

A Masterful Portrait Painter, Barkley L. Hendricks Produced an Early Series of Basketball Paintings Grounded in Abstraction

by VICTORIA L. VALENTINE on Mar 6, 2020 • 12:58 pm



“Father, Son, and...” (1969) by Barkley L. Hendricks

ONE OF THE BIG DRAWS at the Jack Shainman booth at Frieze Los Angeles last month was a triptych by **Barkley L. Hendricks** (1945-2017) called “Father, Son, and...” Given the title and the artist’s renown for making masterful portraits that convey his subject’s cool style and mien, it would be safe to assume the 1969 painting was figurative. In fact, the figure is absent from the work, which portrays a sport to which many in the African American community are devoted, and some might even say worship: basketball.

Before he developed a practice focused on portraiture, Hendricks made a series of basketball paintings grounded in abstraction. He was still in school at the time, working as an arts and crafts teacher at the Philadelphia Department of Recreation, between his years at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (1963-67) and Yale University, where he earned both his BFA and MFA degrees in 1972.

Offering the work for sale at the Los Angeles art fair was a precursor to a more fulsome presentation planned at the New York gallery in May. About a dozen paintings made between 1967 and 1970 will be on view Jack Shainman, most shown publicly for the first time, along with related ephemera and documentary photographs by Hendricks.

The gallery provided a description of the exhibition. It reads: “These paintings are interpretations of abstraction through the lens of an artist interested in his social community and representing the idea of blackness. This little-known body of work is inspired as much by the geometry of the basketball courts as by the way the game itself is played, and how the sport attracted people from all over. Of course, Hendricks’ celebrated ‘Black Cool’ aesthetic has by now become a touchstone in the history of art, but this exhibition offers an unprecedented look at an early stage in its development, before he established a practice centered on portraiture.”

“*These paintings are interpretations of abstraction through the lens of an artist interested in his social community and representing the idea of blackness. This little-known body of work is inspired as much by the geometry of the basketball courts as by the way the game itself is played, and how the sport attracted people from all over.*”

MORE THAN A DECADE AGO, Trevor Schoonmaker organized “Barkley L. Hendricks: Birth of the Cool,” a major traveling survey that opened at the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University in 2008. The exhibition focused primarily on the artist’s portraits, and also included a selection of landscapes and three basketball paintings. “Vertical Hold” (1967), “Dippy’s Delight” (1969), and “Granada” (1970) were on display in the show. The catalog for “Birth of the Cool” illustrates two additional basketball paintings: “Father, Son...” (1969) and “Black on Black in Black” (1967).

Schoonmaker writes about the basketball series in his catalog essay and explains the origins of one particular canvas, demonstrating that the works weren’t inspired solely by the court game. “The painting ‘Granada’ (1970) is a linear depiction of two basketball lanes painted in black oil on a black acrylic background, with one line inverted for symmetrical balance,” he writes.

“The title of the work comes from a town in southern Spain that Hendricks visited in 1966 (on a traveling scholarship while he was a student at PAFA) where he first saw the Islamic palace known as the Alhambra built by Moorish monarchs. Impressed by the classical Islamic architecture, Hendricks mirrored and abstracted its lunette archways in the jump ball circles at the top of the lane in his paintings.”

Hendricks also shares insights about the paintings in the catalog. He begins by saying he has “a love for the game of basketball” and that, even if he was tired, he always had enough energy for the basketball court. His job as an art and crafts teacher with the recreation department indulged his love of the sport and his art education. Hendricks writes in part:

Because much of the program was geared to spring and summer activities, I had time during the winter months to do drawings of the basketball court right outside the window. Besides the game that provided color and geometry for many of my compositions, there were the playground regulars who always provided attention-getting behavior besides their faces, fashions, and attitudes. “Two” was the first composition I completed. The courts were just barely marked, and the rims never had nets or chains that lasted more than a week or two (that is, if the entire rim was not bent or broken off from the backboard).

The street balls rarely had distinguishing lines on them to say, “I’m a basketball.” When the large orange ball was launched from the shooter’s hand, there would follow a confident cry of “Two!” which could often be heard in the next block. At times, which were many, the ball would hit the rim or backboard and soar in directions away from where the game was played. That was a call to shame the shooter, which was very much a part of the sport of “humiliation basketball,” widely practiced on all the courts in all the neighborhoods I played on in Philadelphia....

While I was at Yale, one of the professors remarked about my basketball images having a Josef Albers influence. I had to be very honest with my ignorance concerning my lack of knowledge about Mr. Albers’s art and color theories. I did however take the color course given by Richard Lytle. Most of his curriculum was based on Albers’s principle of color interaction. The class added to my deeper love and understanding of color in all my art....

SINCE THE PASSING OF HENDRICKS in 2017, Jack Shainman has brought attention to the depth of his practice. The gallery presented “Them Changes,” the first-ever exhibition of his works on paper in 2018 and a five-volume publication project is underway exploring the diversity of his output.

The first volume in the series, “Barkley L. Hendricks: Works on Paper,” was published in November. A volume on Basketball will coincide with the May exhibition, followed by publications dedicated to his Landscapes and Photography. The final volume is a career-spanning monograph.

Elisabeth Sann, a director at Jack Shainman Gallery, is working on the forthcoming exhibition. In a statement to Culture Type she said:

“Known for his masterful portraits, in his basketball paintings, Barkley explored abstraction and minimalism through the lens of a socially-minded, community based practice and interest in the representation of blackness. The show demonstrates the depth of his career, revealing an additional layer of complexity to consider when looking at all he produced during his lifetime.” **CT**

Barkley Hendricks: Basketball Paintings on view at Jack Shainman Gallery, 513 West 20th Street, New York, N.Y., May 14–August 1, 2020

TOP IMAGE: BARKLEY L. HENDRICKS, “Father, Son, and...” 1969 (oil and acrylic on canvas, 54 x 36 3/8 x 1 1/2 inches, each panel; 54 x 109 1/4 x 1 1/2 inches, triptych, overall dimensions). | © Estate of Barkley L. Hendricks. Courtesy of the artist’s estate and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

The artist’s work is currently at the Rennie Museum in Vancouver, BC, Canada. “Barkley L. Hendricks and Lorna Simpson: Collected Works” runs through Aug. 29, 2020

A couple of basketball paintings, “Julie” (1969) and “Dippy’s Delight” (1969), were recently offered at auction.

BOOKSHELF

“Barkley L. Hendricks: Works on Paper is the first in a series of five volumes documenting the practice of Barkley L. Hendricks. “Barkley L. Hendricks: Landscape Paintings” is expected in April 2020. “Barkley L. Hendricks: Birth of the Cool” accompanied the artist’s expansive traveling survey. In addition, works by Hendricks are featured in the catalog for the landmark exhibition “Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power.”



BARKLEY L. HENDRICKS, "Vertical Hold," 1967 (oil, acrylic, and metallic silver on cotton canvas, 47 x 44 inches). © Estate of Barkley L. Hendricks. Courtesy of the artist's estate and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York