

**HOUSTON★CHRONICLE**  
As low as \$1 per week / Unlimited Digital Access  
HoustonChronicle.com | App for iPhone and iPad | eEdition  
**SUBSCRIBE**

# Poetic vision of Terrell James at Art League Houston

By Molly Glentzer | October 28, 2016

1



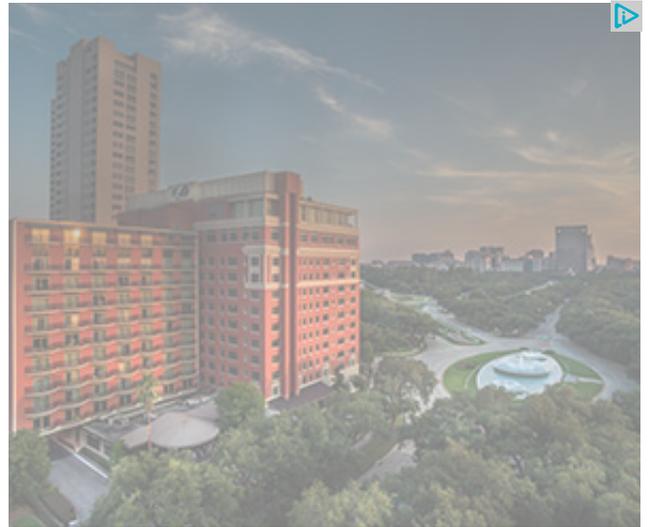
## IMAGE 1 OF 8

"Hover," an exhibition by Art League Houston Artist of the Year Terrell James, prompted her to reflect on decades of accumulated visual influences. It will be on display at the Art League in Montrose through ... [more](#)

---

Before she could paint in a way that satisfied her, Terrell James had to learn to close her eyes and trust that what she could hear and smell was as important as what she saw.

Drawn to nature and landscapes, James sensed early that she expressed herself best with abstraction. She wants to translate the experience of seeing, not tell viewers what to see, likening her painting to music.



Her show "Hover" at Art League Houston, celebrating her moment as the 2016 Texas Artist of the Year, illustrates James' poetic vision.

Although she is widely known as a painter, the show includes two shelves of fist-size bronze sculptures from 1997 and 2014 and a series of monoprints, "Ten Stones," that James made in 2012.

She hadn't really noticed the relationships between those pieces and the show's large canvases, which date from 2007 to the present, until the show was installed - more on that in a bit.

"You just can't escape yourself," she said.

Last week, James also celebrated the opening of her first solo show at London's Cadogan Contemporary Gallery.

"I have the privilege of showing all over

---

**MORE INFORMATION**

---

the world, but it's also a great privilege to have one place you're from," she said.

The Art League survey prompted her to reflect on decades of accumulated visual influences.

A fourth-generation Houstonian, James remembers running across a lawn at the MFAH as a child to inspect a monumental Olmec sculpture. She grew up going to the Rothko Chapel. She learned to love Cy Twombly at the Menil.

"All these things are remarkable - the experiences you have in your own city museums," she said.

Terrell, her first name, reflects her prominent Texas family, which goes back seven generations. Many of her relatives, including her parents, were writers; her great-uncle operated an important printing press on land that was once the family farm, where the Houston Public Library now stands downtown.

"I was the weird kid not reading all the time," James said. "But I love trying to make sense of things verbally. My titles come after the work is finished. For me, they are a way in: What is this evoking for me? I also think it's another clue for the viewer."

She always knew she would be an artist.

"The printing press was important for me because I had reams of paper taller than I was at any given time," she said. "As a child, I could draw a little lady with a flowery hat on a paper plate and take it down to the printing office and have four-color-separation cards made."

James trained classically, starting with life

'Hover,' by Terrell James

When: 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays-Fridays, noon-5 p.m. Saturdays, through Nov. 19

Where: Art League Houston, 1953 Montrose

Info: Free; 713-523-9530, [artleaguehouston.org](http://artleaguehouston.org)

---

## MOVIES & TV

---



**'Rushmore' added to National Film Registry**



**IMDb ranks the best TV shows of 2016, 'Game of Thrones' lands on**

drawing and traditional landscapes. She painted one of her first abstract canvases during college, working outdoors, on the edge of a lake at dusk.



**See how Houston's best burgers measure up to Anthony Bourdain's**

"There was hardly any light. There was reflection. It was a kind of palpable sense of the air and the insects and the movement of reeds, but you couldn't really see it. You couldn't even see the color of paint you were using," she said. "Somehow that became a very important painting for me. It sounds peculiar ... but it captured the place."



**Virtual site map of Day for Night footprint released**



**Appeal of holiday classic 'Christmas Vacation' endures nearly 30**

---

She had a similar experience years ago during a daytime hiking and drawing trip with her husband, architect Cameron Armstrong, at Big Bend's Santa Elena Canyon.

"My drawings were a little stiff, tight - I drew a lot of detail of the rock ledges. Then I decided to close my eyes, and I drew for about 30 minutes not looking at the sketchbook. I still have that sketchbook. ... The experience of being in a canyon came through much better. It's almost like the echo of sound off the stone walls became part of the drawing - these very free loops that became more like the imposing walls of the canyon."

James explored form and light further when she had a second-floor studio at Rice Village with an ugly view of roofs, power lines and cars. "I started looking at shapes just because I think it's important, whatever you're looking at, to have something in mind," she said.

She has never stopped learning. Recently, she has been able to make it appear as if light is emanating from the back of her canvases.

She pointed to "Circadian Clock," one of her most luminous recent canvases, as an example.

"There are lots and lots of layers of paint in that. It was a frustrating painting. I had worked on

it and worked on it, and almost gotten it right. Then all of a sudden, it came together when I destroyed a series of wet patches with drawn forms. You know it when you see it; that light is coming from the back."

As she painted, she was thinking about plums, figs "and the colors of rotting beauty - things rotting, decaying and shining - and that incredible thing when you open a fig and it's got that hidden pink and little seeds," she said. "It turns out that fig is a flower that's blooming inward, and it needs a particular wasp to penetrate, lay an egg and die there.

"There are these glorious anomalies in nature that somehow create amazing life and beauty. A lot of my work is dependent on my love of organic forms in nature and light," she said.

"When you look at painters who are great with light - let's say Edward Hopper - you notice that there is a lot of attention paid to the area around the illumination. An important thing happens with the juxtaposition of dark and light values and color. I remember distinctly when I finally got it. You can't always summon it."

She stopped talking to watch a young couple who entered the gallery to look at her work. They breezed through in less than a minute.

How, I wondered, does she explain abstraction to people who think anybody could swipe a mess of paint on a big canvas and call it art?

"That's a really good question because it's so hard to know what to paint," she said. And every abstract painter has a distinct feel for when a piece is done.

"If you're painting a thing you're looking at, you can see if the shadows and light are wrong. That's why we teach that way, starting with still life and landscapes," James said. "I started painting with oils as a 10-year old - so that's five decades. There's a sense of development with your own vocabulary."

She compared it to learning to write poetry: First you have to learn handwriting, then sentence structure, then how to put meaning into paragraphs, then write a page that is what you want to say.

"With painting, there's a real structure that you learn - with form, with composition value, with color," she said. "And then there's that thing in which you hope you have something new to say."

Her sculptures include bronzes and clay pieces. If you spotted them in a riverbed, you probably wouldn't recognize them as art - they're organic forms, some of which look like random clods of earth.

"Exactly," James said.

She started making them in the mid-1990s because she had the urge to create something that might be crawling out from the floor instead of hanging on the wall.

Look closely at the paintings, and black areas on canvases take on new meaning.

"Surprisingly, they jumped from the table into the paintings: I started drawing them. I thought it was sort of funny and perverse that when I finally started working from life again, it was something nobody could name - these odd, clumpy things," she said, chuckling.



**Molly Glentzer**

Arts, Design & Culture  
Writer / Editor,

Houston Chronicle