

“Deana Lawson & Henry Taylor,” *BombMagazine.org*, September 15, 2015

Deana Lawson & Henry Taylor



Deana Lawson, *As Above, So Below*, Port-au-Prince, Haiti, 2013, pigment print, approx. 45 x 35¾ inches. Images courtesy of the artist and Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago.

Henry Taylor and I were introduced by our mutual friend and collector, AC Hudgins, at a MoMA PS1 function in 2012. When we met I was about to depart on my first trip to Haiti to do my photographic work. The following year I asked Henry to accompany me to Port-au-Prince. That trip was a key moment in our friendship as well as in our artistic practices—the influence of Haiti can be seen in both of our bodies of work. It also gave us insight into each other’s process and the methods that aren’t necessarily visible in the final paintings or photographs.

I’ve sat for portraits for Henry in various locations, including the Hudgins’s homes in Harlem and Sag Harbor; Henry’s studio in Los Angeles; and my apartment in Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn. Henry no longer needs to ask me to sit for him; I now ask him to paint (document) me, because, as a photographer, it is fascinating to experience up-close an artist’s process that is quite different than mine.

Our dialogues have been mutually inspiring and have informed my focus and my photographs in subtle ways. What comes out of Henry’s mouth in conversation is completely unpredictable, and it is our meandering exchanges that keep the friendship alive and fresh. The text below is an excerpt from a recent phone conversation we had between New York and LA.

—Deana Lawson

Deana Lawson

So how’s everything going?

Henry Taylor

Everything is cool; it’s summertime. I’m trying to get ready for London. Oscar Murillo invited me; he said, “Come on out and kick it in London for a month and then why don’t you do a show here?”

DL

You and Oscar were at Artpace together last spring, right? How did the residency go?

HT

I mean, Texas is not California, and San Antonio is not Los Angeles. But it was a great experience. It was three of us at the residency—Autumn Knight, a performance artist from Houston, Oscar Murillo, and myself. It was interesting to watch Oscar’s process, because

“Deana Lawson & Henry Taylor,” *BombMagazine.org*, September 15, 2015



Henry Taylor, *Where Thoughts Provoke, Getting Deep In Shallow Water*, 2015, acrylic on canvas, 36 x 36 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo

even though he did a lot of labor, it came out minimal, just like a diamond. You kill a whole elephant for this little bit of ivory to put on a key chain or something. You know what I’m saying? He painted the whole space blue, and then white—first I thought he had fucked up, but actually that was his intention. He was uncomfortable with it, but I said, “Brother, I got it!” Sometimes we give so much and then it feels like we’ve been short-changed. But I told him, “That was so rich and good. It was like magic.”

DL

Do you have family in Texas?

HT

My grandparents were from Naples, in the eastern part of Texas. We go back generations. My parents have acres of land out there that has been unattended since the migration. A lot of people from that part of Texas moved to LA. I had only been there a few times. Going to a residency in San Antonio, I had no idea what I was going to do. It seemed like a good place to experiment. I thought about video and I started going to my grandparents’ property, knowing my grandfather was shot and killed there, although that was not in the forefront of my mind. I would take pictures, and there were these horses just running wild; it was so beautiful. I thought about what my dad had told me about the trail where my grandfather picked him and his mom up in a wagon. When I looked at that trail I thought, That’s it, here’s my story! But it was so not like my work, maybe more like Hockney’s. I started painting the horses but wanted to do something minimal.

DL

When I think of your paintings, minimalism doesn’t necessarily come to mind.

HT

Because I was thinking about video, the paintings started to come out like storyboards. The first time, I did *Beam Me Up, Scotty*, it was just a rough rendering of a guy being hung. But, I didn’t want it to be so blatant. It was like, those birds that just dive in the water, pelicans and shit. It was like, Beam Me Up, Scotty! Everyone knows their history—we just want people to do right. Yet we still got the Confederate flag being waved. A lot of things aren’t done right; some people can’t make that change.

The minimal work gets held back perhaps because people tend to think they want more. It’s like with a plate of food—sometimes you

“Deana Lawson & Henry Taylor,” BombMagazine.org, September 15, 2015

just get this starchy-ass shit but then you go to some healthy French restaurant, and it’s like, Damn, for a \$300 plate, look what I got! I could have went to Dominos!

So you’ve got to wean people sometimes. They might think I’m short-changing them, but I’m not. I’m just learning to be more efficient, when I can be.

DL

Let’s think of the commonalities in your work as a painter and my work as a photographer, or photo-based artist. We’re both dealing with portraiture and, oftentimes, we’re representing subjects who are strangers.

HT

Yeah. I find it fascinating how in your work you’re going from point A to point B but a lot happens in between. When you went to Haiti or to the Congo, you had drawings and I was like, Whoa, that’s like film!

DL

When I’m traveling to other countries, I often don’t have a lot of time. At the most I might stay for a month, but that’s still not much time to make work, which is why it’s important for me to have at least two clear ideas of an image before I arrive. My friend and colleague Aaron Gilbert often sketches scenes that I describe to him. I then use these drawings as a basis for the photographs.

When we traveled to Haiti together, I showed you the sketch for *As Above, So Below*, the sister with the cut-off pig’s head. What did you think when you saw the drawing?

HT

Hey, it was wild! Are you kidding me? You’re like the banshees—I gotta go get a fuckin’ carcass and cut that muthafucka open! Here in the States, we would just get a plastic doll instead. You took it to another level! I thought, Deana, I’m with it. I can’t think of nothing better to do than follow you. I was like Jimi Hendrix’s roadie; I loved it.

DL

(laughter) During that Haiti trip, we really got to know each other not only as artists and makers, but also personally.

HT

I was like tripping going to a Voodoo church, damn! And that girl was crazier than shit, she just grabbed the pig by the ears like it was nothing.

DL

I hadn’t met the woman who was going to pose for the image, so I was nervous to see whom they had chosen for me. This was actually the first time the model wasn’t chosen by me, but by the community who helped me to restage this image. When we got there, she was really afraid, she thought that I was going to do dark magic with the photos. I remember you guys started drinking some rum; that and your presence helped her to relax. When I showed her my book of photographs and explained the context she understood. I tend to work alone because I feel like it’s bad luck to have people around besides the subject and me. But having you present in this situation made a big difference. You helped make that experience and the photograph even more powerful.

HT

The whole setup in the Voodoo temple was like being in an African village. I felt some real good love right there. And then the drumming with them dudes—it was such a good energy that it was okay to talk about all the negative shit. We tend to forget that they had a catastrophic earthquake happen—I mean, people talked about it. That one girl had lost her momma, sisters, and brothers. Being in Haiti, I think I developed a better understanding of [Gordon] Matta-Clark—I ain’t sayin’ that’s a good way—but I started to notice the destruction.

DL

Matta-Clark—on my first trip to Haiti, I was walking along a sidewalk, and without warning there was a massive hole in the pavement, at least four feet wide. There were no orange cones to warn you, it was like a pit, so deep it probably led straight to hell. Had I not been paying attention, my story could’ve ended right there.

But then, too, what’s so bizarre about Haiti are the contradictions, the contrasts.... There is destruction but also heightened organization

"Deana Lawson & Henry Taylor," *BombMagazine.org*, September 15, 2015



Deana Lawson, *Danto Sacrifice*, Port-au-Prince, Haiti, 2012, pigment print, 43 x 54 inches.

and systems. For example, the Veves that are drawn on the ground with cornmeal (or other types of powders) during Voodoo ceremonies represent a particular Loa. Formally, the designs are like cosmograms, they are balanced but not exactly symmetrical. These drawings, in combination with drum, dance, song, and other mysterious elements, become an entry point to the spirit world.

Not to generalize, but what I also noticed amidst destruction is that Haitians are very clean and tidy. Often I saw women sweeping the ground. While in the countryside of Saut d'Eau, I remember a young woman swept the ground for about an hour before any sacred materials or drawings were laid on the earth. Sweeping was a constant motif that reappeared throughout my travels. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, people would be up at 4 AM before sunrise, sweeping their outside spaces. Seeing this made me think of my Bed-Stuy neighborhood where people sweep their brownstone stoops.

It was interesting how our processes converged in Haiti with Juriana, who was in *Mother Tongue*. I photographed her in our room and you painted her. I was curious to see what you would create from the same being.

HT

We go to a ball game and we're all gonna take a picture of the court, you know what I'm saying?

You went to the Congo after that and then you took a road trip to Detroit and then you went to Ethiopia. Maybe we should go to Egypt together? I mean, what would you do there? Seeing you work in Haiti, I was really blown away by how much you had to set up and prepare. That was new to me. I look at the photos differently now. I have a few friends that are photographers but they don't do drawings to prepare.

DL

The drawings I use might be inspired by something that I saw. For example, when I went to Haiti by myself, I witnessed a sacrifice of a pig, and a woman placed the pig's head on top of her own head and walked around. Her posture and her gaze were so serious. Typically, when you're mounted by the spirit, your eyes become wide, and her eyes were very wide. But because it was my first ceremony, I really didn't feel comfortable going close, so I only got a faraway shot. When I came back and I looked at the picture, I knew that I needed to get the shot up close, and that I wanted to restage the image. There was something about that woman and that pig's head—it just kept

“Deana Lawson & Henry Taylor,” BombMagazine.org, September 15, 2015

replaying in my mind over and over again. So then I knew I had to revisit Haiti to recapture it. One could say that I could've staged and made the photograph here in New York, I didn't have to go to Haiti to make that picture per se. But there's something about the journey, like you described earlier—a lot of labor for a small diamond.

HT

Making that extra journey resonates in the work; one can feel it. Hey Deana, why don't you come to London? You could stay with me. I could stay with you. Hey! We could stay together. Al Green baby, let's stay to-gether!

DL

(laughter) But some of the photos that I took, for example the woman that posed in the hotel, I had no idea I was going to make those photographs when I got to Haiti. So I like to work spontaneously as well. You don't seem to pose your subjects as much. You have done several portraits of me—hold on one second, my baby's cryin'.

HT

Right on.

DL

Getting to watch you work as your muse, I feel like you tend to let the subjects do what they want. With the latest portrait you painted of me in the yellow dress, I chose the pose and decided to include my vintage Crown Graphic camera. The way I sat was a pose quite difficult to hold for a long time.

While I tell my subjects precisely what to do, you seem very laid back in terms of how the person positions her or himself for you.

HT

That's true, 'cause first of all, I'm grateful. A painting can take much longer than a photograph. It's a commitment on both ends. And I'm doing something that I love. I'm appreciative. Afterwards, I'm able to be more intuitive or play with it if I want to create some story. But sometimes it's just the painting experience alone that I relish. When I was in San Antonio painting these horses I was having such a kick out of it. What a fuckin' honor to paint their portraits! Sometimes you just love doing something. It's like playing in somebody's band.

DL

How do you find your sitters?

HT

Sometimes I'll take somebody off the street, and sometimes I do seek out people. I think that's a commonality with our work. The way we gather people, it's interesting in its own way. Sometimes I'll pick up a guy at McDonald's who's panhandling, "Won't you just come over to my house for a sec? I want to paint you." It's almost like a prostitute! (laughter) Painting that person I feel like I'm getting off. Metaphorically speaking. And then I zip it up.

DL

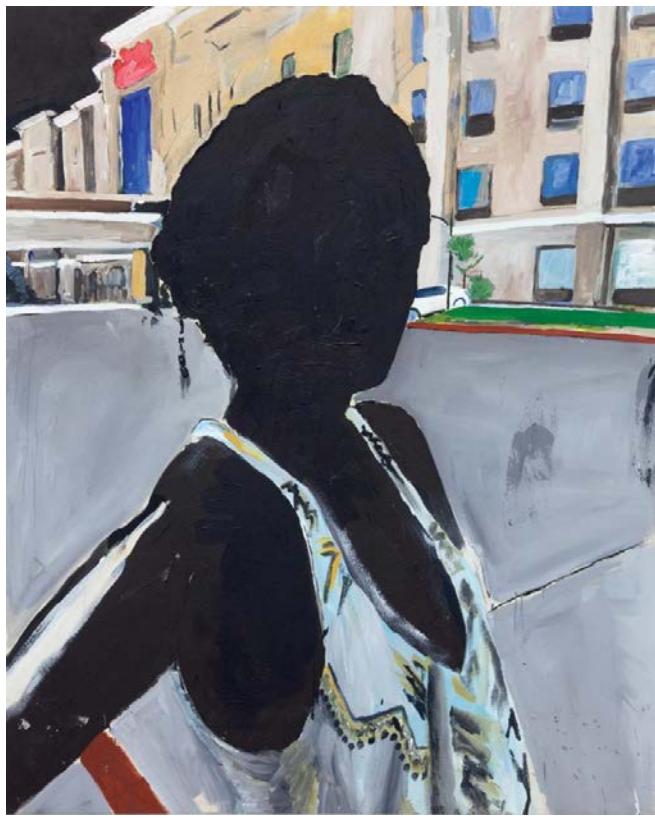
When I look at your paintings, I'll think of jazz, but then when I go to your studio you're listening to Lil Wayne or Kendrick Lamar. How does music influence your process or your work?

HT

I listen to Drake, to Kendrick, to Wiz [Khalifa], I listen to Bob Dylan. And every once in a while I'm like, Man, let me play some Miles. You have to find a rhythm that you know is true. I just did this portrait of this Israeli guy, and then I played something and it popped. Even you walking around, you can be rhythmic. You're settin' up and you're about your business and there's just a certain rhythm you're in. You start to be the director, you're a fuckin' Cecil B. DeMille. "Okay, Gloria, c'mon downstairs!"

I'm not bipolar but I'm on this high—you know how you can just be positive, how you just let something take over. It's like, Oh, I'm relishing this, I got this beautiful baby, I'm lovin' this. You just gotta relish life, like my parents said, "You have up days and down days." So there are all these different rhythms.

"Deana Lawson & Henry Taylor," *BombMagazine.org*, September 15, 2015



Henry Taylor, *The Darker the Berry, The Sweeter the Juice*, 2015,
acrylic on canvas, 78 x 63½ inches.

DL

One thing I love about your path is that you were a psychiatric technician before you were painting.

HT

A lot of work was inspired by experiences I had at Camarillo State Mental Hospital, as a technician. I went to CalArts and worked at the state hospital at the same time. For at least two years, I'd commute from Valencia. I worked the second shift, four to midnight.

DL

Our conversation is all over the place! (laughter)

HT

Check it, it's like stream of consciousness, baby! It's like in jazz—they talk about the whole thing. I'm listening to Fela [Kuti], and I'm watching all these biographies, and they're talking how certain people can just come in on a certain key. How do they do that? We're all over the place, hell yeah, like we should, you know. We gotta be lost before we can be found. You know what I'm sayin'? There's some cohesiveness there.

DL

What I admire about you is that your wheels, as an artist, are turning nonstop. You're always sketching, whether you're drawing on a napkin or in your notebook—it's pretty awesome to see an artist making something 24/7. Whereas I feel like I have spurts, I'll think of an idea and take a picture for maybe a month. It might take me a long time to make a photo shoot happen.

HT

Your process is not as obvious and is maybe more abstract. A sketchpad is just obvious. Also, I might be superficial in what I do on my travels. Like when I go to San Antonio, I might wander around the gift shops. It's apparent that it's a gun-totin' state, so maybe for me it's just that. Sometimes I put things away too quickly. But you want everything to be sincere. Going to the Congo or Ethiopia, damn, what would I have made had I gone there? You're gathering things, you're documenting, you're being voracious. You made some work already surrounding it. When I just wanna go back to my sketchbook, you must wanna go back over and relook at things.

“Deana Lawson & Henry Taylor,” *BombMagazine.org*, September 15, 2015

DL

Definitely. What’s strange is that recently, during my pregnancy, I had vivid and piercing flashbacks of my travels. Visions would come back to me at the most unexpected moments during my day. Like while cleaning my toilet bowl in Brooklyn, suddenly I saw the big flying cockroach in my mosquito net in Congo; or when boiling rice I remembered Nellie’s vomit on the kitchen floor at Mama Goma’s house, as she was going through a bout of malaria. Maybe the hormones from my pregnancy brought the images to my mind. I think ideas for my photos work in this same way. Sometimes they simmer under the surface for a long time before being born. Often, I’ll have a sketch with me for years before it becomes a photograph.

HT

I love the image of the guy with the bananas on his head in the Congo.

DL

That one is titled *Walking Home on Some Road*. This one wasn’t staged at all. There are things that you couldn’t set up, or couldn’t even imagine, they are just presented to you in the world. I love when those moments happen.

For instance, the *Hellshire Beach Towel with Flies* I shot in Jamaica. Hellshire Beach is a local beach without many tourists, so there are mostly Jamaicans, and they make really good fish on this beach. My friend and I were having beers and ordering fish at one of the beach shacks, and I saw this woman lying on a mat watching TV. I asked if I could photograph her, and she said yes. So I took a few pictures, and then she languidly roused herself and just walked off to help in the kitchen. When she got up, I saw the imprint that she had left in the towel. I saw flies swarming around the towel, like they were eating her sweat. So I took a quick photo. That is one example of how I work spontaneously.

HT

The imprint, maybe that has to be scrutinized a little more. It came like an abstract piece to me. I’m saying that because most of your work has figures in it.

DL

One of my teachers at RISD told me a long time ago, “You don’t have to get everything into one picture.” Sometimes I have to remind myself of that. *The Hellshire Beach Towel* takes that moment to be abstract, but still talks about the body in an interesting way.

HT

That sounds almost like an heirloom, if you know what I mean. My mom used to kiss the envelopes so they had her lipstick on it. I saved them. There are just certain things that resonate with you, but will often and inevitably resonate with other people. And, Deana, sometimes I think of myself as an abstract painter, although nobody would ever say that. When I saw your photograph with the towel, I was like, Yeah, I like that. What’s there is what’s in between. It’s a lot like poetry; sophisticated poetry sometimes alludes more than it’s explicit.

Or in painting, there’s the negative space, the time in between things. With that towel, you know, something has roamed that muthafucka. There’s a landscape and there’s nothing there, but you can imagine it. I look at the flies and tell myself, They eatin’ something. There must be something there, I just don’t see it! You know, we’re breathing something but we don’t see it.

DL

It’s the instrumental track on the album.

HT

I was trippin’ on your photo of the woman in Haiti. You did some gangsta moves!

DL

(laughter) What do you mean? Are you talking about the Oloffson Storage Room photo that I did in the hotel we stayed in? I’d like to hear how you would describe what happened.

HT

Well, I mean, we didn’t have the key to the room, it wasn’t our assigned room but it was like being graffiti artists or anybody else who takes chances. I remember once seeing a Colonel Sanders cutout in a Kentucky Fried Chicken and I just walked in and took the six-foot display. I don’t think of myself as a thief, but there are times when I’m goin’ to break in and enter, like you did. We ain’t stealin’ nothin’!

“Deana Lawson & Henry Taylor,” *BombMagazine.org*, September 15, 2015



Deana Lawson, *Hotel Oloffson Storage Room*, Port-au-Prince, 2013, pigment print, 43 × 54 inches.

We’re making something beautiful. It’s kinda like the ends justify the means. It’s almost like a very communal sort of thing. I used to say, “Why I gotta fuckin’ buy a lawn mower when you got one? Lemme use yours!”

DL

Exactly. Sometimes it’s the one thing that catches your eye at the periphery. I just happened to walk by that storage room and I saw the mattresses in there and the extra sculpture of Dessaline’s head. It was dusty and full of different furniture pieces from the hotel. The scene was like a collage that to me was the essence of Haiti. Then, on the day of the shoot, the housekeeper was in cahoots with us. He just loved you, you guys would smoke cigarettes, and you would give him drinks—

HT

I gave him sunglasses and baseball caps and shit. All it is, Deana, we just gotta break bread with people. I think that’s a large part of it, not coming in all arrogant and condescending.

DL

Word-up, when I go to a place as a photographer, I’m not using a fixer or someone hired to arrange things for me. It’s the subject’s family, or a friend of a friend of a friend, who are working with me to bring the things to life. It has to be organic and personal.

HT

Haiti was a trip, that’s all I can say. But it was so fuckin’ beautiful at the same time. I wanna say this—you just on, Deana. When you’re able to make moves like in Haiti, it’s like you’re the best halfback in football. You jukin’ away and gettin’ the touchdown. I was an athlete back in the day, and I ran for sports a lot. You figure out where the hole is and you cut that way. That’s all you’re doin’, just cuttin’. Between point A and point B shit can still go down, so you gotta stay on your guard. The defender may be miles away, but you might run into some stray muthafuckas on the way to the touchdown. So you gotta be on. I’m always on, and I think that’s why I’m sometimes so depleted, ’cause that battery is always plugged in.

DL

Making artwork is about being a different kind of alert. I think what’s similar about our work is that our subjects seem familiar, even though they might be strangers. Many of the people you’ve painted I know, but even those I don’t know, I feel like I’ve known—or I’ve known that energy from around the neighborhood. For example, with the image of Scotty, I’m like, Wow this brother looks so familiar. I think it’s the energy you paint your subjects with. I get similar comments about my work. When I showed my photographs to the people

“Deana Lawson & Henry Taylor,” BombMagazine.org, September 15, 2015

in the Congo they thought they knew the people I photographed in New Orleans or in Haiti. And that's what I want—I want people to feel they are interconnected.

HT

I hear what you sayin'. When I was in Cuba, the lady who I stayed with felt like she was my momma. I mean, they don't even speak my language! But I didn't even wanna leave the house some days, 'cause it felt so much like home.

DL

When I got to the Congo, I had to give a talk and explain what I was there for, what I was doing as a photographer. I was talking to a community of farmers in the country, in a village, and one of the questions was why didn't I speak French. But then one of the sisters said, “She has hair like us.” And even though I'm from America, I think that was the moment when there was definitely that connection. In my photographs, regardless of where they're taken, whether it's Haiti, Alabama, Brooklyn, the Congo, Ethiopia, I want people to come across like an expanded family.

HT

“No matter where you come from, as long as you're a black man, you're African.” I just thought about those lyrics by Peter Tosh. And even when we cross the racial shit—and I'm not assuming you just mean black people—you find this commonality with, or this sense of being familiar with them. Sometimes, being in Chinatown, I look at the Chinese, and I think, They are my brothers.

DL

How do you think about color in your paintings?

HT

When I'm painting from life the colors seem more alive and apparent, because it's real—I mean, whatever real is. If I were to do something from a photograph, then I only try to depict what's there and that seems more limited. I could work from a photograph for hours and hours, but I can work from life in minutes. A human being is never in black and white, even if I'm colorblind. Right now I'm looking out my window and I see shades of green, and then something may be reflecting onto that green from somebody's apartment. So you get blue in there. (in a high-pitched voice) “Why you got blue in the muthafucka?” I say, “Shit man, there was a blue light over there. But you just don't see the blue light.”

DL

Brown skin tones are important to me. I often think of Carrie Mae Weems's titles in the “Colored People” series, in which she names the nuances of black and brown bodies and undertones, titles like *Blue Black Boy*, *Golden Yella Girl*, and *Magenta Colored Girl*. I try to glorify brown skin within the print and bend toward specificity of skin tones. I also tend to get caught up over what I perceive to be “real” color as you mentioned, and memory color. Was that pink towel a red pink or a magenta pink? Was Nikki's shiny black weave a cool black or warm black? And then regardless of what it actually was, what does it need to be for the sake of the print? I can nitpick over colors in a print for hours and days. James Welling told me recently that my prints “looked wet.” I took that as a compliment; it meant to me that the print itself was alive and present. I thought of my prints sweating, like skin.

HT

With color, I tend to go for what I feel—that's when the subconscious comes into play, when you're not really in control. I may be thinking about weight and how something recedes or comes forward and of course I know what cobalt blue does as opposed to other types of blue. So I make those kinds of decisions, but for the most part, I try to find absolute freedom in painting. I want to be taken over! I'm making too many decisions in real life already, paying rent, doing this and that. When I'm painting, I want to be free. Ohio Players baby, you know?

DL

I admire the freedom you feel while painting. At the beginning of Nina Simone's documentary, she's asked what freedom means to her and one of her responses is, “I've had a couple of moments on stage where I really felt free. And that's something else. That's really something else! I'll tell you what freedom means to me: No fear. I mean really, no fear ...” I would be lying if I said I felt free while photographing. The photographic act is work—it's gadgets and gadgets and lights and tripods and shit. But the journey is liberating, and even when I do have fear in my heart, I feel free. During my flight to the Congo, there was a moment when I looked out the airplane window into dark night and I thought to myself, I can't believe I'm flying to the Congo alone. I must be crazy.

“Deana Lawson & Henry Taylor,” *BombMagazine.org*, September 15, 2015



Deana Lawson, *Hellshire Beach Towel with Flies*, Portmore, Jamaica, 2013, pigment print, 35 x 44 5/8 inches.

HT

I swear to God, some questions are just hard to answer. I think in my compositions, I can be intuitive and at the same time start putting in dragons, like Goya did, or Max Beckmann. You start to tell a story that might be about Hercules—myths! You start grabbing things because you want it to feel a certain way.

DL

It's interesting that you mention myths. A constant puzzle for me as a photographer is how to depict the visible and how it connects to the unseen.

HT

Sometimes things can be really dark, like when I was painting these horses in black ... I know it had to do with death. So sometimes I mute the palette, but I'm not opposed to yellow sneaking in there. A little baby may walk into your studio and accidentally bump into something, and next thing you know, your painting is gonna change.

Deana Lawson is a photo-based artist living in Brooklyn. She teaches photography at Princeton University. Lawson has a solo exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago Museum this fall, and has shown at MoMA and the Brooklyn Museum of Art, among others. Her work has been published in The New Yorker and Time magazine.

Henry Taylor is a Los Angeles-based painter. Taylor has been the subject of solo exhibitions at galleries and museums such as Blum & Poe (LA), Untitled (NYC), MoMA PS1 (NYC), and The Studio Museum in Harlem (NYC).