks' rendering of the female body and the sitter in everyday life enables this logical disputation. The task of the viewer is to call attention to the cultural voices at play—whether male or female, Black or White.<sup>17</sup> These voices include not only those heard aurally up close, but also those displaced or disenfranchised by the cultural milieu around them.

No matter how deeply Barkley Hendricks sees into his subjects, he can represent them only in their outer aspects. A side of his sitters will always remain hidden. In the alternative, the artist may choose to overlook a certain aspect of his sitters. However, unlike the novelist or playwright, the artist must round out his character study without the aid of words. The visual requirements of painting and photography set limits on the degree to which he can depart from visual fact. Against the self-image of the figure, he can pose an image more in conformity with his own conception. Be as it may, this image exists solely in potential form, and the artist can only hope that it will emerge in the chosen media. Hendricks appreciated the artistic freedom afforded him by the oil and

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<sup>16</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–317.

<sup>17</sup> I discussed the body and race as commodity with Barkley Hendricks; he informed me of two art auctions that took place in 2009. An image of a Black female (*Bid' Em In/Slave (Angie)*, 1973) sold for a significantly higher monetary value than a portrait of a White female (*Jackie Sha-La-La (Jackie Cameron)*, 1975). Barkley Hendricks, phone conversation with the author, March 2, 2010.

acrylic medium. He used the medium in experimental ways by brushing paint directly on the canvas to create rich, luminous washes of color accentuated by a white gesso that illuminates the figure against each composition's environment. He was interested in the body as an expressive vehicle. He took photographs in various places or visually studied the sitter in his or her actual setting. However, the sense of rhythmic motion and the well-dressed attire in the painting, *Misc. Tyrone (Tyrone Smith)*, 1976, evoke associations with coolness rather than just the urban environment his figure has come from (Fig. 12). The artist's observant and insightful portrayal incorporates this aspect into the work.

The two images, that of the model and that of the portraitist, are locked in a silent struggle of imaginations until they are thrust apart by the click of the shutter or the flick of a brush. At that moment, the struggle is resolved. Still, it is not necessarily resolved in favor of either participant. In painting, the artist has the advantage of being able to complete his creation in solitude. He can make the work conform to his own psychological and aesthetic conventions. In a novel or in theater, the author can completely liberate him or herself from any restraints of likeness. In photography, and in Barkley Hendricks' implementation of photographic techniques in his paintings, the artist is harnessed to the subject. During the entire process of making the picture, he is forced into collaboration, and the truth of his product is bound to depend in some measure on the person being depicted.

Taken as a whole, the moral principle of the portraitist is to respect the identity of the subject. Such respect does not come naturally in painting that without effort produces countless unrelated likenesses of the same object. Paintings as well as photographs are made of light. Such light can endow people and scenes with emotional associations that

are completely irrelevant to them—half-lighted faces transform any woman into a pensive Madonna. To achieve truth, Barkley Hendricks must curtail his resources, which means he must make each image portrayed more challenging in its depiction.

Barkley Hendricks' artwork aims to restore to his subjects the solidity of being. To this end, he has returned to older aspects of portraiture. One might say he has fought his way back to this art through tides of conceptual effects made possible by duality, in painting and photography, and by experiments, in the accidental and the unpremeditated. His works depend predominantly on prearranged conditions leading to the final leap into the unknown. Hendricks has rejected the limited nature of candid composition in favor of the conscious pose. However, he has shown various techniques through settings and objects held by his characters. For Hendricks, pose means only that the model confronts the artist's chosen media knowingly, thus wearing a face that is a product of nature and the model's own act.

## Conclusion

This exploration argues that figurative paintings by artists of color represent many symbolic meanings. Such meanings promote the existence and full participation of a number of diverse ethnic, racial, religious, and social groups. Through such ideologies these artists also include practical meaning or use. Such meaning may be found in the larger criterion of aesthetics that fulfill Western ideals. It is likely that the encounters of most figurative painters will exhibit far more practical than symbolic characteristics. Those art historians and critics who concentrated on the masses of better-known artists were not mistaken; they simply did not see the entire picture. With the intention of correcting this oversight, one should begin to explore in further detail. In part, this can be done simply by multiplying the number and kinds of examples considered here (i.e., the symbolic aspects of American culture and the individuals who participate in a particular historical framework). One view is not “right” and the other “wrong”; we simply need a more balanced vision.

Such an exercise in creating balance may be useful to onlookers even in their everyday lives. To understand portraits, one must understand as much as possible about the circumstances that produced them. For instance, Barkley Hendricks’ life-sized portrait *Bashir* (Robert Gowens), 1975, in which the figure can be compared to Anthony van Dyck’s *Charles I, King of England, from Three Angles*, embodies the traditional proportions of the classical canon; both works are endowed with a classical sense of dignity and timelessness (Fig. 13). This figure is represented by a single model formed in three parts; wearing a black blower hat, black bowtie, a long blue trench coat, and white pants with a checkerboard arrangement and matching white shoes. Hendricks prepared

his rigorous construction with several layers of underpainting. The compositional elements rotate so each perspective can be viewed. These elements are extended in slow, hieratic gestures. The three types of portraits encourage different patterns of reception: the first acknowledges that there is someone out there, the second barely accommodates it, and the third dismisses it all together.

This life-sized portrait constitutes itself in the real space of the viewer's engagement. It seems to be neither a painting nor a photograph, but some kind of grouping between the two mediums. The portrait engages its audience by the positioning of each figure's body making a unique three-dimensional space. Under such circumstances, this model becomes involved in real time in which Bashir's existence unfolds as a painting, photograph, or sculptural form to give this composition a theatrical presence in itself. Bashir, like an actor or person that we may encounter in everyday life, is constantly impacting those who view his work. Having this work become a part of multiple conversations enables this painting to be a mixed media of sorts or *gesamtkunstwerk*. Like a modern-day *Charles I, King of England, from Three Angles* composition, the multiple bodies interact in a pensive-like posture, bending forward and back. The legs twist in a syncopated-pirouette motion and are carefully posed in side-by-side symmetry.

Achieving a balanced understanding demands that we look not only at the practical, utilitarian context of the image and—in these circumstances—figurative portraiture. We must look at the symbolic context and meaning as well. If we continue to overlook that aspect of an artwork, our task as viewers remains only half done. In addition, the conventional aspects of portraiture ensure that each example will bear

resemblance to the next. Yet the general similarities make the distinctive qualities of Barkley L. Hendricks' artwork more relevant.

**Figures**



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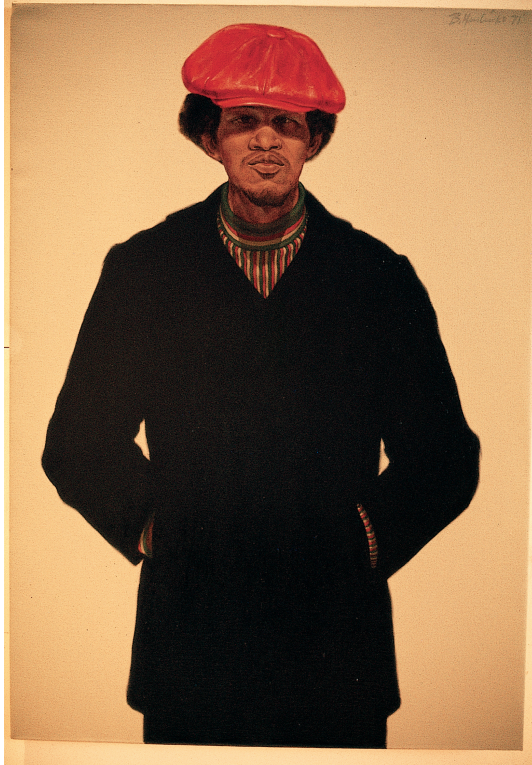


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