

Philip Martin Gallery

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ART

Painter Sedrick Huckaby Looks His Subjects in the Eye, From Dreamers to an Ex-President

The empathic gaze of the Fort Worth artist is on view at Austin's Blanton Museum this summer and fall.

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Sedrick Huckaby's painting *George Walker Bush*.

Justin Clemons

Sedrick Huckaby's paintings are all about giving depth to two-dimensional images, both literally and metaphorically. He employs what specialists call impasto technique, layering his paint up to three inches deep on the canvas so we can see his brushstrokes rise and swirl up from the plane of the canvas. It's a

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style often associated with Vincent Van Gogh and other artists who have sought to share with viewers the emotions they felt while in the physical moment of painting.

With Huckaby, the abiding feeling imparted by his brushstrokes is empathy, a sense of human-to-human connection that can transcend vast gulfs of unfamiliarity, alienation, and disagreement. His typical subjects are traditional African American quilts and the people of his native North Texas region—family members, ordinary people, and the occasional well-known portrait-sitter. Huckaby's portrait subjects appear to have their own gaze; viewers feel that we can perhaps read something of their souls. At the same time, we too feel probed, met, and called out of ourselves by the paintings. We enter a kind of silent dialogue.

For many visitors to Huckaby's new one-room solo exhibition, which runs through December 5 at Austin's Blanton Museum of Art, the big attraction is a new portrait of ex-president George W. Bush. In recent years, as he's taken up the paintbrush as a retirement hobby, Bush has studied painting with Huckaby, who is a professor at UT-Arlington. In this canvas, we see the one-time commander in chief entrusting himself to his art tutor's penetrating eye, posing in what appears to be a plain white T-shirt, skinnier than we remember him and more vulnerable. The heedless confidence around the eyes is still there, in blue impasto gobs, but it seems tempered as the sockets deepen and darken with age.

It's a compelling piece, and certainly one that tells us more about the forty-third president than does his official White House portrait, in which the inner man is hidden by a thicket of impeccable tailoring and generic Oval Office trappings. To Huckaby's knowledge, it is the only portrait of Bush painted from life; his official White House portrait was painted from photographs. But what's most striking about Huckaby's stripped-down take on Bush is its context in the Blanton exhibit.

Bush is just one of eleven people whose portraits are on display. The rest are neither famous nor powerful enough to start a war, yet they all look at us with an intensity equal to the former president's. Their presence is just as large and as demanding of accommodation in our thoughts.

Four of the nonpresidential faces featured in Huckaby's show make up a Hispanic family, in a work titled *Soñadores (Three Pieces)*—"Soñadores" is "Dreamers" in English. The title evokes the challenges faced by immigrant families whose members do not all share the same legal status and thus risk separation; Huckaby painted the two young children on separate canvases, alone and apart from their parents.

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Sedrick Huckaby's painting *Soñadores (Three Pieces)*.
James Wilson



Sedrick Huckaby's *Filthy Rags of Splendor*.
Courtesy of Sedrick Huckaby

The other six people we meet are from a series titled “The Huckabys,” for which the artist sought out nonrelatives in Fort Worth who share his last name. Some, like Huckaby himself, are Black, while others are white and perhaps Hispanic. In their eyes and expressions, their skin and the set of their jaws, their hairstyles, jewelry, and other adornments—and, more mysteriously, in the textures of Huckaby’s paint—we can trace the suggestion of varied life experiences and personalities. Though it is not made clear to the viewer, one is a self-portrait.

The forty-third president will attract the most attention, but the theme of the show is best captured by the only nonhumans on display. Huckaby’s other great subject is quilts, and he has included two quilt paintings in the show—one huge and ornate, the other smaller and more minimalist.

It’s tempting to draw the conclusion that Huckaby sees America, and North Texas in particular, like the first quilt: an expansive, warm patchwork of vibrant diversity. But the smaller companion, *Filthy Rags of Splendor*, which depicts the underside of a homely, tattered quilt hanging limply from its corners on a wall, complicates this interpretation of the exhibition. The unadorned quilt’s sagging shape subtly echoes both a typical crucifixion pose and Raphael’s iconic Renaissance work *The Transfiguration*, which is often understood to be about the transformative power of painting itself. It serves as a hint that Huckaby may be after a more spiritual affirmation of the dignity of each human life he paints.

There’s a lot to unpack when we leave Huckaby’s show—about how unequal power relations between those depicted do or don’t undermine a sense of universal empathy, about what the most frenzied impasto moments on the canvas are meant to emphasize, and about what precisely the almost-blank quilt is doing here.

Part of what makes Huckaby’s work so special is that it is not, at bottom, reducible to ideas. The human element—complex, multifaceted, and always capable of surprising—is what draws us close. It’s up to us not to look past that.