

PAINTERS' TABLE



Interview: Sedrick Huckaby at the Elaine de Kooning House

Submitted by [John Mitchell](#) on March 11, 2019.

Sedrick Huckaby was born in 1975 in Fort Worth, Texas. He earned a BFA at Boston University in 1997 and an MFA at Yale University in 1999. Sedrick has earned many awards and honors for his art including a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2008 and a Joan Mitchell Grant in 2004. He is an associate professor of painting at the University of Texas at Arlington and his work is represented by Valley House Gallery in Dallas, Texas.

As a kid, Sedrick loved reruns of the seventies TV show *Good Times*. We both did. We were both inspired by the *artiste* character — J.J. Walker — and especially Ernie Barnes who was the real painter behind the best paintings seen on that show. Ernie Barnes was famous as a painter and an athlete. He played professional football from 1959 to 1965. In high school, Sedrick was a competitive athlete too and fencing was his sport of choice. In my mind, this connects Sedrick to Caravaggio who was also good with a sword. Unlike Caravaggio and more like Ernie Barnes — Sedrick is levelheaded and loves people but I've always felt that I can see the swordsman in Sedrick's paint handling.

Sedrick is a devoted father of three and husband to Letitia Huckaby who is also a visual artist. They live in Fort Worth, Texas, not too far from the Highland Hills neighborhood where he grew up. His parents and extended family all live in Fort Worth too. Family and community are important to Sedrick.

In early 2018 Sedrick spent time as artist in residence at a hospital in Philadelphia, PA where he made drawings of patients and doctors while listening to them tell their stories. The goal of that work was to cultivate relationships between doctors and patients and act as a reminder to the entire hospital staff including everyone from doctors to cafeteria workers that quality health care is directly affected by how much they care. The drawings he made there are a moving testament to Sedrick's belief that art has the power to heal people and uplift communities.

Sedrick is one of my favorite people to talk to about painting. Imagine extraordinary observations spoken in a Texas accent. Earlier in 2018 for example, Sedrick and I were walking around the Metropolitan Museum of Art together. We stopped in front of Lucian Freud's painting of Leigh Bowery seen from behind for maybe 20 minutes or so during which time, Sedrick pointed out that this is Freud riffing on Ingres's *Valpinçon Bather* from 1808. I'm a huge Ingres fan and I have also been looking at that Freud painting for over twenty years and I had never noticed. Thank you Sedrick!

During the fall of 2018, Sedrick spent six weeks at the Elaine de Kooning House as artist in residence. Elaine de Kooning bought the house on Alewife Brook Road in East Hampton in 1975 and added the studio three years later. This is where she lived and worked throughout the late period of her life. She painted a portrait of the Brazilian soccer player Pele in this studio. I had the good fortune to spend one weekend there in late October with Sedrick, Catherine Anson, and Chris Byrne (owner of the Elaine de Kooning House), hanging out and talking about painting. The night I slept in the studio bedroom I dreamt of being in the studio with Sedrick, Elaine and Willem de Kooning, and John F. Kennedy all at the same time. There is a powerful spirit there and Chris Byrne is a conscientious steward who treats this historic home and studio with all due respect. Having the opportunity to hang out in Elaine's studio – the studio designed by her brother Conrad Fried – full of my friend Sedrick's incredible work and talking about painting for hours on end was a heady wonderful experience and one of the highlights of my 2018. What follows is an excerpt from over six hours of recorded conversation as Sedrick and I talked through the night.

John Mitchell (JM): This is such a beautiful studio. It feels really great in here.

Sedrick Huckaby (SH): Elaine de Kooning made a painting of buffalo in this studio. When you're in here you can really appreciate how big that painting was. It must have been twenty-two or twenty-three feet long.

JM: I didn't even know there was a residency program here until you told me that you had been invited. How did that happen?

SH: Chris Byrne owns the Elaine de Kooning house. He started this residency program. He also started the Dallas Art Fair. He's friendly with a number of people who we know mutually. My work has frequently been included in the Dallas Art Fair over the years. I believe that's how he got to know my work. He also has a home in Dallas. I live in Fort Worth. So we live in the same

area. I think he thought I'd enjoy spending some time here, so he invited me to come spend six weeks.

JM: You have a lot of work here – there's a stack of drawings on the table and fourteen large paintings. Some of these are ten feet tall by eight feet wide. How did you get all of this work here?

SH: I drove across country from Fort Worth. I brought it all on a trailer that I pulled behind my pickup truck.

JM: Obviously the people depicted in these paintings are not here in East Hampton. With the exception of you – there is one self-portrait. Can you talk about the process of how you're making these paintings of people?

SH: I started most of these in Fort Worth, Texas. I brought them because there is stuff in all of them that I need to work on. By just looking at the paintings and trying to see if anything is out of place. But also, there are four that are close to finished but they're a part of this body of work that I'm working on so I want them around when I'm working on the other ones. There's an orange spot in the square one that is sticking out too much. That's an easy fix. Or in the self-portrait there's a slight issue with the hands. They're okay but they don't have the richness of color that I would rather they have. It's an easy fix in my mind and I can fix that here. That was the first painting of all of these, so the paint is pretty dry. I plan to lay a glaze over the part that needs to brighten up and I think that'll do it. So it's stuff like that with those. There are a couple of things going on in this group. There are people wearing funerary t-shirts and for the most part I thought of them in front of quilts. A funerary t-shirt is a t-shirt that shows the image of a recently deceased person. A family might have these shirts made and wear them to the funeral of a loved one. So I'm working with these figures, these quilts that speak to the situation, the funerary t-shirt, and then obviously the portrait of the person.

JM: Do you actually wear the funerary shirt that you're wearing in your self-portrait from time to time?

SH: Usually people don't wear funerary shirts after the funeral. It's a memorial shirt. But I'm thinking about that. I'm thinking that maybe there are things we can do to memorialize people who pass away.

JM: So are you working on these paintings from life?

SH: I started these by painting from drawings and photographs. Then when I go back to Texas I'll continue working on them. So like this one of my nephew Deactress, where I've really built up the head – I'll be looking at it and thinking, "What else?"

JM: So you're saying that you don't need the person sitting in front of you? You're able to work on these paintings without the models present?

SH: Yes and No. The process of using so many references for one piece is actually a new thing for me. I start thin and with loose renderings when using the reference material, knowing that later the surface will be more built up and more particular when I work from direct observation again. So, there's going to be a more built up surface but I like to start thin. The thin starts are like drawings. I think that drawing can often be more honest than painting because it's just done. There's something kind of raw. Well, that's what I see in the thin beginnings. They're so simple. They're not as worried about. There's something nice about how easy they are. You know, like just do it. If something is wrong, you just move it. It's not labored. With the paintings – I try to loosen up. But there's something nice about how loose the thin painted start is in a different way than a worked up finished painting.

JM: Would you ever call a thin painting finished? Have you ever done that?

SH: I have. Usually people who know my work think that it's unfinished. But I'll argue that it's finished. In my last show, I had a painting like that and people were asking, "Is that done?" And I'd tell them, "Yes. It's done." I understand why some people might not agree with that.

JM: Can we talk about your palette?

SH: Sure. It's messy now. But I scrape it clean all the time.

JM: It looks like you're taking the waste paint off of the palette – maybe paint that is starting to skin over or dry out and you're putting it on the hands in the ten by eight foot portrait. You're building up those hands almost sculpturally with paint. Is that right?

SH: Yes.

JM: These paintings with a lot of paint on them must get heavy. How do you prepare for that? Are you painting on loose canvas or is there a way that you prepare the surface so that it can take these heavily painted, almost sculptural areas?

SH: I'm adhering the canvas to a wooden panel with gesso. At one point I was doing it with heavy gel medium but I found the gesso is better. Because it's white and also because I can completely saturate the surface with the gesso so it really makes it wet and then I go through a series of putting the canvas on, rolling it down flat, and then saturating the top so that the wet gesso goes all the way through. Then I take a metal painter's knife and scrape it across the surface. Then when I get to the outer perimeter, I'll start to scrape it onto the edges. I don't start on the edges because of the rate of drying. When I do get to the surface edges, I start to stretch it. So the process is, I put gesso all across the surface, I put the canvas on it, I roll it down with a brayer, saturate the top with gesso, then I'll do the sides, and then I stretch it as I do the sides and staple. When I'm stretching, I have it resting on a table so that I can get under it and pull the canvas down and staple it to the back. Because I saturate the canvas so heavily, I'm able to slow down the drying time. I can pull and stretch the whole thing and staple it while it's still wet. I also squeegee the whole thing to work the air bubbles completely out of it.

JM: Let's talk about the scale of your figures. Why is it important to make the people so much bigger than life size?

SH: Some of them are about life size and some are larger. Some are a lot larger. When I was doing the big heads, I was trying to monumentalize the people. Even the big paintings of quilts had to do with making ordinary things into something extraordinary. I like the idea of making the quilts into a kind of flag. There's something about them having this large presence and the viewer being smaller. What that something is, I don't know. I don't want to say that making them big makes them more important because something small can be just as important but somehow it does make them undeniable. You walk up to them and you have to look up. This gives them a presence that they wouldn't have if they were smaller.

JM: What is the common denominator between the fourteen people represented in these fourteen paintings?

SH: Most of the people here are family. The question is, will this project move outside of that? I'm going to just follow it and see. I've started with family because there's a dialog. I know them personally. But the dialog is bigger than my family. If I had to guess, I'd say yes – it will push outside of my family into other families that have these traditions.

JM: You mean, families that have the traditions of quilts and funerary shirts?

SH: Yes, because it's a conversation about the death rate in African American communities. With black people – what is that? If you start thinking about this conversation I think that what you'll find is a disproportionate death rate among African Americans. It has to do with a lot of different issues. I want to talk about those issues from different angles. For instance to talk about it in terms of a kind of systemic problem – you know like someone goes to a hospital and receives unfair treatment because of the way they look. They think they're a person who probably doesn't have the kind of insurance that warrants good treatment. Maybe that person is just looked over. Or maybe it has to do with police brutality. Or maybe it has to do with a person who does a lot of things to ease into an environment that can cause an early death indirectly. Of course some African American people live full lives and die of old age but we're at a point where even with a normal death, like with my grandmother Big Momma, you think there won't be any other Big Mommas in the future. So it leaves a hole. She was someone who held the family together. That's gone now. So there are all of these issues that have to do with death. And at the center there is a conversation about life and death. And there's a kind of poetry of the quilts that comes into play. It's a conversation about life and death with these backdrops that are quilts.

JM: Can you elaborate on the importance of the quilts and how you use them in your painting?

SH: The quilts contain legacy, history, tradition and mystery. Sometimes I even backlight them, illuminating them with light from behind to give them an other-worldliness. They're like a spiritual heritage that looms behind the figures. These paintings are about the discussion between the living and the dead, things seen and mysterious unseen things. The patch-like t-

shirt portraits are like recent members of a quilt of the ages. The figures wearing the shirts are also encompassed by the shape of the canvas, hinting that they too will become a part of the fluid geometry of the sacred unseen quilt. I know all of this is kind of *out there*, but it is a part of the way I think about the poetry of painting and life.

JM: Has being at the Elaine de Kooning House done anything for you or for the work? Anything specifically? Do you feel the presence of Elaine in here? How is it affecting your ideas or your painting?

SH: I would say maybe a little. She wanted this studio to have that second floor portion that looks down into the main workspace. It's nice to look down on the work from up there. Also, there is a spirit of abstraction between Elaine and Willem de Kooning. I'm thinking about that. Another example is that Elaine made some tall portraits. There's a portrait of John F. Kennedy that's about ten feet tall. I like the presence of the figure in that painting. So then in my tall portraits, I can make a painting that has that kind of presence. Another thing is that I found this quilt that I'm working with here at the de Kooning House. In this one painting – the one with the thickly painted blue hands, I'm working with the quilt in this studio but then I'm going to leave the quilt here and go home and continue working with the person in Texas. I'm going to try to make the de Kooning House quilt and the person who lives in Texas work together in this one painting. You know – that's kind of wild.