

Ecstatic Dislocation: The Art of Sedrick Huckaby

Joe Milazzo | Issue 90

IN 2016, SAINT PATRICK’S DAY falls on a Thursday, bringing with it an early weekend. In the aftermath of apocalyptic north-central Texas thunderstorms, a sultry heat settles on the quiet residential street in Fort Worth where artist Sedrick Huckaby is hard at work preparing for his next exhibition. Huckaby is a painter, sculptor, and printmaker whose works can be found in the permanent holdings of the San Francisco MOMA, the Whitney and Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts. We’ve agreed to meet here, in the predominantly African American neighborhood where he grew up, so that he can show me a very unusual building that’s been at the center of his art-making for a decade: Big Momma’s House.

Against all the obstacles presented to her by Jim Crow Texas, Hallie Beatrice Welcome Carpenter maintained her own home in south Fort Worth. It’s a house Huckaby knows intimately: Hallie Carpenter, also known as Big Momma, was his grandmother, and she raised several generations of children there. Since her passing, Huckaby and his brother have been renovating it, and dreaming about how Big Momma’s House might be used as a space where art can offer transformation and healing to the surrounding community. In 2008, it was the subject of an exhibition of Huckaby’s work. More than a building, the house feels like a person, a body that bears all the marks of its history. The more Huckaby exposes its scaffolding and hollows, the more he reveals how its bones have been broken and reset, the more it reverberates with mystery.

There is no name or category for a space like this. Big Momma’s House will not be a gallery, nor a studio, nor an installation, but something more like a theater. One room has been filled with pews and a pulpit recovered from the church of Huckaby’s childhood. It is a testament to Huckaby’s patience and abiding care for the complicated integrity of Big Momma’s neighborhood—one that outsiders might see as “disadvantaged” or in need of

“revitalization”—that he is willing to take as long as he needs to figure out how best to use the space. The integration of his artistic practice with his social conscience is always evolving.

Though he rarely talks about his art in political terms, Huckaby has said, “The African American experience—our struggles, advancements, curiosities, culture, faith, and families—has always been the great story of my work.” His work honors the creativity of generations of African Americans who were victims of one of humanity’s great crimes, people once deemed property who have preserved their story in every sort of artistic medium and form, and in so doing have influenced storytelling the world over. Black Americans have had to exercise daily creativity in order to survive in a world that is mostly hostile to the simple act of black self-definition. Huckaby’s work is a celebration of those creative acts.

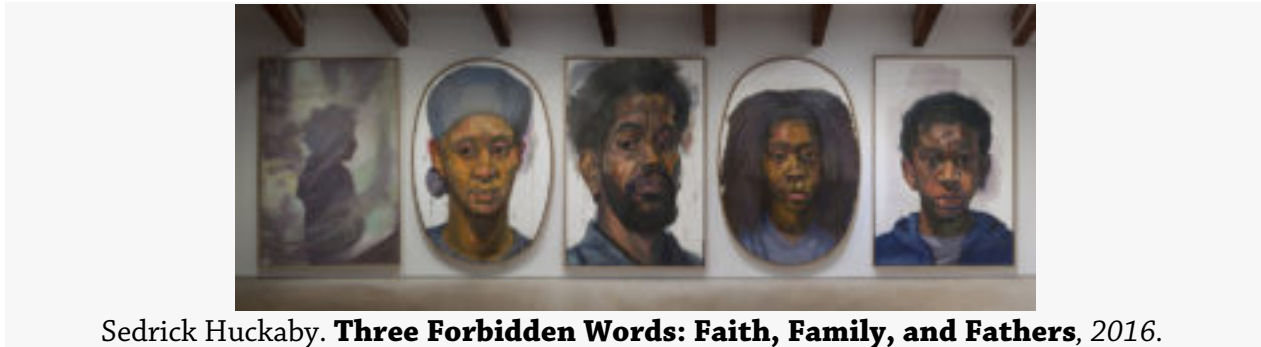
As he and I drive together from Big Momma’s House to his studio, he shares early memories of the people and places along our route. It becomes clear that his definition of community is very specific to Fort Worth. This is the community that provided him with his earliest examples of what it means to labor, to make, to invent, to thrive, and to endure.



The theme of endurance is perhaps most apparent in his portraits. Take for example *The Family: Halle Lujah*, one of a series of paintings in his latest exhibition at Valley House Gallery in Dallas, titled *Three Forbidden F Words: Faith, Family, and Fathers*. I first saw this portrait of

the artist's young daughter at Big Momma's House. At eight feet high, *The Family: Halle Lujah* initially impresses with its sheer size. Despite its heroic scale, other aspects of the work give it a more private feel. The portrait's oval frame is a simple, handcrafted hoop of wood whose shape evokes a cameo. Here the artist renders the intimacy he shares with his daughter in a form so expansive that we might almost walk right into it. But it is an intimacy all the same, and while we are welcome here, we are also being asked to remember that we see the girl through a stranger's eyes.

The work is complexly textured, painted in vigorous impasto and built up in places with judicious application of CelluClay, a brand of "instant papier-mâché" that includes recycled paper. (Salvage and reclamation are themes to which Huckaby frequently returns.) His daughter faces forward, neutral and composed. Her gaze seems not to stop at the picture plane but to rest somewhere outside of the painting, behind the viewer. Perhaps Huckaby is painting not only his daughter but an entire generation of young African Americans who gaze out at their future with hope and anxiety.



We cannot pretend to be colorblind in looking at any of these portraits. Huckaby paints the faces of black people, but in their technical execution, his portraits also expose the fiction of describing skin in terms of a single color. If we treat this girl's face as an abstract composition, we see oils in a vibrant palette curving across a background that is not so much white as empty. Umbers and ochres predominate in her complexion, but their harmoniousness depends upon an unfolding counterpoint of yellows, reds, greens, and blues. The bands of color in her forehead, cheeks, and mouth recall the Pan-African flag—in which blackness is positioned between the red of bloodshed and the green of the earth on which the blood has fallen. Huckaby uses green for shadows and reds for highlights: warm and cool.

Huckaby seems to see his subjects through the complications of a love both personal and impersonal. Are the cultural differences between Huckaby, a black painter, and me, a white viewer, surmountable? I want to believe so, but the sense of deep and complex love in this portrait reminds me that I'm looking in from the outside. I want to resist the temptation to try to impose understanding upon my perceptions before they've even had a chance to develop. Witness first, testify later.



Sedrick Huckaby. **If Perhaps by Chance, I Find Myself Encaged...**, 2016. Oil on canvas, oil wood, wire, and CelluClay. 38 1/2 x 37 x 11 inches. Photo: Teresa Rafidi.

Physically much smaller but equally ambitious in scope is *If Perhaps by Chance, I Find Myself Encaged...*, a sort of triptych whose central sculptural element resists integration into the portraiture around it. On painted panels, a woman and her children, rendered with Huckaby's customary realism, flank a nearly monochromatic, faceless, almost allegorical male figure. The man's Giacometti-thin body is molded again from CelluClay, which also covers the bars that confine him. The rough shaping gives a deceptive weight and luster to the light material, accentuated by encrusted oil paint. On examination, however, the thick surfaces have a hollow feeling. What at first resembles concrete seems as if it could crumble at a touch.

As with the portrait of his daughter, the framing devices are an important part of this work's meaning. The caged figure is suspended by a thin wire, but it also rests upon an improvised pedestal. Is it heavy or light? This group portrait is of a family both burdened and bereft, reckoning with the emptiness of the man's absence as well as the weight of the reality that took him away in the first place.

Sedrick Huckaby has chosen to make art about a subject—the mass incarceration of black men—which American society has mostly proved incapable of addressing. The power of his accomplishment is perhaps most evident in the incredible subtlety of expression he grants this family. There is no vanity in the three portraits, only character. To the man's left, his wife, who may be pregnant, stares dead ahead, her eyes defiant. She reaches out to him, but the edge of

the canvas cuts off her hand—perhaps an ironic reference to the draconian style of justice favored by proponents of mandatory sentencing. This woman has incurred an unjust punishment through a law that robs her of her husband, the father of her children. But still she reaches for him; the two are linked in a way the man no longer is to his children.

The boy and girl stand to his right, facing slightly away from each other. The painter's skilled use of linear perspective makes them recede slightly. The son looks up at his father with a mix of curiosity, sullenness, and disbelief. The hands thrust in his jacket pockets prefigure the resentful adolescent to come. His younger sister feels even more isolated, though her stance echoes her mother's. Her eyes are cast back toward her father even as her face is turned away. Is she afraid to appraise him and his situation? How much of his situation can she comprehend? Does she feel nothing but shame? With her hands clasped in front of her, she looks as though she wants to collapse in on herself.

As I spend more time with the painting, the color seems to grow more intense. The woman is dressed in layers of reflective black, the paint showing the traces of the brush used to apply it. The boy's jacket vibrates with dense yet translucent, stippled greens, and the rose pink of his sister's shirt is rendered with a kind of *cangiantismo* (exaggerated color contrast in the style of Michaelangelo). The colors are pastoral, and also liturgical, as if the family members are marking the psychological seasons—from innocence to grief—of what is, after all, a ritual for many black Americans. A man is arrested, “processed,” and transformed from a father, husband, brother, son, and neighbor into a convict.

Huckaby's prolific output is diverse in form. His works vary in scale from monumental portraits pulsing with color to medium-sized pen and ink studies to improvisations torn from minuscule sketchbooks. He works on paper, canvas, and hunks of reclaimed wood. His portraits often incorporate text as well. He talks with his subjects as he draws and paints them, and sometimes records their words at the edges of the portraits.

As I study the body of his work, certain postures and poses recur. Like John Coltrane (from whom he has drawn inspiration) in his *Sheets of Sound* period, Huckaby is a vertical thinker. His compositions depend upon variations on the idea of stacking—of layers of paint in Rothko-like oblongs, of thematic preoccupations, and of entire artistic traditions. His series of portraits build meticulously upon each other, but they also respond each to each in a lateral conversation. Even the sculptural elements of *Encaged* can be seen as a diagram of the invisible flow between lower and upper sections, as the man seems to strain upward. The barely perceptible arch of his back doesn't evoke pride, a chest thrust forward, so much as stretching on tiptoe to peer over some obstruction. Or perhaps he is being pulled up by his hair, as if under interrogation.

It is in Huckaby's numerous paintings of quilts that one feels the power of these vertical relationships most acutely. The quilt paintings operate on a dizzying number of levels. Quilting is a textile art tradition that bridges continents as well as generations. At one level, the quilt

paintings are extremely personal, like portraits of the women in his family via their handiwork. Quilts evoke comfort, warmth, safety, intimacy, and rest. They are maternal love and work in physical form. Yet quilts are more than privately symbolic. Quilts are an entire cosmology, a visual form elaborately developed over centuries of tradition interrupted as well as uninterrupted, a language for telling stories via template and juxtaposition.



Sedrick Huckaby. **Secret Places**, 2016. Oil on canvas on panel. 48 x 108 inches.

In one sense, the quilt paintings are assemblage. The large canvas *Secret Place* documents an actual space, a room in which Huckaby has deliberately hung a number of quilts sewn by his wife, mother, grandmother, aunts, and other women in his family. I cannot help but think of the work of Thornton Dial, the pioneering self-taught African American assemblage artist who died earlier this year. Both artists are world-builders, embracing the tensions inherent in that endeavor.

On the one hand, things are what they are: to make his art, Dial scavenged and repurposed items from his day job building railroad cars in Alabama. On the other hand, in assemblage, things have transactional purposes. We understand one thing in terms of another, so that creation can become Creation. Significance depends on pattern and principle. Dial's forms are biomorphic and weirdly fractal. In the welter of buckets, bedsprings, toy carcasses, television antennae, rags, rope, and screens, the micro- and the macrocosmic become indistinguishable. In the words of curator Joanne Cubbs, Dial's unclassifiable art is "so metaphysical it almost hurts your head."

A similar ecstatic dislocation looms in Huckaby's quilt paintings. Are these really quilts in *Secret Place*, or are they curtains, tent walls, or pillars? From where does the light flooding this space emanate? As the title makes clear, this is a sacred space, a temple. (The allusion is to Psalm 27: "In the secret place of his tent he will hide me.") How does a space become sacred? In the lower right quadrant, threads of orange-gold paint run from a quilt's edge to the bottom of the canvas. The quilt may be frayed, or these may simply be expressive drips of paint. As a pictorial element, they exist somewhere between expression and representation, between what can be verified by sight and what can only be understood through the imagination. Perhaps it's the simultaneity of these modes that enables us to enter into a sacred space.



Sedrick Huckaby. **From Glory to Glory**, 2016. Oil on canvas on panel. 80 x 30 inches.

In one sense *Secret Place* is an abstract work; that is, its subject matter—the quilts themselves—is abstract. Other quilt paintings have a more overtly abstract feel. *From Glory to Glory* also alludes to scripture in its title: “But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Corinthians 3:18). In this painting, the quilt or quilts undergo a transformation as they rise in a narrow column. The textures and colors shift as the eye ascends. We seem to be in the presence of a kind of transfiguration. What is muddy and coarse below reaches greater illumination and refinement above. The lozenge-like forms that waver across the upper canvas resemble panes of stained glass. They also reveal Huckaby’s conversation with the so-called abstract impressionist canvases Philip Guston painted from the mid-1950s through mid-1960s. Both the close clustering of forms in a mosaic-like grid and the color schemes that define the painting’s upper and lower halves feel Guston-like. Taken as a body, Huckaby’s quilt paintings also echo Guston in their use of repetition. Both artists obsessively explore a handful of images over many works; like Guston, Huckaby sings his refrains. Huckaby plumbs the mystery of being “changed into the same image”—not within a single canvas but across canvases.

From Glory to Glory could be read as all foreground. The only horizon in the painting is drawn so low that, by the time we make our way to the top of the painting, we’ve forgotten that we were ever on the ground at all. But *From Glory to Glory* is also all background, a wash of texture and color. Quilts, for Sedrick Huckaby, exemplify beauty as much as Guston’s (or Michelangelo’s, or Rembrandt’s or Mark Rothko’s) “high art.” Huckaby has been looking at these quilts all his life.

He has seen them—and showed them back to himself through his paintings—so many times that they're present to him all the time. Through that repetition, they accrete meaning. The paintings work the same way. These patches of carmine and turquoise and white, these drips of paint and the warp and woof of canvas, all these details, like quilts, must be re-seen, reimagined, reckoned with. Again, what makes something sacred? Huckaby's quilt paintings propose that through sustained attention, the mundane can become transcendent.

As an artist committed to telling and retelling the African American story, Sedrick Huckaby understands how painful incremental change can be. At the recent Valley House show, an entire room was given over to a series of works on paper entitled *A Dialogue with an Unknown People*. Based in part on photographs from the collection of the Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth, these paintings take their inspiration from stereoscopic images of African Americans living in a small Kansas community around the turn of the twentieth century. Huckaby writes that these photographs presented him with the challenge of “mak[ing] connections between the images of the past and present lives of everyday people.”



Sedrick Huckaby. **A Dialogue with an Unknown People: Two Sisters**, 2015. *Mixed media on paper. 12 x 15 inches.*

In *Two Sisters*, a modern young woman in a bright blue graduation gown smiles, proudly holding a diploma. In a split panel to her right, an anonymous woman sits for her portrait. Her hands are folded in her lap, and her expression is slightly dour, but she somehow radiates a comparable sense of pride. Huckaby's description of the original photographs is illuminating: “Fading in and out of the misty charcoal gray hues are men and women, children and babies with heads held high, facing the light, boasting proud demeanors.” This woman's dress has much to do with the impression of pride. Its tight collar and cuffs are understated but formal, its buttons opalescent, giving her a polished, self-contained look. While the modern graduate meets our eye, engaging us, this woman looks slightly away and beyond us, lost in her own thoughts. It's tempting to try to treat this as a true stereoscopic image, to merge the two into a single portrait that will tell us something about the experience of black women past and

present. But that's not possible; despite a shared history and a shared genealogy, they remain individuals, not types. The wide gulf of time is underscored by the contrast between the "misty charcoal" of the past and the bright hues of the present. Although *Two Sisters* is a celebration of achievement, this double-portrait also reveals something about how slowly history has moved for black Americans.

At our present cultural moment, when the question of how we value black lives is so urgent, it feels necessary if not entirely fair to ask: how political is Sedrick Huckaby's art? I have written, rewritten, and scrapped entire essays attempting to address that question. In my conversations with the artist, we haven't discussed this directly—not so much out of discomfort or even Dixified politesse, I think, but because the only common vocabulary for such a discussion is in the images Huckaby makes. And that vocabulary is remarkably free of grievance. In any case, he prefers to defy expectations. As he says when I ask him about what looks like a certain restlessness about media, "you can draw with anything."

Huckaby's joyful concern for images is what I most appreciate in his work. Throughout his oeuvre, marks made on a surface yield a generative experience for image-maker and image-receiver alike. However, I do not doubt that Huckaby's work has deep political implications. His love and the sense of responsibility he demonstrates for his community and its hard-won culture are palpable in everything he makes. For Huckaby, this love finds its expression first and foremost in the simple act of making images, an ability that can never be destroyed or taken away. He doesn't mount spectacles, nor does he simply mirror what he sees around him. Rather, the act of looking in a sustained and loving way at the people and artifacts of his longtime community, combined with a faith in the power of image-making, consecrates his work and gives it a power beyond the merely documentary or conceptual. As he said of one unfinished abstract piece on which he was working: "The closer you get, the more faithful it becomes. The more you pay attention, the more it repays you with its attentiveness. So, really, it's all a matter of devotion."