



**SIX PANELS: AL TAYLOR**  
ORGANIZED BY ROBERT STORR

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## Taylorism: Lyrical Loopiness and Canny Uncanniness

Al Taylor had a singular knack for making something out of nothing. Of course “nothing” doesn’t exist. Everything is something, and the best artists can take the most meager of means and give them form while imbuing them with substance. But only the best are capable of performing such alchemical feats — and, in the present context, we should consider underlining the prefix “al” while capitalizing the “A”— that is to say, the magic of transforming base matter into aesthetic gold.

Taylor’s mentor Robert Rauschenberg was a past master at the same sort of conjury, and much of the power of his work emanates from the fact that Rauschenberg never gilded a lily, much less a package wrapper, torn magazine photo, shoe, hat, stuffed bird, or any of the found objects and images he incorporated into his work. Rather, he let twentieth-century culture speak in its own vernacular and taught the public to find beauty in the 24-karat “thingness” of the least of things.

Whereas Rauschenberg was an omnivorous scavenger and hoarder, Taylor was the most discriminating and formally economical of recyclers. As exemplified by the works in this exhibition, the ready-made predicates of Taylor’s art range from cardboard tubes to tin cans (Warhol went for the graphics of Campbell’s Soup, Taylor for the ridged shape of its containers), to broom handles, to fishing net floats, to novelty shop collectibles such as plastic shrunken heads. Those heads are among the comparatively rare instances of explicitly figurative, much less overtly Pop elements to be found in his palette of materials. And I use the term “palette” intentionally, since the color of a painted broom handle or the given tones of the scrap lumber

Taylor redeployed and sometimes repainted were all factors in the carefully considered spectrum of his sculptures.

Trained as a painter at the Kansas City Art Institute in the late 1960s before moving to New York in 1970, Taylor contributed to a long tradition of painterly innovation in sculpture that started at the beginning of the twentieth century with Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, and the Russian Constructivists, notably Vladimir Tatlin, with whose wall reliefs Taylor's own resonate sympathetically. By contrast, though, Taylor was unconcerned with revolutionizing the world by means of art, but concentrated instead on shifting our vantage point on the commonplaces of the world as it is so as to gently destabilize everything we are inclined to take for granted, including gravity.

Innate whimsicality and formal wit, so Taylor shows us, can be just as metamorphic as programmatic single-mindedness. Likewise, "bricolage" — a French word for making things up as you go along from the resources at hand or, in simple English, "tinkering" — is as fertile a basis for engendering fresh art as the "will-to-form" expressed in "media-specific" terms long advocated by "mainstream" modernism. Moreover, impish charm can be as subversive as argument — often more so — just as the self-effacing trickster is at times a more reliable guide to existential absurdity than the grimly determined hero or antihero — and often more so.

Taylor was both a deft tinkerer and a sly trickster. Take his untitled relief of 1987 that when confronted head-on from a distance appears to be a conventional abstract construction mounted on a relatively small support but, when approached up close or seen from an angle, reveals itself to be a zigzagging amalgam of various lengths, widths, and colors of wooden dowel that jut far out into the room from its simple plywood backboard like a sprung Jack-in-

the-Box eager to “get in the face” of the unsuspecting viewer, or, without there being anything overtly representational about the piece, like the very long arm of a party guest waving a lighted cigarette.

Taylor’s floor-bound, hence differently invasive “Pet Stain Removal Devices” (1989 – 1992) — of which *Black Piece (for Étienne-Jules Marey)* (1990) is a puddling cousin — are similarly *unhousebroken*. Dedicated to the French scientist who, along with English inventor Eadweard James Muybridge, pioneered the techniques and uses of sequential photography, this stepped or terraced sculpture seems to record a splash in cascading stages. And, given the spontaneity of its structural elaboration and the apparently unstoppable spread of the black enamel, one is tempted to hike up one’s trouser cuffs or the hem of one’s skirt to avoid contamination.

Other works are more sober in their abstraction, but the essence of their articulation is no less a product of visual play. The untitled cardboard tube variations of 1987 with which this show opens are a marvelous demonstration of some of the many permutations to which an ordinary manufactured form can lend itself. Who has not, at one time or another, toyed with a toilet paper roll after the last sheet is gone, bending it or pulling apart its coiled laminates? But who, other than Taylor, has thought to create such wonderfully syncopated volumes by “deconstructing” such a throwaway item. The Spanish Cubist Juan Gris famously said that while Cézanne had made a cylinder out of a bottle, he aimed to make a bottle out of a cylinder — or words to that effect. Taylor takes a cylinder, slices it like a sausage, unravels it like a rope, and juxtaposing the fragments, utterly reconfigures it like a jeweler working in perishable pulp rather than precious metals.

Taylor was expert at freeing mundane objects from their given identities and settings — tin cans from the pantry shelf, bicycle wheels from the pavement — and suspending or cantilevering them into weightlessness, like so many untethered bits of flotsam and jetsam floating free inside a space capsule. *Distill* (1988) has this quality, as does *Untitled (Night Lessons)* (1993), though the wooden armature of the latter is partially anchored to the wall. Exactly where on the wall other reliefs are placed becomes their defining characteristic. *Low Fat* (1995) sticks out such that it could trip an oblivious passerby, or at least bark at their ankles or calves. *Upper Case (Bern)* (1992) tips down from on high like a surveillance mirror, except that the plain plywood face of the relief reflects nothing and no one besides the gallery goer is watching. *Station of the Cross* (1990), *Untitled (Mapplethorpe Pc.)* (1986), and related pieces hew more closely to traditional modernist concerns but display an improvisatory verve and linear animation that is unique to Taylor's work.

For their part, *Untitled (Mapplethorpe Pc.)* and *Station of the Cross* redraw, reconfigure, and remodel ambient space, even as the pressure plates of the austere *Upper Case (Bern)* and kindred pieces such as *Untitled* (1987) reshape it, and the long arm of the work with no title and the festive *Layson a Stick* (1989) probe and enliven it. For its part, *Shrunken Heads with X-Ray Vision III* (1993) hovers disturbingly, but also comically, just above eye level, metaphorically miniaturizing the spectator's head while calling into question the relative intensity of his or her gaze—is he, is she, or are we gifted with X-ray vision? It also links Taylor to the Funk sensibility that has long thrived West of the Hudson even as it obliquely, teasingly evokes Bruce Nauman's many beleaguered hanging heads. To be in the company of all these ambiguously assertive presences is to be enveloped in a linear, planar, and chromatic “happening” that prompts participation via one's own forward, backward, and sideways movement.

Taylor's prodigious talents with a pencil and a brush have much the same effect in two dimensions as his sculptures have in three. To enter into his drawings — for that is what looking at them entails — is to be caught up in an antic conjugation of charged strokes, bold marks, and subtle delineations that coalesce in the suggestion of expanding and contracting volumes frequently shadowed by rich washes and variously broad or attenuated currents of dilute ink or watercolor. These graphic forces attract and hold the stationary glance only to throw it off-balance. The experience of such pleasurable tipsiness and the equally pleasurable effort it requires to re-establish an elusive compositional equilibrium is what makes his work so memorable. In Taylor's pictorial universe there is no standing still, indeed no fixed contour without latent flux, no void without the potential for a sudden infusion of palpable form. Everything about his works on paper, like everything about his sculpture, converges on the tipping point between eidetic coherence and dissolution, knitting and unspooling, becoming and coming apart. Scrutinizing Taylor's drawings is like watching a card shark in action perform serial feats of prestidigitation, dealing at will from the top, bottom, and middle of the draftsman's deck with such dexterity that one is convinced his every spontaneous move, his every trick must have been rehearsed a thousand times, and yet, one after the other, they remain mesmerizingly impromptu.

Finally, it must be stipulated that this selection of Taylor's work should not be regarded as a systematic survey or art historical summary of his prolific output. After all, the venue was not designed by Philip Johnson — its resident architect — as a museum but rather as a site for intimate delectation. Accordingly, this presentation should be approached as a sampler whose sole purpose other than providing immediate delight is to tantalize those familiar or unfamiliar with Taylor's achievement and to inspire them to want more. Nevertheless, as the first

exhibition in this uniquely conceived private viewing room since Johnson's death, it is also a tribute to his partner David Whitney, who was an early and steadfast fan of the artist. To that extent, choosing Taylor as the initial focus of the exhibition series "Six Panels" is a salute to both men.

– Robert Storr, 2014

**Robert Storr** is the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Dean of the Yale School of Art. He was formerly Senior Curator in the Department of Painting and Sculpture at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, where in 1996 he co-organized *From Bauhaus to Pop: Masterworks Given by Philip Johnson*. In 2002 he was named the first Rosalie Solow Professor of Modern Art at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University. He has also taught at the CUNY Graduate Center, the Bard Center for Curatorial Studies, the Rhode Island School of Design, Tyler School of Art, New York Studio School, and Harvard University. He has been a frequent lecturer in this country and abroad. From 2005 to 2007 he was Director of Visual Art for the Venice Biennale, the first American invited to assume that position. The exhibition he organized at David Zwirner in the Fall of 2013 to celebrate the centenary of Ad Reinhardt was voted "Best Show in a New York Commercial Space" by the American Section of the AICA (Association Internationale des Critiques d'Art).



[no title], 1987

Wooden broomsticks with enamel paint mounted on plywood with acrylic paint

12 x 7 3/8 x 29 inches (30.5 x 18.7 x 73.7 cm)

Estate of Al Taylor No. AT (3D-1987.22)



*Black Piece (for Étienne-Jules Marey)*, 1990

Plexiglas, enamel paint, grease pencil, wood, and wire

39 3/4 x 41 x 97 3/4 inches (101 x 104.1 x 248.3 cm)

Estate of Al Taylor No. AT (3D-1990.19)



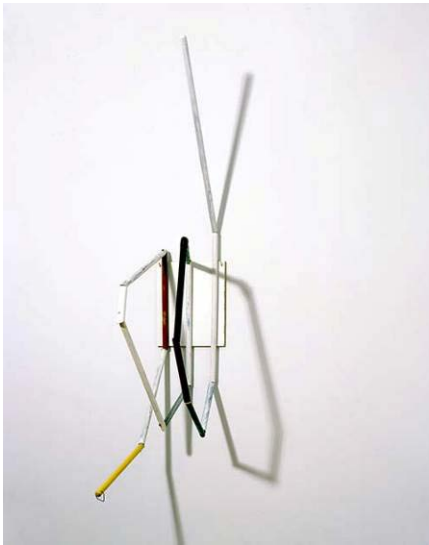
*Untitled (Tube Art)*, 1987

Cardboard tubes, acrylic paint, and wire

11 1/2 x 4 1/4 x 6 3/4 inches (29.21 x 10.79 x 17.14 cm)

Estate of Al Taylor No. AT (3D-1987.29)





*Distill*, 1988

Wooden broomsticks with enamel paint and metal hook  
mounted on Formica laminate

64 x 11 x 28 inches (162.56 x 27.94 x 71.12 cm)

The Glass House, New Canaan, CT



*Shrunkened Heads with X-Ray Vision III*, 1993

Two fabricated plastic heads with artificial hair, metal rods,  
plastic rings, and wire

81 x 36 1/2 x 4 inches (205.7 x 92.7 x 10.2 cm)

Estate of Al Taylor No. AT (3D-1993.12)



*Odd/Even*, 1989

Pencil, gouache, watercolor, and ink on paper

23 1/4 x 21 inches (59.1 x 53.3 cm)

Estate of Al Taylor No. AT (D-89.172)



Al Taylor at “The Bridge Club” in the Glass House (June 1980). Photograph by Billy Sullivan.

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#### ABOUT SIX PANELS

Six Panels is a new series of exhibitions organized by guest curators in the Glass House Painting Gallery. When the Glass House was the private residence of Philip Johnson and David Whitney, the gallery had an active life as new works were acquired and displayed. Building upon this legacy, Six Panels — named for the gallery’s unique display system — inaugurates the Painting Gallery as a site of temporary exhibitions for the public.



The Glass House ◦ New Canaan, CT ◦ [theglasshouse.org](http://theglasshouse.org)  
The Glass House is a site of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.