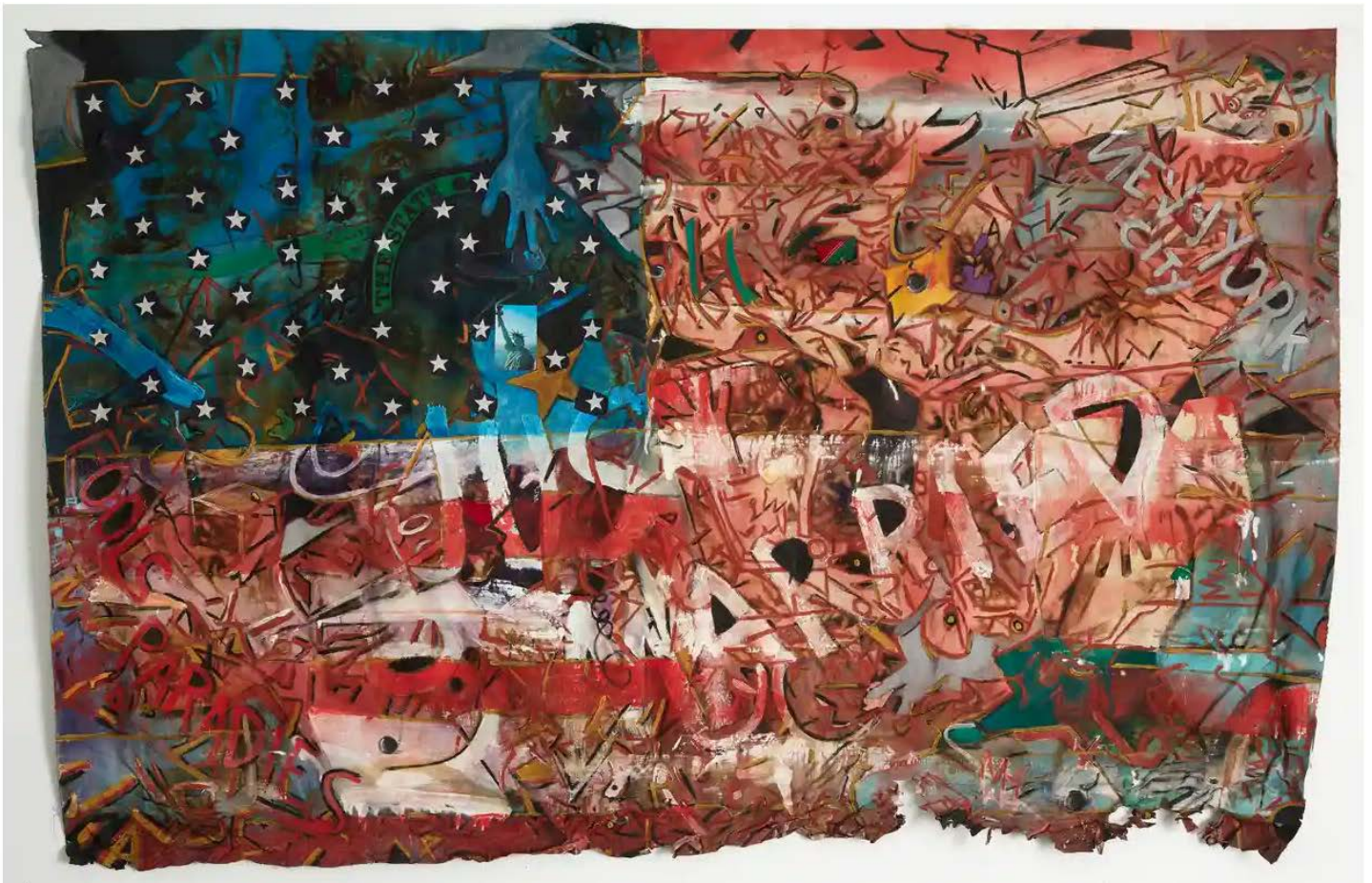


# The Guardian

## ‘I could have died’: how an artist rebuilt his career after a studio fire

Much of Mike Henderson’s ‘protest paintings’ were destroyed after a fire but in his first solo exhibition for decades he shows what was recovered and restored



Mike Henderson - Love it or Leave it, I Will Love it if You Leave it, 1976 Photograph: Courtesy of the artist and Haines Gallery. Photo: Robert Divers Herrick

**David Smith** in Washington

[@smithinamerica](#)

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“The difference between a good life and a bad life,” begins a line attributed to psychiatrist Carl Jung, “is how well you walk through the fire.”

Artist [Mike Henderson](#) knows the purging, clarifying effects of conflagration. In 1985 a blaze ripped through his home studio, damaging much of his work from the previous two decades. But that moment of destruction was also one of creation.

“I came to realise that the fire was a changing part in my life,” the 79-year-old says via Zoom from his home in [San Leandro](#) near Oakland, California. “I could have died if I stayed in there. I started looking at my life in terms of relationships and what life is about. Raising a family: I wouldn’t have done that. I decided to clear out my life so I could find that person.”

Henderson did and has now been married for more than 30 years, though he ruefully waves a finger at the camera to show that he recently lost his wedding ring – he had removed it to put on some rubber gloves and believes it was stolen by workmen at his home.

The painter, film-maker and blues musician is now preparing for his first solo exhibition in 20 years. [Mike Henderson: Before the Fire, 1965-1985](#) opened last week at the Jan Shrem and Maria Manetti Shrem Museum of Art at the University of California, Davis.

It is a rare chance to see Henderson’s big, figurative “protest paintings” depicting the racist violence and police brutality of the civil rights era. The show includes many pieces that were thought lost in the fire but have been recovered and restored by the museum. There is also a slideshow of damaged artworks to illuminate the dozens of paintings that were beyond salvation.

It has been a long journey here. Henderson grew up in a home that lacked running water in [Marshall, Missouri](#), during the era of Jim Crow segregation. His mother was a cook; his father worked in a shoe factory and as a janitor. “We were poor,” he recalls, reclining in a chair under a blue baseball cap. “We couldn’t even spell ‘poor’. We couldn’t get the P.”

But attending Sunday sermons at church with his grandmother, Henderson was moved by the religious paintings. “I was an oddball because I was still a dreamer. I had these dreams of something

else like wanting to be an artist or wanting to play the guitar. It didn’t make much sense. You’ve got to be a football player, athlete, you go to the army, you get married, you live two doors down from your parents and it repeats all over again. Sit around and tell lies in the barbershop and so forth. I tried to fit in but didn’t.”

Severely dyslexic, he quit school when he was 16 but returned at 21. A visit to a Vincent van Gogh exhibition in Kansas City proved inspiring and life-changing. In 1965 Henderson rode west on a Greyhound bus to study at the [San Francisco Art Institute](#), then the only racially integrated art school in America. He found a community of artists and kindred spirits from backgrounds very different from his own.

“I went as an empty container. I had no opinions about anything so I was like a sponge just sucking it all up. I was around students whose parents were New York artists, kids who travelled the world. Real diverse: Indians, Koreans, Chinese, Japanese and different tribes of Native Americans. I



Mike Henderson, Sunday Night, 1968.

Photograph: Courtesy of the artist and Haines Gallery

made it a habit to mingle with everybody that I could to find out whatever it was that I didn't know."



Mike Henderson, *The Cradle*, 1977. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist and Haines Gallery.

This was also the tumultuous era of civil rights demonstrations, protests against the Vietnam war and, in Oakland, the birth of the Black Panthers, a political organisation that aimed to combine socialism, Black nationalism and armed defence against police brutality.

The rallies were culturally and racially diverse, Henderson recalls. "There's a common thread here; everybody's feeling something here. Everybody was questioning everything and saying, why are we fighting? It was like a magnet that glued me to it and I was just taking it all in."

He smiles when he thinks back to one anti-war protest where a limousine pulled up and a woman got out, kissed him and exclaimed: "Harry, I haven't seen you in years!" It was the singer-songwriter Joan Baez. Henderson, tongue-tied, managed to point out, "I'm not Harry!" Baez excused herself, got back in the limo and went to the civic centre, where Henderson watched her perform the Lord's Prayer.

But it was also a revolutionary moment in art – bad timing for a fledgling figurative painter who idolised Goya, Rembrandt and Van Gogh. "In the 60s, painting was dead. Conceptual art, film-making, the new stuff was coming in. How was I going to make a living from it? I don't know.

"I knew one thing. I wasn't going to be on my deathbed wondering why I didn't try. I knew that the protest paintings I was doing weren't going to hang in anybody's living room but the paintings were

coming through me. There was a deeper calling. It wasn't about, will it sell or is it popular? It's coming out of me and I had no control of it. It controlled me."

It was a financial struggle. Henderson sometimes had popcorn for dinner and depended on student loans or the kindness of strangers. But in 1970 he joined the groundbreaking [UC Davis art faculty](#), teaching for 43 years alongside Wayne Thiebaud, Robert Arneson, Roy De Forest, Manuel Neri and William T Wiley (he retired in 2012 as professor emeritus).

In 1985 he took a sabbatical from UC Davis to play in a band touring Switzerland. But during his first weekend away, he learned that his home in San Francisco had been destroyed by fire. "It was like the rug was yanked from under my feet when my landlord called me and told me that everything was gone," he says.



Mike Henderson, *The Kingdom*, 1976. Photograph:  
Courtesy of the artist and Haines Gallery

"Wow, the first thing I did was get rid of all the liquor around me because I wanted to bounce and that was going to fog my brain. I was in shock. When I got back, I found out later things weren't as bad. There were some paintings that were saved."

And thankfully the fire had stopped at the door of a storage closet containing Henderson's precious films of blues musicians such as [Big Mama Thornton](#). "When the landlord told me the whole block was gone, I first thought about that film. The paintings I could do again, perhaps, but I could never replace those films."

Henderson did not resume work on protest paintings after the fire. Instead his later work explores Black life and utopian visions through abstraction, Afro-futurism and surrealism. He

reflects: "I didn't want to paint figures any more. I felt like I was through with figures."

His home was gone and he could no longer afford to live in San Francisco – "I'm not [Rauschenberg!](#)" – so he found a place in Oakland instead. "It was a big change and I did a lot of soul searching why I was there. I knew there was only one way to go and that was to go forward.

"I remember thinking I'm like in a trench. I can't go over the right side or left side. I can't go back. I have to go forward and just keep on going, see where this leads, and maybe I can climb out of this trench. Eventually I moved on and got married and had a son: he's a wildlife biologist. I couldn't complain because I chose art. So whatever he chooses is OK with me!"

- [Mike Henderson: Before the Fire, 1965-1985](#) is now on show at the Jan Shrem and Maria Manetti Shrem Museum of Art at the University of California, Davis