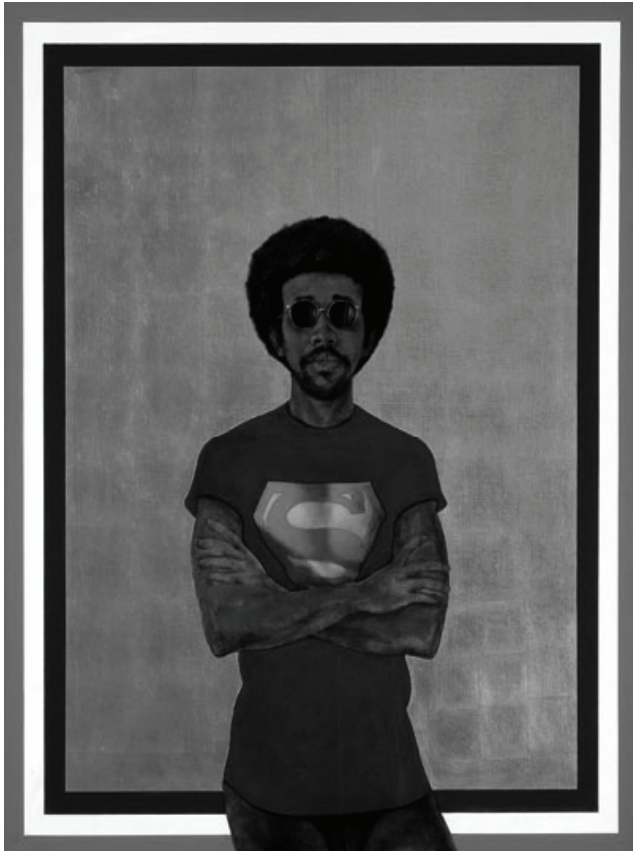


# The Singular Icon

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



glance. Like Balzac, the careful scrutiny of physical traits reveal the effervescent singularity of the being he has before him. The keen rendering of human

visages is bolstered by the study of revelatory gestures, unique fabrics and fashions, as well as instantaneous reflections of light. Instead of painting conventional impressions or identifiable types, he captures the fleeting singularity of unique human beings.

Hendricks' homage to the singular is of a resolutely iconic nature. His figures are often devoid of context, imposing their gazes and sultry poses as if from nowhere, or rather, from nowhere other than their own uniquely adorned 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 transcendent, universal forms but rather glorifies the minute singularity of their being to such an extent that it radiates with more power than abstract universals.

Hendricks' 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 circumstantial 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



claim that he is a “brilliantly endowed” artist by a near naked self-portrait taking on the myths of black male physical prowess (a myth that goes hand in hand with the implicit assumption that the black male is not intellectually or artistically endowed...). Hendricks avoids essentializing black culture in order to persistently dismantle the essentialized traits operative not only in mass culture, but also in the art of social representation and the artistic attempts at social engineering. The true political power of his work is his ability to shatter typological representations by taking the spectator into the idiosyncratic singularity of human existence through the production of iconoclastic icons. This is painting!

- Theodore Tucker

Images source  
 Left top: Barkley L. Hendricks, Icon for My Man Superman (Superman never saved any black people—Bobby Seale), 1969. Oil, acrylic and aluminum leaf on linen canvas, 59 1/2 x 48 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, NY.  
 Left bottom: Barkley L. Hendricks, Misc. Tyrone (Tyrone Smith), 1976. Oil and magna on linen canvas, 72 x 50 1/4 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, NY.  
 Right: Barkley L. Hendricks, Lawdy Mama, 1969. Oil on canvas, 53 3/4 x 36 1/4 inches. Collection of the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York. Gift of Stuart Liebman, in memory of Joseph B. Liebman.