



Paradise Found

OUT OF BUKIDNON IN NORTHERN MINDANAO, THE INTENSE AND ECCENTRIC *GERARD D'A HENDERSON* GETS A PRECIOUS SECOND WIND TO BRING BACK HIS PASSION FOR ART AND LIFE. BY *JOCELYN DE JESUS*

TO BE IN THE PRESENCE OF GERARD D'ALTON HENDERSON is to be buffeted by the vigorous energies of memory, place and identity. He is agelessness incarnate: at eighty-one, he is at once a wide-eyed child and a sage, an artist and muralist who has been there but has yet to do this and explore that.

From his wheelchair, to which he's been bound in recent months following a major heart attack and open surgery, Henderson still dominates a room in the same way his magnificent murals, sculptures and paintings have taken over hotel and convention center lobbies and private homes across the world in the last five decades. As he tells his stories—and these are many—those beautiful hands trace expansive arcs in the air, fingers folding in a variety of Buddhist *mudra* poses at some point in the tale. Or at least these motions evoke the *mudra*—the spiritual gesture used in the iconography of Indian religions and traditions of Dharma and Daoism—as Henderson confides in a rich baritone that he was given a Tibetan name in a Black Hat sect ceremony, which translates as “Indestructible Wisdom.”

To share a space with Henderson, even his so-called sick room outfitted with oxygen tanks and mini versions of life-reviving machines one might find in a regular hospital ER, is to confront your ordinariness while being reminded periodically of his. Except that he is given to the grand and the outré in his works; even his earlier brushes with mortality have a big-screen quality about them, as when he went flying off a bike in some Hawaiian lava landscape and awoke in a hospital fully aware of his grievous wounds. Even he is surprised at having survived that inglorious accident.

A second, maybe even third, lease on life has only amplified Henderson's sense of gratitude. Solemnly he kisses everything and everyone in sight, thankful that these things and these people have helped him live through another day. He says grace before meals, grateful for life's bounty and its humming regularity. He punctuates his happier remarks with “Yippee!” and one gets used

to its childlike tone soon enough, seeing its positive effect on the people surrounding him.

To break up this huge chunk of enigmatic energy into bite-sized pieces, one might start with the romantic fact that he writes everything down, ink on paper—from his letters to friends to what could pass for his diary, which consists of reams and reams of notes to self, short prayers, Buddhist musings, and—yes—the Samurai Code of Chivalry. It's the sensualist in Henderson: the compelling smell of ink, the feel of its traction on paper, the sight of curves he conjures up with every letter and punctuation mark—all these are the stuff of life for the irrepressible artist who has all his long life worked magic with his hands.

“Everything begins in the mind,” he says, proud to have kept his throughout his lengthy and battle-scarred existence. “But central to creation is provoking an accident and then controlling it.”

Henderson's own creative processes and materials have been unconventional at best. He has worked with an extensive variety of media—ground rock, lime, resins, oils, marble dust, egg tempera and lacquers, and, during his cigar-smoking days years ago, even cigar ash smudged with coffee. A comprehensive photographic documentation of Henderson in action invariably shows him contorted in impossible poses or bent over a work in progress, if not suspended in some scaffolding, lit cigar in mouth.

He says he has used other materials that could well be unmentionable in polite literature, but whose effects were well worth the controversy, such as in his 300-square-foot mural on glass titled “The Anatomy of Time” in the New York Airways Heliport of the Former Pan Am building, now Metlife building for which he was commissioned in the late sixties, and which he'd had to retouch sometime in the eighties. He smiles and says, “One thing always leads to another.” Works of art, even murals, say, made of stone, are not writ in stone. Time always has a way of altering the view. “Remember

Photograph by *Francisco Guerrero*

Clockwise, Gerard at age one, with his mother Eileen Lim Henderson, Kuala Lumpur, 1929; *The Couple*, 1972; Gerard in his Hong Kong studio, 1990; *Rendezvous*, 1989.

that the viewer always completes the picture," he adds, and the viewers, especially, change.

This relativism may have evolved from Henderson's descent. Of Anglo-Chinese parents, he was born in 1928, the first of six children who grew up in the hectic cultural fringes of prewar Malaya, in Kuala Lumpur. His Irish father had been a pioneering, if also intellectual, planter and one-time editor of the *Malay Mail*. His beautiful Chinese mother, of Swatow (Shantu) extraction, taught him calligraphy, and perhaps decided that her eldest son should receive a classical Chinese education at home, including violin lessons at the age of nine. While World War II raged, Henderson was in seclusion at a Buddhist school in Singapore, immersing himself in the study of Chinese and Japanese classics.

After the war, between 1945 and 1955, Henderson launched his career as a first violinist with Radio Malaya and the Singapore Symphony Orchestra. By this time he had also opened an art studio in Singapore, where he was doing mostly portraits and illustrations for publications of the United States Information Service. Henderson's first big break came after he won an international competition for a 120-foot-long mural for KLM. More commissions followed, among them a mural for Standard Vacuum Oil's Rumbai Club in Surabaya, Java, and two for the Raffles Hotel.

Henderson has since moved around the world's capitals to work and live. From Barcelona to London and New York, to Hong Kong, Tokyo and Paris, he was busy creating both commissioned and personal works, many of which are in private collections. In between he managed to travel extensively, allowing him to indulge his deep love for ancient art forms and civilizations, notably out of Central Asia's Silk Road. This was almost like returning to his multicultural childhood, one forged out of the confluences of East and West and everything in between.

Decades later, in the years that Henderson came to be known as the "Horse King" as he set free the proud Mongol warriors and their powerful equine companions on huge canvases, critics noted the remarkable texture and depth imparted by the powerful series.

We sit and look at these famous paintings' photographs in the stillness of early afternoon in his Bukidnon home, which Henderson shares with his longtime partner, Paula Perrine, who hails from a distinguished line of American-era plantation owners. Henderson has called this enchanted place home for the last several years. A breeze ruffles the leaves of hundred-year-old trees in the expansive yard and coaxes the gentlest notes from the wind chimes strung on them and down the length of the gazebo. The famous Philippine barking deer, for which the estate has an adoption farm, have yet to break out in mating calls, which, Perrine warns, could persist well into the evening.

Henderson traces the horses'—his horses'—lines with a grace-



ful finger. Here, its rump is sensuous, its taut fullness suggesting imminent motion. There, its head is thrown out as if in the throes of a wild chase. The heft is undeniable in any case, and even the suggestion of repose in the semi-relief is fraught with other possibilities. Suddenly Henderson says with a sigh, "Doesn't it remind you of a generous spread of butter?"

Indeed, the impasto of lavish paint tamed by a scrupulous palette knife might evoke thick butter on bread. "It could be that the deprivation we experienced during the war has shown in these works," Henderson says, laughing. He rolls his eyes and smacks his lips—another one of his trademark gestures—at the thought of butter and its rich associations. "Well," he sighs again, "we always carry our childhood in our pockets."

To be sure, his sterling career has fed his great appetite for all the best that life has to offer—good food, abiding love, romance and adventure—although the reverse could be equally true. How else to explain his penchant for larger-than-life creations, his preference for movement, which also celebrates rather than denies its opposite—stillness? As the director of the Kyoto Museum of Modern Art wrote, Henderson's paintings convey a "Mongol ferocity, but instead of a wild assault on the canvas, his work is characterized by a delicate refinement of line and detail; his paintings are charged with a passionate effort to capture primordial force, yet they retain a dreamlike harmony of color and surface texture...."



Clockwise from top left, The artist at work in his Bukidnon studio; with Paula Perrine in Machu Picchu, Peru, 1975; the couple at home, Bukidnon, 2009; *Himalayan Landscape*, 1993; *Horse Composition*, 1987.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY FRANCISCO GUENERO (BUKIDNON, 2009); AND COURTESY OF GERARD HENDERSON

A dreamlike harmony indeed seems to have descended on Henderson and Perrine's household. Henderson, who sometime in the eighties was named among the "Ten Most Fascinating Men in Hong Kong" by a prestigious local magazine, still bristles with energy, but Perrine keeps a close eye on his diet. She says the healthy food, clean air and unhurried lifestyle have done wonders for Henderson's frail health. He might negotiate for an after-dinner treat, say, dark chocolate, but he gets that only if his sugar levels are low. But far from feeling deprived this time around, he is busy counting his blessings, which have arguably been many.

Perrine, a businesswoman and herself a painter, shows some of Henderson's latest paintings. They're smaller now, and calmer-looking, too. Of course he's still vain, Perrine confides with a big

laugh. For this interview, for example, he took pains to dress carefully—red, unsurprisingly, is his favorite color—and look good.

While a big retrospective might yet happen, Henderson has been contemplating religious paintings. More accurately, painting religious paintings, or those, he says, "that could heal or be prayed to." He has begun a few tentative sketches to mark yet another passage. One suspects this has less to do with age than with his evolving philosophies, which may be coming full circle. After all, the world's major religions generally agree on the oneness of the universe, and that earthly life is a journey everyone must undertake in the spirit of goodness, if little else.

"I am a Buddhist Catholic," says Henderson. "But Zen has touched me in a way that I realized harmony between myself and the environment." This belief in cosmic unity—yet another solid aspect of the self-taught artist—finds its expression in his mealtime prayers, in which he also praises the earth and sky, the stars and the universe, for being where they should be. There is something deeply moving about his version of the anthropic principle, as it spins on the strange paradoxes of modern physics. When he writes, for example, "We come from the stars and we shall return to the stars," the artist has a close brush with the quantum rather than with the weary New Age blather.

To put Hamlet's speech on its head, there are more things in heaven and earth, according to Henderson, than are dreamt of in our philosophy. He has certainly brought his audiences to that edge for a sneak preview. ✕