





# Figures and Grounds

*By turns extravagant and direct*, the portraits **Barkley L. Hendricks** has made of his African-American friends and neighbors since the late 1960s variously recall the indolent nudes of Philip Pearlstein and the deadpan chic of David Hockney. But in these canvases and in other works—such as his series of landscapes freighted with Barbizon-school scrupulousness—the artist has sought modes of representing that go beyond the pursuit of likeness, gesturing toward abstraction, anamorphosis, and anachronism. On the occasion of a major traveling exhibition centered on these two bodies of work (organized by Trevor Schoonmaker for the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, recently shown at the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, and appearing this summer at the Santa Monica Museum of Art in California), *Artforum* asked art historian **HUEY COPELAND** to engage Hendricks's alternate realisms.

**THE WHITE-SUITED BLACK SUBJECTS** are rendered with varying degrees of realism: There is the chalky brown man at left, who possesses all the charm of a department store mannequin; the androgynous youth at right, with unfurled scarf and ghostly tinted glasses; and, of course, the woman at the center of the work, whose adjacent nude double seems to both teasingly recede into and forcefully protrude beyond the group. Barkley L. Hendricks executed this large-scale canvas, *What's Going On*, in 1974, and it is perhaps the most striking of what the artist calls his “limited palette” works, with its fractured modes of depiction and hue. Indeed, for all their matching *Ebony* elegance, the figures might as well inhabit separate pictures, appearing less a community than a cast of characters layered into the same phantasmic envelope. Cool, aloof, and ethereal, these men and women are *packaged* together, in an assembly that evokes at once the rhetoric of *grande peinture* and that of the Pictures generation—one part *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, one part deconstructed album cover.

Like the Manet it recollects, Hendricks's painting is decidedly inconclusive, its personages inscrutable and its narrative indecipherable; yet it is rendered in terms that resonate with the visual production of African-American culture as consumer spectacle. The work's life-size figures in oil, shimmering against a monochromatic acrylic ground, illuminate the crisis of blackness within representation—a crisis everywhere shaped by an engagement with and an opposition to those persistent forms of reification, high and low, that transform liberatory self-fashioning into co-opted cliché. Not incidentally, Hendricks painted *What's Going On* just three years after Marvin Gaye's eponymous record was released, recalling the way in which, as scholar Mark Anthony Neal reminds us, Gaye's album became the “quintessential black protest recording”

Barkley L. Hendricks, *What's Going On*, 1974, oil, acrylic, magna on cotton canvas, 66¼ x 84¼”.



This page, above: Barkley L. Hendricks, *Tequila*, 1978, oil and acrylic on linen canvas, 60 3/4 x 50 3/4". Below: Barkley L. Hendricks, *Brilliantly Endowed (Self-Portrait)*, 1977, oil and acrylic on linen canvas, 72 x 53 3/4". Opposite page: Barkley L. Hendricks, *Fela: Amen, Amen, Amen, Amen . . .*, 2002, oil and variegated leaf on linen canvas, wooden frame, altarpiece armature, twenty-seven pairs of high heels, 66 3/4 x 46 3/4".

even as the black protest genre was being successfully commodified. At the same time, advances in recording technology had allowed Gaye to layer multiple vocal registers in new ways, thus echoing the sound of black resistive communities and traditions threatened, as ever, with violence, rupture, and dissolution—a threshold that Hendricks has limned for more than forty years with inimitable virtuosity.

In the 1960s and '70s, such pressures were acutely felt and sharply reflected across African-American culture, particularly among its panoply of black nationalisms. In a series of insightful essays addressing Hendricks and this moment from which he emerged, art historian Richard J. Powell has shown how the artist's pictures participated in this transformation of racial imaginaries, which not only valorized blackness but gave rise to emphatic displays of a new, self-conscious "to-be-looked-at-ness." These surfaced across the visual spectrum, from Huey Newton posters, to films like *Shaft*, to the 1976 Dewar's Scotch ad in which Hendricks himself appeared. Take the figure in *Tequila*, 1978, who stands in a familiar pose, cigarette in hand. The work, however, is no ad for Virginia Slims: The woman's idiosyncratic chic, probing glance, and stilled self-possession are a far cry from the smiling insouciance of the typical magazine model. Hendricks is interested not so much in the look of mass culture as in the individuated appearance of the mass subject—he tests the fragile boundaries between subcultural experience and middlebrow consumption, between avant-garde tactics and kitsch genres. The artist's sitters present themselves with an attitude and a sartorial flair that, as the critic Kobena Mercer has argued, attract the gaze yet also defend against primitivist projection, carving out a space where the self and its aesthetic construction can take center stage.

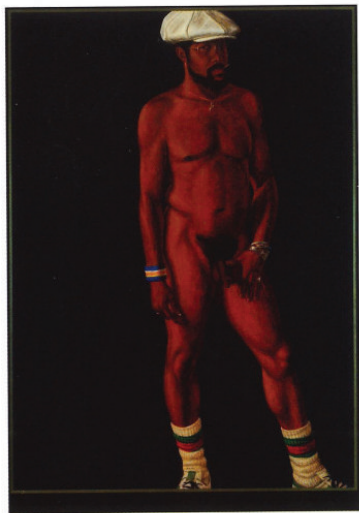
**MANY OF HENDRICKS'S SUBJECTS** are, in fact, people he saw in his local neighborhoods: New London, Connecticut, where he has been a professor of art at Connecticut College since 1972; New Haven, where he went to graduate school at Yale in the early '70s; and the hoods of North Philadelphia, where he grew up in the '50s and '60s. When recently seen together at the Studio Museum in Harlem in "Birth of the Cool," the traveling retrospective of Hendricks's work—a rhyming and rhythmic layout of individuals and groups, dark paintings and light ones, men and women—the artist's compositions suggested a series of contrapuntal relations between various forms of cultural alterity and vernacular style. For example, in the second-floor gallery of the museum, a fiercely styled woman of color in skintight yellow capris smiled out from a gold ground, calling to the orange-clad, crotch-grabbing superstar Fela Kuti to her left, while between them the protagonist of *North Philly Niggah (William Corbett)*, 1975, luxuriated in his peach coat and beige surround, casting a wary eye on the whole scene. Hung close to the floor and brightly lit, the paintings evoked religious icons in both their format and their sumptuous adornment—even as the figures

within them seemed liable to emerge from the frame, doubly restructuring our understanding of the social arenas in which they moved and the museal space of the viewer.

As exhibition curator Trevor Schoonmaker has noted, when Hendricks's canvases first appeared, they proposed a figural

confrontation that disrupted the art world's racial status quo. The artist often represented those groups whose protests for rights and recognition had splintered the social field in the '60s and '70s and paradoxically opened new vistas of commodification. Yet Hendricks does not pose his subjects as protesters or victims or celebrities. They are, rather, avatars of themselves who model (to

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This page, from top: Barkley L. Hendricks, *George Jules Taylor*, 1972, oil and acrylic on cotton canvas, 93 3/4 x 62". Barkley L. Hendricks, *Sir Charles, Alias Willie Harris*, 1972, oil and acrylic on linen canvas, 84 1/4 x 72". Opposite page: Barkley L. Hendricks, *Vertical Hold*, 1967, oil, acrylic, metallic silver on cotton canvas, 47 x 44".



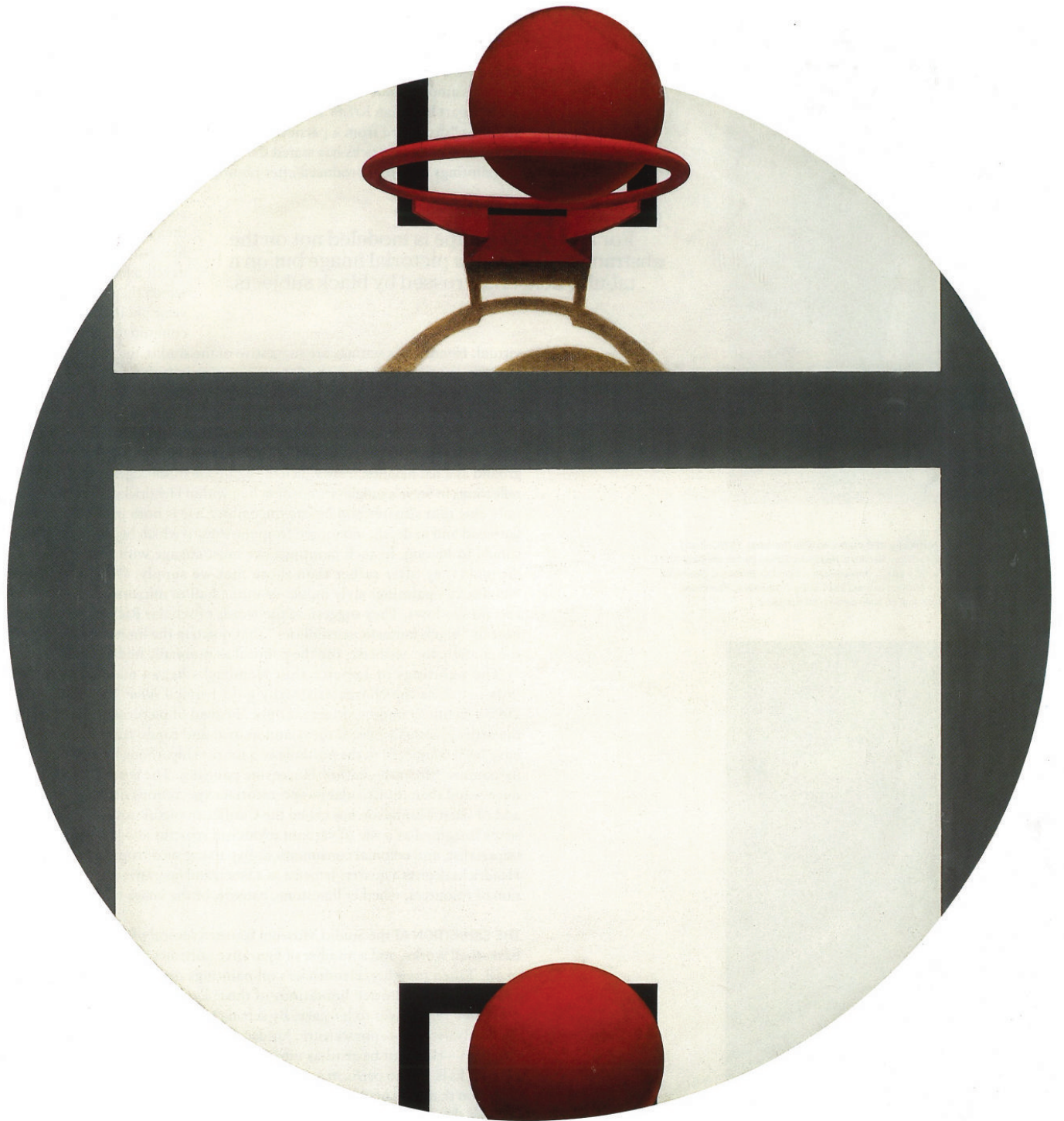
borrow from art historian Thomas Crow) a range of imaginary relations to dominant culture, from the merely dandyish to the queerly transgressive, from what Powell identifies as the “player chic” of the small-time drug dealer depicted in *Sir Charles, Alias Willie Harris* to the gay intellectual swing of Hendricks’s Yale student who is the subject of *George Jules Taylor*, both 1972. The latter two figures take up and twist black masculine style conventions, just as African-American gay, working-class, and women’s groups were beginning to critique the bourgeois and heterosexist tendencies of certain black liberationist politics. This proliferation of perspectives is key to Hendricks’s figurative painting and its central unit, the personage: He would paint Taylor in different moods and poses at least four times over the course of as many years. But, as the artist insisted in a 1976 interview, “I want to create a total painting rather than just a portrait.” Thus *Sir Charles* is trebled within a single canvas to arrive at a distinctive brand of totality—one that flirts with the conventional treatment of the Three Graces only to displace it, and that destabilizes modernist tactics meant to secure the “facingness” (to use art historian Michael Fried’s term) of the picture as a whole.

Throughout his career, Hendricks has stood alongside the subjects featured in his series, as in *Slick (Self-Portrait)*, 1977, a limited-palette painting whose title winkingly refers to a common characterization of his work by critics. One such writer was Hilton Kramer, who also notoriously described the artist as “brilliantly endowed”; Hendricks adopted this designation as the title for his nude 1977 self-portrait, at once appropriating and fulfilling the language of critical appraisal: *Brilliantly Endowed (Self-Portrait)* depicts the artist as an embarrassment of riches—his body, his adornments, and his skill in rendering both—as he adopts a knowing and confident pose. At the Studio Museum, this painting took its place next to several self-portraits that depict the artist similarly undressed, including the charmingly vulnerable *Brown Sugar Vine*, 1970, and the deadpan *Icon for My Man Superman (Superman never saved any black people—Bobby Seale)*, 1969. In each of these works, he wears not only an array of vaguely fetishistic accents—a toothpick, a joint, a “third leg” around his neck—but also his own poise, which renders his nudity a kind of performative suiting-up. In so doing, Hendricks contravenes the modernist pictorial injunction against ornament and intervenes in an African-American tradition that has often shied away from the unclothed body, owing to the violent and anxious stereotypes with which black male sexuality has been burdened from slavery to the present.

For Hendricks, reckoning with such realities means painting against historical stereotype and humanist essence. He therefore undertakes abstraction as well as figuration, in order to activate a multiplicity of visual and cognitive experiences that define and dislodge the contours of blackness. In *Vertical Hold*, 1967, for instance, a basketball and backboard become the basis for an urban take on the shaped canvas, as if to reply to Fried’s declaration that painting circa 1966 needed to hold its shape to compel conviction. Here, shape is modeled not on the abstract geometry of a pictorial image but on a tabular field crisscrossed by black subjects. This is, then, a reorientation of the modernist picture in art historian Leo Steinberg’s sense, a move from vertical plane to horizontal site. Such a shift differentially inflects our notion of location—whether on the canvas-as-basketball-court of *Granada*, 1970, or before the chessboard motif in *Buck*, 1967, both emblematic traversals of black diasporic culture.

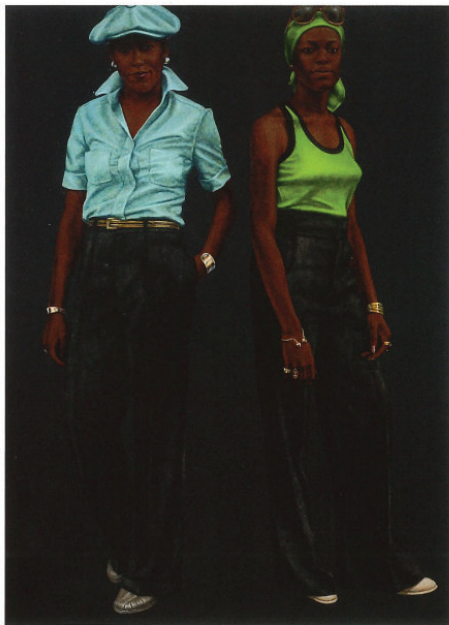
**HENDRICKS IS NO STRANGER** to this terrain, having visited Europe, Africa, and the Caribbean on trips that bolstered the sense of Pan-African connection revealed in his work. Consider his APB’s (*Afro-Parisian Brothers*) of 1978, which depicts smartly dressed figures who look like they might easily commune with the fabulously laid-back *Sisters (Susan and Toni)*, 1977, hung next to them at the Studio Museum, and who could seem equally at home staring out of a







This page, above: Barkley L. Hendricks, *APB's (Afro-Parisian Brothers)*, 1978, oil and acrylic on linen canvas, 72 x 50". Below: Barkley L. Hendricks, *Sisters (Susan and Toni)*, 1977, oil and acrylic on linen canvas, 66 x 48 3/4". Opposite page, from top: Barkley L. Hendricks, *New Year's Marl Hole*, 2007, oil on linen canvas, 18 1/4 x 26 1/2". Barkley L. Hendricks, *Lawdy Mama*, 1969, oil and gold leaf on linen canvas, 54 1/2 x 36 3/4".



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photograph taken by Malick Sidibé before a concrete wall in Bamako or by Sanford Sawyer before an ornate gold curtain in Nassau. By placing his subjects against grounds that appear to stand in for such surfaces—but that hold out no such spatial or architectural purchase—Hendricks suggests the differences and affinities among modes of self-visualization across the black world in the '70s, when, as art historian Krista Thompson has written, blackness appeared as if it could be “dislodged from a particular space and time and . . . embodied anywhere.” While Hendricks has stated that he prefers to work with live models, his paintings are often produced after photographs. Indeed, because his back-

drops tend to rhyme with the coloration of the subjects themselves, his figures might be said to metaphorically develop from the grounds on which they sit, a kind of perverse photographic effect that commingles the real and the

virtual. Hendricks's settings are suggestive of the studio, the screen, and monochrome painting, as well as the flat permutations of what Steinberg has called “design technology,” against which transnational and diasporic blackness could startlingly become visible.

In painting a subject like the one in *Steve*, 1976, a youth decked out in a downy white coat, Hendricks probes these conditions of visibility: He renders the white ground as a flat halation from which the figure's textural edges emerge. While the reflections in Steve's sunglasses position him within Hendricks's studio, this is the only clue that situates him before the painter. He is both present and absent, flattened and in depth, unmoored from the sites to which black subjects are presumed to belong. In such paintings, we must engage with the figures on the grounds they offer rather than those that we supply: Ostensibly frontal, Hendricks's paintings slyly induct us into a hall of mirrors and subjects who cast no shadows. They suggest, in the words of scholar Richard Iton, a whole host of “black fantastic sensibilities” that outstrip the limitations imposed by the modern, the aesthetic, and the political as rationally understood.

The paintings of Jamaica that Hendricks began making in the early '90s—such as the characteristically gold-framed *New Year's Marl Hole*, 2007—manifest another itinerant optic. Instead of picturing human subjects, the artist gives us views of the island in oval and tondo frames, formats that have been compared to the porthole of a tourist ship, though they might as easily conjure fifteenth-century Florentine painting. The works thereby reproduce—and then disarticulate—spectatorial expectations of religious allegory and of what Thompson has called the Caribbean picturesque, the island landscape imagined as a site of verdant exoticism structured by dreams of tourist, imperialist, and colonial consumption. Bypassing such tropical hallucinations, Hendricks depicts a quarry: Jamaica as a literal and figurative mine for the extraction of resources, whether limestone, bauxite, or the image of the place itself.

**THE EXHIBITION AT** the Studio Museum featured several of these canvases, a few basketball works, and a number of figurative portraits, numbering nearly forty in all. Taken together, Hendricks's oil paintings describe both the expansive possibilities and storied limitations of those key sites of blackness that have presented themselves to his gaze. By seizing upon the ambivalence of various painterly systems—portraiture, landscape, icons, shaped canvases, monochromes—that can be read as either transcendent or commercial or both, Hendricks is able to perform a conversion of his own: adapting modes of representation that have historically occluded or instrumentalized black subjects into vehicles that cut through the dross of racial phantasm.

Not surprisingly, then, Hendricks's work has been positioned in relation to Pop, hard-edged abstraction, Photorealism, and old-master painting, and has garnered comparisons to a dizzying array of figures (Rembrandt, Malevich, Ellsworth Kelly, Alex Katz, Chuck Close, David Hammons, and Corot among them). The term *cool realism*, which originated in the '70s to describe Hendricks's work, seems inadequate, as does any single categorization: His practice is as revelatory as it is materialist, drawing on any aesthetic means necessary. When Hendricks's paintings were shown in the 1994 exhibition "Black Male," at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, they stood out not only against the other work in the show, much of which took a deconstructionist approach to race, but also against images of black masculinity such as O. J. Simpson's, then seemingly omnipresent within the public sphere. In fact, from 1984 to 2002, during what Hendricks calls the "'Renaissance' (the age of Ronald Reagan)," he produced little figurative painting, as if that era's provisions for possibility, range, and depth within the visual field could no longer sustain a meditation on the facts of the black image.

During this time, however, Hendricks continued to produce prints, photographs, watercolors, drawings, and collages, such as *I've Known Rivers*, 1987—a schematic outline of the female figure that is suggested with the merest of means: a shock of human hair denoting "head" and what appears to be a grommeted belt for "spine" connected to a hand-drawn pelvis. These engagements allowed for an exploration of symbol and index at the very moment that the black icon seemed saturated yet again with the historicity of its dereliction. Hendricks avows that different media are integral to his practice, allowing him "to get a different perspective" both on his painting and his subjects. Although they have been featured in his retrospectives in 1980 at the Studio Museum and in 2001 at the Lyman Allyn Art Museum in New London, Connecticut, such works are not included in "Birth of the Cool." In time, a retrospective is due that accounts for a fuller range of Hendricks's practice, including his figurative oil paintings of white subjects.

Today, amid younger artists concerned with the black figure and its effects, such as Mickalene Thomas, Jeff Sonhouse, and Kehinde Wiley—whose exhibition "The World Stage: Africa, Lagos ~ Dakar" immediately preceded "Birth of the Cool" at the Studio Museum—Hendricks's practice seems all the more relevant for its desire to depict actual black subjects in all of their fullness and particularity. If practitioners of the "post-black" generation have, as curator Thelma Golden noted in 2001, emerged in a moment when "their particular cultural specificity is marketed to the planet and sold back to them," then Hendricks's canvases might be seen as the *Nachträglich* anticipation of and answer to this condition. His art considers what is possible within representation given the dialectic of commodification, co-optation, and resistive self-fashioning that has shaped the black image in modernity. Hendricks's paintings thus offer not so much transcendent portraits as temporal disruptions. In *Lawdy Mama*, 1969, the layering of postponement and projection reaches a fever pitch: A young black woman is centered on a gold background, the shape of her Afro echoed by the round frame of the canvas, a double halo that suggests Black Power's enshrinement of the female figure, so many Madonnas lost to history, and black subjectivity's never-ending iteration as shining spectacle, the optical effect par excellence. Hendricks launches a deferred action that allows us to see how the black past, present, and future continue to manifest themselves in the image. □

"Birth of the Cool" travels to the Santa Monica Museum of Art, CA, May 16–Aug. 22, 2009; Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, Oct. 17–Jan. 3, 2010; Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, Jan. 30–Apr. 18, 2010.

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