

Big Momma's House

Artist Turns His Grandmother's Humble Texas Home Into a Historic Wonder

BY CATHERINE D. ANSPON // 11.09.16

PHOTOGRAPHY MAX BURKHALTER



IN A HUMBLE FORT WORTH NEIGHBORHOOD, ARTIST SEDRICK HUCKABY HAS RECLAIMED HIS GRANDMOTHER'S HOUSE.

Painter Sedrick Huckaby flies under the radar. He's a modest, earnest man with a direct gaze, unmistakable intelligence, and the convictions of a pragmatic idealist. His understated nature stands in contrast to his art-world credentials: This year alone has seen his series "The 99%" paired with Glenn Ligon's work in a special exhibition mounted by the Amon Carter Museum of American Art in Fort Worth, as well as inclusion and commendation in the prestigious Outwin Boochever Portrait Competition at the National Portrait Gallery, Washington, D.C. (a museum under the auspices of the Smithsonian; the exhibit tours nationally).

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In an era of painters and the embrace of the figure, Huckaby could have punched a big ticket to anywhere in the art world. But after earning his MFA from Yale, he returned home to Fort Worth, where he has exhibited since 2005 at Valley House Gallery, and reared a family with wife and artist Letitia Huckaby, who also has a respected trajectory.

His purpose for being in Texas came into focus after his maternal grandmother, Hallie Beatrice Carpenter, passed away in 2008, and he inherited her historic house in the Poly neighborhood of Fort Worth. Its interiors, as well as Carpenter herself, are the subject of his most memorable canvases. Huckaby contemplated the next step for the homestead, a circa-1901 domicile on two acres of land in a deeply rooted African-American neighborhood, at the moment little gentrified.

Within Big Momma's House, you can see an environment best understood when viewed in the grand sequence of art history. Its sense of place, time, eternity, and community is every bit the equal of Rick Lowe's Project Row Houses in Houston, and James Magee's The Hill in West Texas.

All of these artistic parallels the artist mentions in our discussion about his influences. He also cites a pivotal European sojourn in 2000 to France, Italy, and Spain. "To see the El Grecos, you have to travel to a city that you can only walk into — Toledo. It's quite a journey to see some of those works and how they are placed. Really, the idea for Big Mom- ma's House started there," Huckaby elaborates further about the years-in-process vision.

He has been working on the home since the fall of 2010. The time-worn homestead was his grandmother's domain for decades — the seat of a matriarchal kingdom where a brood of eight children, even more grandchildren, and their large extended family met for holidays, entertainments, advice sessions, and impromptu gatherings.

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“There’s that idea in Big Momma’s House that a person has to come to this certain spot to see what’s going on — and something about the journey is important, and something about place being important,” Huckaby says.



Big Momma also watched young Huckaby after school until his parents returned from work. The painter recalls that some of his first drawings of fellow family members were made within the walls of the upright Victorian. The stalwart Big Momma was the subject of her own exhibition, “Big Momma’s House,” in 2008 at Valley House. Huckaby made the moving meditation on her passing, showing her final days bed bound in the home, as well as her hands on the Bible. Her visage was faithfully recorded in heroically scaled canvases, as were the unadorned domestic details of her dwelling, including the faded chair that took on the air of a throne while dissolving into abstraction due to Huckaby’s virtuoso display of paint handling, becoming both object and subject.

The crumbling Victorian structure has been taken down to its bones — a labor of love equal to a purification ritual. What remains are the walls, natural light (our first visit was sans electricity, and even in the twilight, the rooms shone with pearly rays), and honest materials, especially the shiplap and wide floor beams that would be hard to duplicate today. Huckaby hints at redemption with well-worn pews preserved from his own church’s congregation, reused here to create a beautiful chapel that symbolizes the riches that lie within unadorned human interiors — a central tenet of his artistic practice that underpins his life as a painter.

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Big Momma's House will be open to the public when Huckaby perceives the time is right. What does the house signify? Huckaby's carefully chosen words are weighted with conviction.

"There's this whole idea of place and what it can mean and how it can affect the way we perceive both art and how it simply affects us," he says. "With the house, I think like a painter on the one hand ... I don't want to say community activist, but an idealist on the other hand. I'm constantly searching for how to make art have a profound effect upon people.

"In terms of art, I don't know that we've asked all the questions of what all it can do and be in a society and culture. For example, if we look at Houston, and we look at Project Row Houses, what exactly is the art and what is it doing? Project Row Houses is not going to break those houses down and take them down to the museum, but it is helping transform that area of Houston. Who would have thought that art can do that? I try to ask those kinds of questions and push [art].

"We think of it as objects of contemplation, and definitely that is important. But what if, let's say, Big Momma's House can be a place that is a catalyst for transformation of that entire community? Can art do that?"