

R O D N E Y T A Y L O R





Buffalo artist Rodney Taylor's most recent painted works on paper combine fiercely energetic rendering with blunt symbols and icons in a hybrid that addresses itself to the emotional state of the union circa mid-2008. Using a tree as the central image throughout the series, Taylor takes the icon through successive degrees of devastation and dissolution. From a sick bed, to sprouting, blood red, from the top of the Capitol Dome, through floods and fire and ultimate annihilation, Taylor presents an arc of potential self-destruction that is both a narrative omen and emotional rollercoaster.

Taylor's rendering in these new works is fast and loose, as much a drawing style as a painting one. Swift, swirling, occasionally erratic, it is a mode of expression in which each painting informs the next, building up a cumulative emotion that, in total, maximizes the impact of the implied message. The wash of one painting slides into the wash of the next—even if the color palette shifts, there is a sense of perpetual motion.

Apart from the few works that explicitly depict the Capitol, the majority of these recent works are not overtly political. Yet it is impossible to avoid the symbolic and metaphoric implications contained in the series. His lead protagonist throughout is the figure of a tree and while he has not sought to consciously redraw the same tree, there are multiple points of reference that indicate it may be one tree, particularly in the manner in which the top of the tree inclines.

This subtle detail suggests that a narrative of some kind is playing itself out. At the least, we are witnessing selected moments within a large narrative arc. Taylor's gestures are all simple ones that suggest much larger emotions. In the series' earliest work, the tree seems to be situated, behind bars in an institutional bed. If the tree stands in for the nation or country, it is both ailing and imprisoned. When he overtly draws the tree form sprouting from the Capitol Dome, there is no evading the symbolic connection, while other works are more ambiguous and allusive.

In one work, Taylor's tree is dotted with oversized clumps of cotton and, in one instant, imparts a deep recognition of systemic slavery and subjugation. In another, a reddish brown wash in one work is entirely





non-specific, though its tone manages to immediately connote a sense of The Big Muddy and evokes potent memories of recent natural disasters. The harsh yellow tone in another obscures many of the tree's branches and evokes a fiery end, the tree itself looking burnt to a crisp.

In one, we see the tree nearly subsumed by an endless field of water, its blood red branches decorated with bits of debris and the vague outline of the Dome suggested beneath the waves. By the time we get to a later painting in the series, a blue-gray-brown field is the ominous backdrop for some scattered branches, disembodied and thrashing chaotically in the wind.

In several of the paintings, the bottom quarter or third of the picture plane is represented with a rounded corner rectangle that has no direct association to the implied narrative and is more of a formal, visual device, a solid modernist slab at the bottom of the works.



What is perhaps telling within these bottom portions is what is omitted—we never see any depiction of roots from any of the tree forms. It sounds unimportant until considered it symbolically. A tree that is rootless is the most bereft, the most in peril of complete annihilation. With no source for sustenance, nothing gripping it to the earth, no foundation to rely upon, it becomes the most fragile of entities.

The sequence of Taylor's paintings illustrates an increasing fragility. In most of the works, his tree appears dry and brittle, not much more than a shell of a form barely hanging on to its former self. The large, inert form of the tree is direct and plain but within each version of the form are innumerable textures—a mottled or stippled surface, evoking the gradations (or remnants) of bark. There are also slight, smaller drawings within the works—easy to overlook in the whole but, when witnessed, increase the ominous volume.

All of Taylor's markings accumulate and coalesce, through the accumulated images, into a texture of perpetual degradation. Closer inspection of the works reveal how the paper itself has sometimes been patched together or has parts excised from the whole. One can become overwhelmed with the sense that everything is just barely hanging on.

Contextualized within the year of their making, Taylor's new paintings are an ominous portent, a nightmare made palpable and believable by the political climate of the world in which they exist. They are beaten and bruised. They stagger forward, existing in a murky haze. Filled with fear and trepidation and doubt. They are numerous storm fronts, slamming successively into our psyches. They are threatening, mournful, and eloquent.

They leave us hoping that the worst has passed.

John Massier  
Visual Arts Curator



Rodney Taylor, born in Buffalo, New York 1966 and was educated at Fashion Institute of Technology, S.U.N.Y., later receiving the Camille Cosby fellowship to attend Skowhegan School of Painting Sculpture, Skowhegan Maine, 1994. Rodney also was a Milton Avery school of the Arts Fellow at Bard, Annandale on the Hudson, 1996.

Taylor has shown with curator Kenny Schacter, in various locations throughout Soho between 1994-1998. He has also shown at the Drawing Center, Selections, New York City, 1995; Snug Harbor Cultural Art Center, Staten Island, N.Y. 1997; Lincoln Center, curator Christina Rose Gallery 1998; City Without Walls Gallery, Curator Emma Amos, Newark New Jersey. 1998; Kentler International Drawing Center, 1999; Cambio, curated by Kenny Schacter, pt I New York City, pt II Mexican Museum of Art, 1999; Beyond Western New York, Buffalo, 2005; Art and Jerry Riggs Experience, The American Dream Sequence, Miami, FL, 2007.

Taylor is included in the permanent collection of The Albright Knox Art Gallery, 2007 as well as the private collections of Brice Marden, Donald Beachlor, Ray Smith, Saint Clair Cemics, Camille and Bill Cosby, Emma Amos, Richard Crump, and Not Vital.

RODNEY TAYLOR • September 13 to October 21, 2008

Hallwalls' visual arts program is supported by generous grants from the New York State Council on the Arts and The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts.



The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts



# HALLWALLS

CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTER  
341 DELAWARE AVENUE  
BUFFALO, NY 14202  
[www.hallwalls.org](http://www.hallwalls.org)