

## HYPERALLERGIC

ART • WEEKEND

# Everybody Should Want to Belong to Sedrick Huckaby's Tribe

Huckaby, who lives in Fort Worth, Texas, where he was raised, and teaches at the University of Texas at Arlington, draws people he knows: family, friends, and neighbors in the African American community: he makes the local become something more.



John Yau April 9, 2017



734 Shares



This is my first encounter with the work of Sedrick Huckaby, and I found that it challenged my capacity to pay attention. There was so much to see that even after I looked at the more than 100 works installed on the walls and in a vitrine, I knew that I did not see them all. It was good but also painful to be reminded that we cannot literally see everything that's going on, in whatever circumstances we find ourselves in, which means we need to make choices. And you can rest assured that someone somewhere will tell you that the choices that you made are wrong or not good enough. Such is the pain of trying to be alive and responsible in today's world.

In the exhibition *Sedrick Huckaby: The 99%* at Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects, his solo debut in New York, the artist shows the 101 lithographs that comprise *The 99% Project* (2012-2013), a series of portraits and figurative works, as well as drawings and paintings. The paintings, which are built up with thick impastos, sometimes to the point that the figure becomes three-dimensional, are often displayed in clusters, especially when Huckaby is portraying every member of a family. As the exhibition's title suggests, Huckaby wants to make visible the invisible and demonized.



All of the lithographs are based on loosely rendered drawings, which are relatively small and done in sketchbooks. Placing acetate over a drawing he wants to turn into a lithograph, the artist copies the earlier work, making additional marks in the process. All of the prints in *The 99% Project* are hung on one wall of this narrow gallery. Huckaby's portraits are casual, and they include brief written remarks based on something his subject said to him. Some of the men are bare-chested. Everyone is at ease and seems to know the artist: he is their friend and he draws.

One ink drawing is of a man in a sleeveless undershirt relaxing on the couch, legs stretched out, hands folded on his belly. He is wearing glasses and looking at the artist. Huckaby has paid most of his attention to the man's upper body and head, where intense crosshatching evokes light and shadow, and less attention to the legs and the wall behind him, where everything is sketched in with a few lines. Beneath the drawing, which is largely confined to a rectangle the artist has drawn on the sheet of paper, Huckaby has recorded something the man said: "You thought that was a cigarette in her hand...ha, ha, ha... that was a blunt." The tenderness of the artist's attention includes the capacity to accept his subject's gentle chiding over how inattentive he has been.



If you get the feeling that Huckaby — who got his MFA at Yale — is not trying to be arty, it is probably due to what the artist has said about his work:

I believe my paintings are done in a language more closely in tune with my soul than the language of my tongue. For me, the act of painting is not just a means to a product; it is also a meditative process of communication. At the end of life my greatest hope is that God is pleased with all of the prayers I left behind in the form of paintings.

He has said about his large portraits, none of which are in this exhibition, that he wants to monumentalize the ordinary person — that “ordinary people matter,” deliberately echoing the rallying cry, “Black Lives Matter.” Huckaby, who lives in Fort Worth, Texas, where he was raised, and teaches at the University of Texas at Arlington, draws people he knows: family, friends, and neighbors in the African American community: he makes the local become something more.

With a few exceptions (think Lucian Freud and Alice Neel), the idea of the artist as a chronicler of one’s tribe — whatever that group may be — has been scorned for being

provincial, or old-fashioned, or not modernist. Besides, didn't photography, not to mention digital media, take care of all that? But it is one thing to take a photograph, as they say, and another to make a drawing or painting: it is a difference between instance and time, between the passing moment and the prolonged exchange. Huckaby's art is the result of his desire to give his subjects a face and voice, which is why he writes down something they have said to him during the sitting.



The paintings' thick paint imbues his subjects with a physical presence. Most of the portraits focus solely on the head, the person's distinctive face and skin tones. In "Antwone's Family" (2016), there are five portraits, with the women depicted in oval formats and the men in rectangular ones. The impasto surfaces vary, with some built up a great deal and others not at all. The youngest child is blurred, as if his personality has not quite come into focus yet. Without knowing who these people are, it is still possible to read all kinds of feelings into their expressions. Clearly, Huckaby knows his subjects and they know him. They trust him and are not afraid to let their guard down.

Despite his need to document his family and friends, Huckaby is not, strictly speaking, a realist, because, in at least one work, he addresses his own deep-seated apprehension about being black in America. In the painting/sculpture hybrid, "If Perhaps by chance I find myself encaged" (2016), two paintings flank a man built out of painted Celluclay trapped behind

bars. In the panel on the left, a woman — presumably the man's wife — looks on, helpless. In the painting on the right, there are two young children, who are apparently his son and daughter. The boy, who is closer to the man, looks at his father, his hands thrust into his jacket pockets. The young girl, standing off to the right and slightly behind the boy, is looking out toward the viewer, one hand clasping the other.



Huckaby conveys a lot in the distance he places between the boy and the jacketed girl, and between the girl and the picture plane. Which is to say that he is able to plumb the daily anxiety and powerlessness that many people of color feel every day of their lives, and he does this through nuance rather than didacticism. Even the fact that the painting's surface is not entirely covered with paint conveys the artist's urgency, his awareness that America is in a crisis that shows no sign of being resolved. We do not need to know what got the man encaged because we know that it might have been nothing, and, in the eyes of some, that is a crime.