

Forbes

Mike Henderson's American Odyssey On View At University Of California, Davis

Chadd Scott

Contributor | Jan 31, 2023, 11:37am EST



Mike Henderson, *Love it or Leave it, I Will Love it if You Leave it*, 1976. Mixed media, 69 × 108 in.
© MIKE HENDERSON. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND HAINES GALLERY. PHOTO: ROBERT DIVERS HERRICK.

The old saying goes, “those who can’t, teach.” Mike Henderson could, and taught, excelling as both an artist and professor at the University of California, Davis for 43-years. The Jan Shrem and Maria Manetti Shrem Museum of Art at UC Davis honors the professor emeritus during the exhibition, [“Mike Henderson: Before the Fire, 1965-1985.”](#) Opening January 30, 2023, the

presentation brings to light the pioneering artist's rarely seen contributions to the history of contemporary painting and filmmaking, radical Black politics, and to the story of California art.

That title is not metaphorical, it is literal.

In 1985 a fire damaged much of his work from the previous two decades and partially obliterated his visual recordings of a time of tumult and change in the state and the world. After his studio catastrophe, Henderson's artwork never returned to the subjects of social strife and political angst in America it centered on previously. He subsequently explored new ideas about Black life and utopian visions in a unique visual language merging abstraction, Afro-futurism and surrealism.

Many pieces assumed lost have been recovered and restored by the museum in conjunction with the Bay Area's [Preservation Arts conservators](#) to anchor "Before the Fire." Over the past three years, restoration treatments varied from mold and organic remediation, heavy surface debris cleaning, inpainting, strip lining and restretching works that had been rolled for many years. A slideshow of damaged artworks is included in the exhibition to illuminate dozens of paintings that were not able to be restored.

The Odyssey

Henderson's studio fire was child's play in comparison to the inferno of his upbringing which reads like a mid-century African American "Odyssey" of one unthinkable trial following another. Henderson (b. 1943) grew up in segregated Marshall, Missouri. A childhood memory shared in the exhibition catalogue recalls a local man dressed as Santa Claus calling him the n-word. Ku Klux Klan members were a routine sight in town. Then there was the day in 1959 when Henderson's high school science teacher chose to teach "evolution" by having the Black students in class stand up and compare them to monkeys.

"I was told I was a second-class citizen," [Henderson is quoted in the catalogue](#). "The teacher would come in and say, 'All you're going to be are housekeepers, soldiers, or factory workers, so we're not going to have class today, I'm going to show you how to serve a table.'"

Not that his home life was any better.

His family lived in poverty. No electricity or plumbing. The artist remembers sneaking into his high school on weekends to shower. On top of that, his father was physically and emotionally abusive.

It's no wonder he dropped out, left home and moved to Springfield, IL to live with an aunt. While there, he wrote a letter to President John F. Kennedy seeking help finding a job. Remarkably, he heard back from a secretary who did help him land work.

After moving back to Marshall, he won a mail-order drawing contest encouraging him to take correspondence courses on the basics of drawing. He ended up graduating high school by taking night classes while working. Henderson was surprisingly accepted into and received scholarships from the San Francisco Art Institute in 1965. It was the only college he applied to that didn't consider his race when considering his application. Financial support to get there came from community members.

Mike Henderson wanted to get as far the hell away from racist, rural, midwestern Missouri as possible and he found that in progressive, cosmopolitan, West Coast San Francisco.

Protest Paintings



Mike Henderson, Self Portrait, 1966. Acrylic on canvas, 45 × 29 in. COLLECTION OF JOHN AND GINA WASSON. © MIKE HENDERSON. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND HAINES GALLERY

Henderson arrived in the Bay Area at the peak of the counterculture revolution and political protests of the 1960s. [The Hunters Point Uprising in 1966](#) brought five days of martial law to Black neighborhoods in San Francisco after police shot and killed an unarmed Black teenager. Also in 1966, across the Bay in Oakland, activists Bobby Seale and Huey Newton [formed the Black Panther Party for Self Defense](#). The artist would come to work with the Panthers, creating artwork in support of their mission and volunteering at community events they organized.

“The radical atmosphere of the Bay Area was a part of his everyday experience,” Sampada Aranke, co-curator of “Mike Henderson: Before the Fire, 1965-1985,” told Forbes.com. “Whether it was being questioned by police on the way to campus or stumbling upon anti-war or [Black Power](#) rallies and demonstrations on the way to his studio, Mike has stories upon stories of how San Francisco shaped his understanding of both violence and liberation.”

Out of this cauldron Henderson’s “protest paintings” emerged confronting the anti-Black violence of the Civil Rights era he observed and took part in. An art history degree isn’t required to decipher his *Self Portrait* from 1966.

Screaming, tormented, angry, teeth bared.

“Enormous epics of rage,” Dan Nadel writes in the exhibition catalogue.

Love it or Leave it, I Will Love it if You Leave it from 1976 could just as easily have been painted last month in response to those believing anything other than blind devotion to America’s history of racism, inequality and abuse of land and people be met with banishment.

His academic setting further encouraged him to push and challenge and find his own way artistically.

“The San Francisco Art Institute was itself an art school known for experimentation, risk-taking, and an unabashed embrace of the eccentric,” Aranke said. “Mike walked into a learning environment that, in many ways, embodied the spirit of the Bay Area more broadly.”

At school, Henderson’s talent was quickly recognized. He earned a spot in the prestigious summer residency at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture where he met one of his idols, [painter Jacob Lawrence](#). While attending the program in Maine, he hitchhiked to the Newport Blues Festival. Henderson was an accomplished blues musician as well.

And so it goes, on and on, Mike Henderson's life, hardships, talents, achievements and connections to history reading like a movie script.

Professor Mike Henderson



Mike Henderson, *The Cradle*, 1977. Oil on canvas, 71 × 120 in. Fine Arts Collection, Jan Shrem and Maria Manetti Shrem Museum of Art. Gift courtesy of the artist and Haines Gallery.
© MIKE HENDERSON. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND HAINES GALLERY. PHOTO: ROBERT DIVERS HERRICK.

Henderson joined the groundbreaking UC Davis art faculty in 1970. At the time, he was the only Black faculty member in the Art Department, one of only two Black faculty members on campus.

“Mike came to UC Davis because he wanted to make an impact, be an agent for change at the university,” Aranke said. “So, in that spirit, I think Mike’s legacy is probably best embodied in his students, many of whom went on to be artists, educators, and activists themselves. I’m thinking of Carlos F. Jackson, Jose Arenas, Vonn Sumner, and Maisha Winn—all of whom have had great impact in their work and communities.”

Henderson taught drawing, painting, filmmaking and printmaking before retiring in 2012 as professor emeritus.

“When Mike joined the UC Davis art department, he became part of an illustrious tradition started by Professor Richard Nelson, who founded the department in 1958 with very little direction beyond, ‘just make an art department,’” Aranke explains. “The department became known for cultivating experimentation and material innovation, as inspired by its faculty, who were each trying new things and challenging the art orthodoxy of the time. When Mike joined, he was suddenly teaching alongside the likes of Wayne Thiebaud, Robert Arneson, Roy De Forest, Roland Petersen, Manuel Neri and William T. Wiley. He was able to find his voice, just as they had, in this atmosphere of creative freedom and dedication to art. He also made lifelong friends in this group.”

Mike Henderson continues to live and work in the San Francisco Bay Area. [“Before the Fire” will be on view](#) through June 25, 2023.

Follow me on [Twitter](#) or [LinkedIn](#). Check out my [website](#).