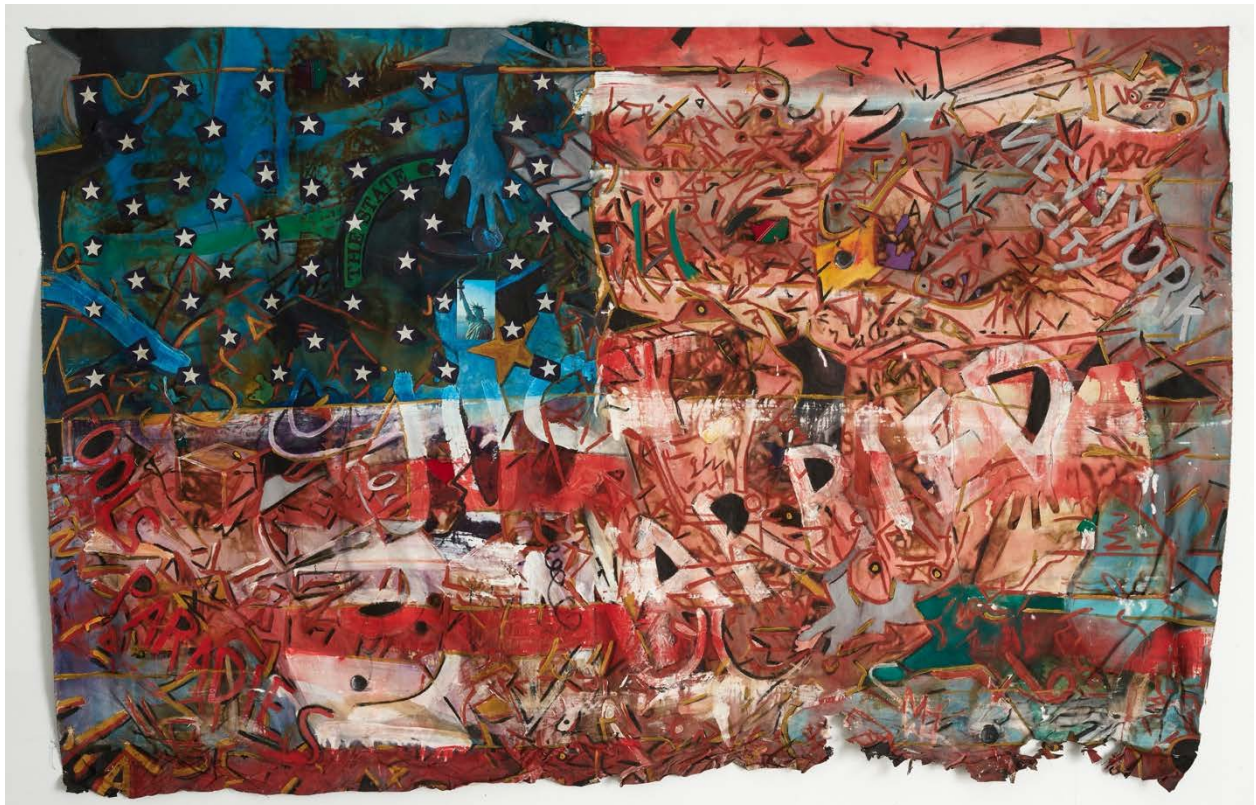


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An Odyssey of Fire: Nearly Destroyed in a Blaze, Mike Henderson's Long-Lost Paintings About the Rage of the '70s Reemerge

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Mike Henderson, *Love it or Leave it, I Will Love it if You Leave it*, PHOTO ROBERT DIVERS HERRICK/COURTEST THE ARTIST AND HAINES GALLERY

In 1985 Mike Henderson's studio caught on fire. All the paintings he made during the 1960s and '70s, into which Henderson poured the fear and angst of the era, were destroyed—or so it seemed.

Murmurings of the paintings' existence reached Dan Nadel, curator at large at the Jan Shrem and Maria Manetti Shrem Museum of Art at the University of California, Davis, in 2018. He was having a conversation with the painter William T. Wiley, a longtime teacher at UC

Davis alongside Henderson, when Wiley insisted that Nadel give Henderson a visit. Wiley spoke of a body of figurative work that Henderson had made as a student. Unfortunately, Wiley said, those works had been destroyed in a fire.

During the studio visit with Henderson, Nadel mentioned these early lost works. Then, to his surprise, Henderson asked Nadel if he wanted to see them.

Together, Henderson and Nadel opened up a shipping container that Henderson hadn't touched in years. One by one, the rolled canvases were taken out and unfurled. All of them were heavily damaged by a mix of dirt, mold, and ash. These works were subsequently cleaned up, and for the first time in decades, they are now on view to the public through June 25th, in a solo show at the Manetti Shrem Museum.

"I feel very blessed that they came out of me," Henderson said on a recent video call. "The closest I can get to describing it is: your children grow up, and they find their way in the world, and they come back to you with their own philosophies, their own way of looking at the world."

Sampada Aranke, who worked on the Manetti Shrem show with Nadel, said, "they were absolutely breathtaking. They demonstrated a completely different style, so unlike the canvases that we'd seen from Mike from the '80s on. They really started to tell a radically different story around Californian art and Black American art."

Black Is Beautiful

At first, Nadel and Henderson had some trouble parsing what was intentional versus what was fire damage. At the time that Henderson made these early works, he was experimenting with putting canvases in the oven. This unusual form of mark making spoke to both the violence he was wrestling with and the color fire produced—black as in "Black is beautiful."

Strangely enough, though, the fire that ravaged Henderson's studio had nothing to do with this singular technique. Henderson was thousands of miles away at the time. These experiments with fire have come to represent an uncanny historical echo, the cosmic beginning of a fated tragedy.

Depicted in these canvases that Nadel and Henderson were able to salvage were scenes of protests that were occurring across the country in the '60s. This period of unrest, often referred to as a time when California was on fire, prompted an outpouring of work from a young Henderson, who was in art school at the San Francisco Institute of Art at the time.

"I was 25 or 26 when I did those paintings. I had knots in my stomach, then," Henderson, 79, said. "I wanted to speak about what I felt and what other people who weren't artists felt, like going to the oracle, the doctor or something. The doctor tries to help each person with what they're dealing with and I felt that was my job as an artist."

As Henderson attended demonstrations, he reflected the scenes of historical violence that he had come to know by studying paintings by the likes of Goya. The violence he saw unfold was intimately familiar to Henderson, as a Black man who had grown up poor in Marshall, Missouri, in the 1940s and '50s.



Mike Henderson, *Non-Violence*, 1967

“I was at this demonstration, and there were cops beating up these white kids because they had long hair. They were hippies, [the cops looked at them like they] were nasty and dirty, the way they looked at Blacks,” Henderson said. “You see that, and you see what happened with the Native Americans [and] at Auschwitz. You could change the sex or the color, but it’s the same thing.” This historical cross-referencing can be seen in a painting like *Non-Violence* (1967), in which Henderson depicts a cop wearing a swastika on his armband as he wields a bloody knife against two Black people.

As the ’70s approached, Henderson would take on filmmaking as his primary medium, prompted by an accident he had.

Henderson recalled that, when he attended the San Francisco Art Institute, he saw the painter Christina Schlesinger, “a tomboy, racing around with the guys. She didn’t have any paintings to show at class, but she had a film she made of a cook of her family, a Black woman. It was the first time I had seen a Black woman who wasn’t playing an Aunt Jemima character,” said Henderson. “And then the next day I got hit by a bus.”

One of the trustees at SFAI got involved, and Henderson had \$2,000 in his pocket the next day. The first thing he did was buy a guitar amplifier. The next thing he did was buy a camera.

The next years for Henderson were defined by his filmmaking and music-making, and for a time he left painting behind.

“What If I Had Been in the Fire?”

Then one day, years later, he was on tour in Europe when he got a phone call informing him of the fire. It was a turning point in Henderson’s life. “I kept thinking about what if I had been in the fire and I had vanished too?” said Henderson.

Henderson had the opportunity to stay in Europe, and weighed whether he should go back to the States and start painting again. In the end, he decided to give painting one more try. He refused to be “burned out,” Henderson said.

When Henderson returned to the US, he began thinking deeply about what he wanted from his life. He started looking closely at his colleagues at UC Davis, like Wayne Thiebaud, who managed to have both a career *and* a family. Henderson realized he wanted that too.

“Art-making was my life and I thought I couldn’t get married because that would be another relationship I’d have to adjust to,” said Henderson. “I didn’t want to get involved with that until I helped out my parents, my brothers, get them a house with indoor plumbing.”

Henderson also feared putting a child through the poverty he had faced growing up.

“It’s too brutal, when you’re a kid watching other people have things you want like shoes with no holes,” said Henderson. “But eventually the finger points back to you, the clock is ticking. I decided to clear out all the trash around me so if there was somebody, I could find them.”

Henderson got back to painting, working in a new, abstract style. Along the way, he met his wife, Susan Deming. They had a son together.

A Teaching Tool

Henderson’s Manetti Shrem Museum show is more than just a solo exhibition, however—it’s also meant to be a teaching tool. Undergraduates across all departments at UC Davis can work as part of the visitor services team at the museum for pay, and for the entire fall semester, student advisers and visitor service student-workers have been preparing for the show alongside curators and professors.

“It is very challenging to present an exhibition about racism here at home in California. And it’s even more challenging to present that at a university art museum, where a huge proportion of our audience will be under 21,” said museum director Rachel Teagle. “They don’t necessarily know that history. It’s also a difficult moment in time to bear witness to anti-Black violence. We have had many difficult but important conversations with faculty, with students, with our community about why and how we would present these images.”

To that end, museum staff and students have been preparing how best to prepare audience members for Henderson’s art. They decided to eschew trigger warnings, which the museum team thought might lead visitors toward a certain bias.

Maev Dunning, a 21-year-old design major, said, “There’s a fine line between preparing visitors and letting them make an informed decision about what kind of content they want to see, but also

making sure that the experience isn't being painted for them before they can experience it for themselves."

The information given to visitors includes pamphlets and an educational video. Comment cards were handed out, so visitors could make their feelings heard if there was something that might need to be adjusted. There's also a part of the exhibition called "Cosmic Strut," where Henderson's blues music plays softly. It's a place where visitors can relax and reflect on the exhibition.



A still from Mike Henderson's film *Pitchfork and the Devil* (1979).

Students involved with the show said they were able to provide their peers with a different experience from the kind typically had at museums. Kate McConn, a 19-year-old anthropology major and student worker, recalled inviting a friend from Texas, where "the education is completely different there on art and race," McConn said. "He's super liberal, but he just wasn't really exposed to this history and kind of art until he came to Davis. So showing him these pieces shocked him."

McConn was able to have a conversation about how their schooling affected their knowledge of art, race, and history. Even for McConn, who grew up in California, participating in this program opened her eyes to two things: the virtues of contemporary art and the history of protest in her home state.

“I thought I didn’t like contemporary art. This is going to sound mean, but I thought it was boring,” said McConn. “But hearing Professor Henderson talk about how he felt these pieces come out of him, it was really cool and inspiring. It also just made me aware of how I don’t know enough to be a good ally to the BLM movement. Seeing it in the art, I realized it’s not just the news, it’s not just now, here, it’s everywhere.”

Making Space

A longtime teacher, Henderson always felt that the best thing he could do for his students was to give them space. He likened his work to “coaching” more than teaching. But students said that it was most impactful to be in the presence of a truly passionate and artistic spirit. He doesn’t quite seem to grasp the impact he’s had on them.

“I see them smiling at me, they ask me if I was afraid in the 60s, about if grades matter,” said Henderson. “I just tell them not to be afraid to make mistakes. No one ever asked to see my report card full of Ds.”

Henderson is still mystified by how he got to this moment. To understand it, he took a cue from the work of Joseph Campbell, who had written about the common narratives that exist across different folk tale traditions.

“I began to realize that life is like that, just as [Campbell] described—a Ulysses journey,” said Henderson. “How it began for me: I was shining this guy’s shoe in Missouri and he tells me to see a show about van Gogh, he gives me a ticket.”

Henderson went to the show and saw a docent was leading a group around. Not sure if he was allowed to join or not, Henderson hung on at the edges, but the more the docent spoke, the closer he got to the front of the group. He had a moment of epiphany.

“All of a sudden I understood the earth tones he was using and the shoes and those forks that they had, that dim light hanging over the table, the women in the fields with those arched backs,” said Henderson. “Next thing, I go to school and I’m painting a figure, and I figure I better break the rules, so that [these figures] can become my people.”

The painting that perhaps represents Henderson’s long odyssey is a piece called *Love it or Leave it, I Will Love it if You Leave it* (1976). It’s a large American flag, scrawled over with graffiti-like marks that give it a depth of layers. A hand appears, a human profile, a few words, like “marriage,” “fools,” and “paradise,” there’s even a bit of collage, a pasted-on picture of the statue of liberty. It’s a chaotic tapestry, with its bottom edge scarred and tattered by fire. It was the only painting in the lost cache that has not received any restoration work, per the curators’ wishes. It is unstretched, weathered by history and a lack of resources. It hangs in the show as a potent manifestation of Henderson’s odyssey, a little battered, but loved, just the way it is.