A series of bold and defiant self-portraits punctuate a recent retrospective at PAFA, adamantly declaring at cadenced intervals through the course of the exhibition: “this is painting!” A resolute iconoclast resisting the movements, modes and fashions of the swings of the art world has been working for years to his own tune, the tune of searing jazz lines, soul groove and Fela-style Afro-beat that breaks with the structured rhythm of the rise and fall of identifiable artistic movements and popular aesthetic trends. The visitor cannot but be struck by the resounding truth of this off-beat, seditious declaration in the church-like silence of the gallery: “indeed, this is painting!”

Barkley Hendricks is the brilliantly endowed artist responsible for this exhibit, the singular force leading the spectator into the very heart of singularity. His refined treatment of texture, his keen use of color and the overall acumen of his execution combine to give the viewer powerful and potent portraits of unique individuals. His precise and perceptive rendering of human physiognomy captures the idiosyncrasies of a gaze, the peculiarities of a visage is bolstered by the study of revelatory gestures, unique fabrics and fashions, as well as instantaneous reflections of light. Instead of imposing their gazes and sultry poses as if from nowhere, or rather, from nowhere other than their own uniquely adorning being, carrying the weight of their entire past in a single gesture or glance. These are not simply images; they are icons. However, their status as icons is not due to the fact that they are universalized as types, nor is it due to their ‘iconic’ stature as well-known figures (such as Warhol’s Liz Taylor series). On the contrary, Hendricks presents us with an iconography of the singular, an elevation of the everyday that captures the personalized eccentricities of individuals. His iconographic practice of painting does not transform his models into transcendental, universal forms but rather glorifies the minute singularity of their being to such an extent that it radiates with more power than abstract universals.

H e n d r i c k s’ valorization of the singular is not simply a stalwart attempt to embrace the fleeting and contingent for its own sake. Echoing Baudelaire, he mediates his search for the purely circumsstantial with an intriguing resuscitation and reworking of the “eternal” forms of representation found in the gallery of his imaginary museum: his self-portraits act as curious counterpoints to Rembrandt’s, his monochrome backgrounds recall the ground that Manet borrowed from Velasquez, his black frames add a racial dimension to the black frames of Dutch Old Master paintings, basketball lanes are aesthetically aligned on the Islamic Palace of Alhambra, the Portrait of Cardinal Guido Bentivoglio haunts his “Sir Charles, Alias Willie Harris,” his circular paintings recall those of 16th century Italian art, his rendering of “twins” resuscitates the tradition of diptychs, medieval Byzantine religious icons are given a singular new existence as gold leaf emblazons the afro and placid demeanor of “Lawdy Mama”...

It is for all of these reasons that it would be an egregious mistake to simply classify Hendricks—in order to be finished with him—as a painter of “black culture.” It is indeed of the utmost importance that he broke through the repressive filters and oppressive regimes of visibility that have largely excluded blacks from the canvas (unless they were typified blacks). However, he did not simply break through these structures in order to re-essentialize black culture by purporting to provide its true image, its universal icon. On the contrary, his incessant depictions of singular black subjects are a constant reminder that there is no “black culture” in general. There are cultural practices identifiable as “black” and social struggles over the categorization of these practices, and painting is precisely a cultural practice participating in these struggles. The singular icon resists both the oppressive cultural structures of longstanding white supremacy and the myopic valorization of “true black culture,” which is ultimately only a partial contestation of the structures of racist culture since it nonetheless remains within the confines of categorical thought. Moreover, to invoke Kobena Mercer’s insightful distinction, Hendricks’ painting ultimately remains irreducible to the framework of social engineering and the attempt to simply present a “positive representation” of blacks and black culture to resist the negative imagery that dominates mass culture. He displaces the logic of social engineering, to take but one example, by ironically responding to the image source
Image source

- Theodore Tucker