

*Sedrick
Huckaby's art
is all about
paint, lots of it,
and family, lots
of that, too*

**BY CYNTHIA K.
BUCCINI**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
CHARLES FORD



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Big Love

IN SEDRICK HUCKABY'S 2007 *Portrait of Big Momma*, the painter's maternal grandmother wears a tomato-colored turban and an emerald bathrobe buttoned to the top and quilted at the neck. Gazing to her right through hooded lids, her lips almost pursed, she looks like a woman who has few doubts about anything at all. And that she was.

Hallie Beatrice Carpenter was the heart of Huckaby's family. She was the church-going matriarch, the one who held the family together, who never turned her back on a relative in trouble. Her Fort Worth, Texas, home hummed with children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.

"Being godly was a big part of her life," says Huckaby (CFA'97). "She lived by the principles of the Bible — and people respected her for that. I think a lot of people felt like they could talk to her about different things. And sometimes they didn't talk to her, because they knew she would tell them the truth."

Carpenter, who died in 2008 at age eighty-four, sat for several portraits by Huckaby. He painted her in her home, in church attire, in bed. "I wanted, in my own way, to canonize this figure as a part of the African-American family," he says. "I wanted to historically note this figure of Big Momma, who she was to the family, what she did, and what she meant to our lives."

His grandmother was one of several muses for Huckaby. His parents, wife and son, siblings, cousins, nephews, aunts, and uncles have also been captured on canvas. The very personal nature of his subject matter, as well as his mastery of paint, lots of paint, has caught the attention of art collectors, museums, and gallery owners. The thirty-four-year-old artist has works in the permanent collections of the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the African American Museum in Dallas. In 2008 he won a Guggenheim fellowship, awarded to artists, scientists, and scholars on the basis of stellar achievement and exceptional promise.

"He probably has succeeded as he has not only because of his skill, but because of his extraordinary will," says Richard Raiselis, a College of Fine Arts associate professor of art, who keeps in touch with his former student. "People live to breathe. He lives to paint."

IN THE BEGINNING

As a child, Huckaby, the son of a jack-of-all-trades and a nurse, often sketched human figures and heads with his father. In high school, he was accepted into an artist apprenticeship program run by a local nonprofit, where he learned oil painting under Ron Tomlinson (CFA'67). He attended Texas Wesleyan University, where Tomlinson taught at the time, and after two years transferred to BU.

There, recalls Raiselis, Huckaby was driven, self-critical, and dedicated to his painting. "You'd get the impression he lived in the building rather than went to

school here," he says. "He was always the last to leave."

At CFA he developed a deep appreciation for the feel of paint, how it looked and moved. He liked to use a lot of it, to push it around. The technique — the buildup of paint on the canvas — is called impasto, and Huckaby has made it his own. At times, he piles on so much pigment, his work becomes almost sculptural. "I call it relief painting," he says. "It's not just impasto."

"What anyone remembers about his painting is usually the paint itself," says Raiselis, who describes a self-portrait of Huckaby he'd seen at a recent exhibition. The paint, he recalls, projects from the canvas an inch or more, particularly at the tip of the nose. It's not easy to build up that much paint and keep the color clean, according to Raiselis. "Usually, if you use a lot of paint and you make changes, you end up making sort of a mud pie," he says. "But his paintings still maintain color saturation and luminosity, so the pigment itself creates a quality of color and light in the painting, which is impressive."

The effect is striking, according to William Stover, an assistant curator of contemporary art at the MFA. "You look at this rather large-scale painting from across the room, and the closer you get, you start to notice the paint. And the painting itself doesn't break down the way something like Impressionism would, into the brushstrokes. But what you actually see is this person created through this building up of the paints."

AFTER SCHOOL

After earning a B.F.A. at BU and an M.F.A. at Yale, Huckaby won a fellowship at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Massachusetts. He traveled the United States, studying painters such as Henry Tanner, a turn-of-the-last-century African-American artist with whom he felt a kinship, and then Europe, where he studied the old masters.

Always, however, he was drawn back to Fort Worth, his hometown. "I felt like there was work I needed to do that was here," Huckaby says. "I wanted to deal with family. I wanted to deal with the bonds that keep us together, the issues that cause us to grow apart."

He started with his grandparents. "Big Momma liked that I liked to paint her," he recalls. "But I think she liked it more that I was coming around all the time."

Over the years, he painted other family members, too — his nephew Broderick, his cousin Enocio — some larger than life. *Portrait of Big Momma* is five feet tall, and *Enocio* is more than seven feet, a scale meant to celebrate

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► **SEDRICK HUCKABY** wanted to celebrate the role his maternal grandmother, Hallie Carpenter, played in his family's life. Carpenter, who died in 2008 at age eighty-four, sat for many of the artist's paintings. Clockwise from top left: *Sitting in Her Room*, 2008, oil on canvas, 56 3/4" x 41"; *Mother Carpenter*, 2008, oil on canvas on wood panel, 15 3/8" x 11 5/8"; *Her Hands on the Word*, 2008, oil on canvas on wood panel, 32" x 36 1/4"; *Portrait of Big Momma*, 2007, oil on canvas, 60" x 48".

average, everyday people who are of extraordinary importance to us. “They’re important enough to make a monument out of them,” Huckaby says.

That sensibility is another facet of Huckaby’s art that caught the eye of curators at the MFA. Stover says they had been aware of the painter through area exhibitions and were delighted to accept when a museum supporter offered in 2006 to buy *Enocio* from an exhibition at Nielsen Gallery in Boston.

“For me,” Stover says, “the work is very much in the vein of traditional portraiture, but it plays with the notion of who gets portrayed. The kinds of people who normally would be — we always think of kings and queens and ‘important people.’ Huckaby is portraying family and friends and people he knows, and it’s a nice sort of twist on the idea of traditional portraiture.

“When you see a lot of his paintings,” says Stover, “you feel like you might also know this person, because they’re depicted just like you’d think your portrait might be painted. There is this humanity in the work.”

Raiselis sees it, too. “Because he’s the draftsman and the painter that he is, he’s really able to interpret his subject in a beautiful way. You get the feeling of a real human being behind that painting, and they become very narrative. Their life stories are there; you can feel them. I don’t know that anyone can describe why that happens in paintings by Sedrick, or by Rembrandt or by Velázquez, but he seems to be on the same wavelength.”

Nina Nielsen, founder and codirector of Nielsen Gallery, remembers vividly the first time she saw Huckaby’s paintings, at a contemporary art show in Boston. “The work just knocked us out,” she says. “What struck me is this genuine quality of the work — the actual place it comes from. He comes from a place he’s very proud of and very connected with. There are very few artists who seem to have a real place that they bring into the studio. They’re always searching for where they should be, what they should be saying. Sedrick never had to search for what he wanted to say; it was only how he was going to say it.”

THE QUILT TRIP

During his undergraduate days, Huckaby often added another personal touch to his art. He used quilts — the ones that had been stitched by his grandmothers and had covered every bed in his childhood home — as a colorful background for a still life or a portrait. Before long, the quilts became his subjects, too. “I think it was at Yale that I decided that a quilt didn’t need anything in front of it,” he says. “I could paint it in and of itself.”

As he exhibited those paintings, Huckaby learned that others had stories to tell about their own home-made quilts and the grandmothers who created them. “At first it was a personal thing,” he says, “and I started to notice it was larger than that. This was really an art form that ordinary people did all over the United

WEB EXTRA
Watch a slide show of Sedrick Huckaby’s art at bu.edu/bostonia.

States. I wanted to speak to that.”

Huckaby doesn’t remember watching his grandmothers at their needlework, so he quizzed his aunts and uncles about the process and began to formulate an idea. The patterns and colors of early African-

American quilts are distinctly similar to another art form: jazz music. “One of the big things that defines jazz is its improvisation,” he says. “And if you look at some of the quilts, you’ll find there’s an improvisation that happens. They were making decisions as they were making the quilt. It sounded like an African-American women’s jam session.”

He turned the idea into a plan and, in 2008, won the Guggenheim fellowship, which enabled him to travel and borrow quilts from institutions such as the African American Museum and from private collectors. These he hung on his studio walls, arranging them by color and fabric to reflect the seasons, and went to work.

Huckaby says he wanted to make something monumental, a work that “totally encompasses the viewer.” The result achieves just that. Titled *A Love Supreme*, the massive painting is made up of four panels, each more than seven feet tall and twenty feet wide. He displayed the work in full for the first time in 2009, at the Danforth Museum of Art in Framingham, Massachusetts. With its great folds and vibrant colors, the painting is so realistic, according to the *Boston Globe*, “a viewer might be tempted to reach out and tug on a loose thread.”

The painting’s title is taken from the John Coltrane composition of the same name, which Huckaby had been thinking about when he started the piece. “One thing I learned to incorporate in my art was a way of having multiple meaning,” he says. “You can be talking about the seasons and about the cycles of a person’s life and about music. So, that name seemed like it had enough in it: it could reference music, it has a reference to that song, and it also references the seasons. It speaks about the jazz in terms of the jazz in the art of quilting and quilts. And in the end, it has a hint of something spiritual.” Huckaby will exhibit the work again, starting in October 2010, at the Art Museum of Southeast Texas.

He is still interested in exploring the subject of family, but in a different way. “I think where I’d like to go next is doing people in groups, families together.”

Perhaps that desire reflects his own growing family. A visiting artist at the University of Texas at Arlington, Huckaby and his wife, Letitia, also an artist, have two small children, Rising Sun and Halle-Lujah.

“I feel like the challenge for contemporary families is to keep that bond and that kind of connection to one another,” Huckaby says. “Because it seems as though the more we go forward, the more of that we lose. There aren’t many Big Mommas being born today.” ■