As we recall Martin Luther King, Jr. this week, it seems fitting to look at this large portrait by the late African-American artist Big Al Carter of a man with a crown on his head - however ill-fitting it appears to be. I’m not sure why but I have always associated this painting with the power of Dr. King’s vision and it also offers clues to the ultimate working methods of Al Carter - his intensity of the eyes in the painting and the richness of color in Carter’s palette. By using a comb-like tool in swirls of motion to lay down an under painting of gesso or tile adhesive, Carter involves us in the physical act of building a painting. The swirls remind me of the spirals that Van Gogh used to organize his compositions.

The title Sweep could refer to the motion of a hand sweeping something or it could have something to do with a clean sweep as winning a victory over difficult odds. It is the crown that has me thinking of a symbolic crowning of a king - and why it doesn’t quite fit the head is a continuing mystery.

This painting is also remarkable for its size and for the carpentry that went into building the painting’s support. Carter was known for finding anything that could function as an art material and in many cases his paintings verge on relief sculpture when he finds a scrap of wood or popsicle sticks that suit his formal and at times social concerns.

Allen Carter’s career is a curious one as he worked as a mentor and art educator and always seemed content with staying in the background of the art world. His legacy of promoting the work of others and giving his work away rather than selling it is an admirable position to take in today’s market oriented art world.