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George W. Bush's Painting Teacher Shows What He Can Do With A Quilt In A New Exhibition



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Arts



Sedrick Huckaby, George Walker Bush, 2017, oil on canvas on panel, 48 x 54 in., The Harlan R. Crow ... [+] IMAGE © JUSTIN CLEMONS PHOTOGRAPHY LLC

It can be tempting, when thinking about Sedrick Huckaby's latest exhibition of paintings, which is open at the Blanton Museum of Art through December 5, to focus solely on the included portrait of former President George W. Bush. Bush has famously turned to painting as his most notable post-Presidential hobby, capturing everyone from Vladimir Putin to Malala Yousef with his brush, which while not expert, is not entirely amateur.

Philip Martin Gallery

Lesser known than Bush's favorite hobby is the fact that Huckaby, who grew up in Fort Worth, Texas, and received his MFA from Yale in 1999, was one of Bush's painting teachers. "He was actually a great student," Huckaby told me. "He listened, and he was very quick in terms of applying things that I was telling him."

Bush, who was introduced to Huckaby at the latter's exhibition in Dallas, was interested, Huckaby says, in making his work more "painterly." "I really worked with him on loosening up, and applying a lot more paint," he says. The former President, Huckaby notes, was gracious and outgoing. Huckaby's tutelage is directly apparent in *Portraits of Courage: A Commander in Chief's Tribute to America's Warriors*, a book of portraits of 98 physically and mentally wounded Armed Forces veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. In the portraits, Huckaby lessons on bold, thick strokes, and confident use of color to create depth, are apparent.

In Huckaby's own portrait of the former President, Bush looks somewhat more serious — and definitely thinner — than his official portraits. It's almost as if Bush has suppressed his normal look of bemused bewilderment to give Huckaby a flatter, more universal expression to work with. Perhaps, one wonders, Bush gave Huckaby what he looks for in his own portrait subjects. In any case, Huckaby captures the President's most notable features — his pointy ears, full head of gray hair and the triangular center of his nose — while at the same time transmitting a sort of gravitas and respect for a man he says treated him kindly.

Much more interesting, once you put the infamy aside, are the other paintings in the exhibition. Two depict quilts, which Huckaby says his own grandmother made. Huckaby says that his grandmother's quilts were beautiful objects, an art form. His grandmother never called herself an artist, however. "The objects were not just made to be seen, they were also utilitarian," he says.



Sedrick Huckaby, *A Love Supreme: Summer*, 2001–2009, oil on canvas, 92 x 240 in.,
photo courtesy of ... [+] COURTESY THE ARTIST

Filthy Rags of Splendor (2011) shows the back of a yellowed quilt, the bottom frayed, hanging from the wall like an Andrea Zittel tapestry. *A Love Supreme: Summer* (2001) shows a wall of hanging quilts, in total a riot of color. They are the product of a painter's exploration of his own talent — each fold, crease and tear is carefully depicted. Created in the decade or so following his graduation from Yale, it is easy to see how Huckaby painted the quilts in an attempt to apply high-brow academic theory to his own lived experience.

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Sedrick Huckaby, *Sonadores (Three Pieces)*, 2018, oil on canvases, overall: 72 x 72 in.,
The Harlan ... [+] PHOTO © JAMES WILSON

More recent is *Sonadores (Three Pieces)* (2018), a triptych of three sets of portraits hung as if they are frames on a living room side table. They depict a family, Huckaby says, of Dreamers. There may be as many as 3 million Dreamers — or immigrants who were brought to the country as children, and do not currently have citizenship — living in the United States. In the portraits, the family members look confident and strong. Each of the four heads — father, son, mother and daughter — are tilted up towards the viewer. The mother suppresses a smile. The daughter raises an eyebrow. The son, his hair freshly cut, bears a similar mien to the one Rembrandt bore in his own self-portrait at age 34. This is not a family afraid, but a family proud. Although there can't be a cheesier way of stating this, the portraits seem to propose, "We are the future of America."

In retrospect, especially given Trump's policy of separating children from their parents, Bush's policies towards immigrants seem tame, even compassionate. Like Presidents before and since, he tried to balance a line between praising immigrants for their hard work, while at the same time noting that the path to immigration must be transparent. Perhaps his most notable contribution to immigration policy was that he doubled the number of Border Patrol agents in 2006.

Juxtaposing a portrait of former President Bush with portraits of a family of Dreamers — along with portraits of quilts, a medium of expression favored by former slaves and their descendants — creates a political statement, especially in Texas. The facile reading is that they all — President, black woman, immigrant — deserve to be elevated equally in the annals of history. But really, what Huckaby seems to be saying is, sure, I can paint a decent portrait of a former President, but look at what I can do with a freaking quilt. Bush, in the exhibition, is just a floating head. The quilts are masterpieces. The Dreamers are bodies, clothes, background. They are tight t-shirts, rumpled jeans, masculinity and femininity, the product of an artist observing carefully, and using his talent to capture every detail.