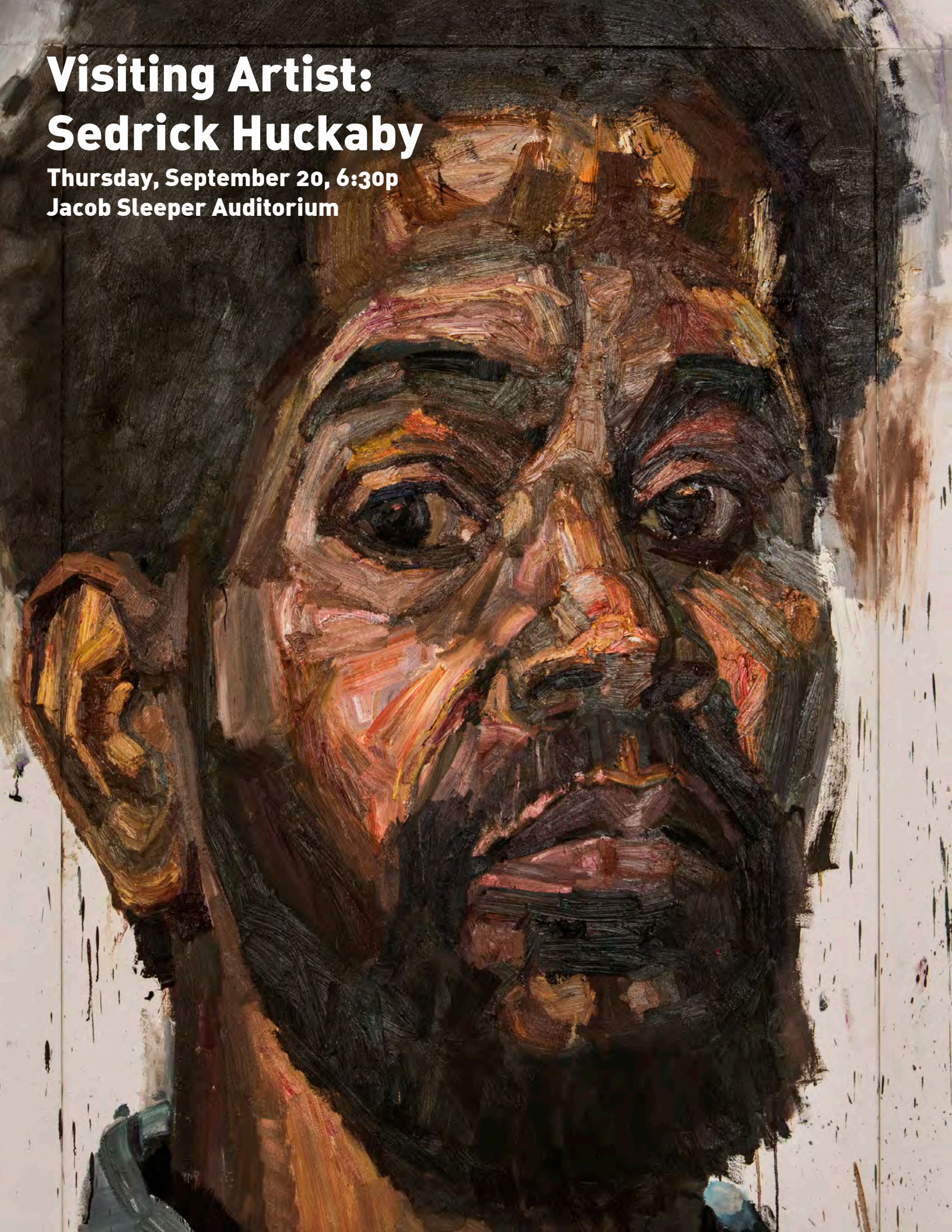
Visiting Artist: Sedrick Huckaby

Thursday, September 20, 6:30p
Jacob Sleeper Auditorium



About the artist

Sedrick Huckaby (CFA 97) is a Texas-based painter known for large-scale portraits rendered in thick impasto. His densely built-up paintings portray the artist's friends and family on a monumental scale, elevating them to the status of Renaissance icons. Huckaby's work is in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, where it was recently featured in the exhibition *Monuments to Us.* Other venues for his work include the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Minneapolis Institute of Art, and The Art Institute of Chicago, among others.

Huckaby received his BFA from Boston University in 1997, and his MFA from Yale University in 1999. He is a recipient of the Joan Mitchell Foundation Grant and a Guggenheim Fellowship.

Works

Press

“Everybody Should Want to Belong to Sedrick Huckaby’s Tribe”
by John Yau, Hyperallergic, April 2017

“A Love Supreme: The Surprising Art of Sedrick Huckaby”
by Bruce Herman, Image Journal

“Big Momma’s House: Artist Turns His Grandmother’s Humble Texas Home into a Historic Wonder”
by Catherine Anspon, Paper City Mag

“Ecstatic Dislocation: The Art of Sedrick Huckaby”
by Joe Milazzo, Image Journal

“Rattling Cages: Texas Artist Sedrick Huckaby’s New Work Portrays the Grief of Incarceration for Black Men and their Families”
by Michael Agresta, Texas Observer

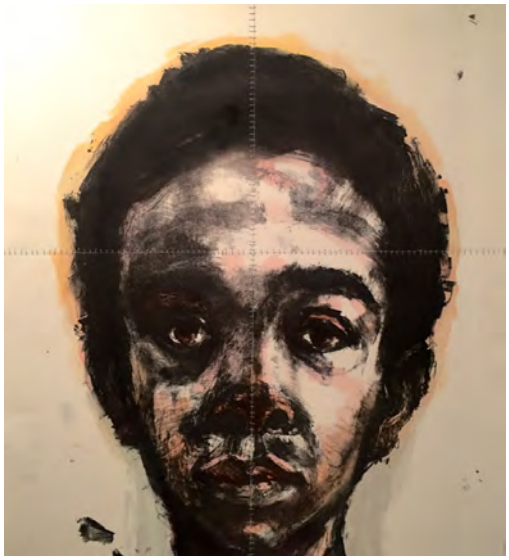
HYPERALLERGIC

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

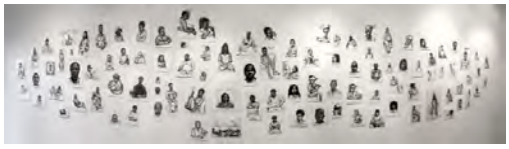


Sedrick Huckaby, "America's Son" (2016), lithograph with hand coloring, 26 1/2 x 22 inches (all images courtesy Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects)

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.



Installation view of "The 99% " (2012), 101 lithographs

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.

Sedrick Huckaby, “You thought that was a cigarette in her hand…ha, ha, ha… that was a blunt” (2012), ink on paper, 14 x 11 inches

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.

Sedrick Huckaby, “Antwone’s Family” (2016), oil on Panel and canvas

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.

Sedrick Huckaby, "If Perhaps by chance I find myself encaged" (2016), oil on canvas, oil on celluclay

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.

Sedrick Huckaby: The 99% *continues at Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects (208 Forsyth Street, Bowery, Manhattan) through April 23.*

MORE FROM HYPERALLERGIC

Love Supreme: The Surprising Art of Sedrick Huckaby

By Bruce Herman

~~This essay is a web exclusive~~ (https://imagejournal.org/article/herman-on-huckaby/) accompanying Image *journal's current issue, #90 (https://imagejournal.org/journal/issue-90/).*

Homely, decorative, domestic—that's how most of us think of quilting: something a sweet grandmother does while humming an old tune and waiting for a pie to cool on the rack. It's a comfy-seeming practice we associate with homemaking and mothering—vocations mostly overlooked and never accorded the worldly esteem we give to the artist, composer, intellectual, or CEO.

But of course we all know that it is mothers and grandmothers who carve out large spaces in their lives to nourish and raise us and set us free to write, paint, dance, read, play our music, or rule a great nation. Without mothers, we perish, yet they are routinely sidelined. We roll our eyes at their sentimentality and protective nagging.

Shattering these stereotypes and setting this serious art form front and center is the subversive painterly realist, Sedrick Huckaby (https://imagejournal.org/article/ecstatic-dislocation-art-sedrick-huckaby/).

For more than a decade, quilts and the communal ethic surrounding their making have been a major preoccupation of Huckaby's work as a painter—both at a theoretical level and in the physical stuff of his heavily painted canvases. He also makes colossal portrait heads of ordinary folk whose lives are off the radar of the star-making machinery of the art world. Yet these are Huckaby's people, whose lives and occupations are worthy of his most passionate and sustained work.

Huckaby has gotten national and international attention for his art in all the most respected museums and art venues, yet has steadfastly stuck to domestic African American life as the main source of his inspiration and practice. He calls this source "everyday glory," and he chronicles the dignity and insight and beauty produced in the world of mothers and grandmothers, in local church quilting groups, and found in the faces of ordinary folks, people working in service professions.

His monumental canvases are thickly painted with rich, nuanced color and powerfully expressive brushwork, arresting our attention and signaling significance in seemingly unimportant lives. Like Linda Loman in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman,* who poignantly cries, "Attention must be paid!" Huckaby seems to emphatically call us back from our culture

of celebrity, conspicuous consumption, and vanity.

Sedrick Huckaby is a committed Christian unashamed of his strong religious roots. His work has a kind of religious undertow—a strong, tidal pull of allusive symbolism embedded in the everyday glories he paints. One such work, *Filthy Rags of Splendor*, is remarkable for just this kind of subtle but unmistakable symbolism.

(/)

In *Splendor* the painter has constructed a giant canvas of bravura brushwork and close tonal and chromatic shades—the subject a disheveled white quilt apparently thrown across an invisible bed. At nine by nine feet, the painting envelops the viewer in a geography of folds and coruscations of brilliant but stained cloth, lovingly painted in high realism. So heavily tooled is the paint that the quilt seems to bulge and thrust itself into the viewer's space. This is no quaint product of a clichéd pastime.

Splendor has a strong composition where folds of the quilt seem to sway and thrust in a V shape, protruding in ways that evoke a tortured human body—arms spread as on a cross, though no figure is depicted. The "skin" of the quilt even feels like flesh in places, with hints of a human face in the brushstrokes. The quilt is empty (like Christ's tomb) yet the overtones of suffering and rejection—even crucifixion—are palpable in this apparently empty painting. The sufferings implied could be those of both Christ and everyman.

The very fact that the artist chose to paint a white quilt, stained and twisted and thrust into the sanitized space of the proverbial white cube of an art gallery—this is Huckaby's stock in trade: he is quietly subversive, dignifying the mundane and showing that tragedy and comedy, sadness and joy, catastrophe and redemption happen here where we live.

In *Filthy Rags of Splendor* we might well be looking at the only blanket owned by some sharecropper, worn to a mere rag. But upon close inspection we also glimpse something like the Holy Sudarium—the cloth used by Saint Veronica to wipe the bloody face of Jesus as he trudges the Via Dolorosa, and which later became a continual theophany, a showing forth of the holy face, a portrait "made without hands."

The stains and rips and frayed edges of the quilt are simply the dumb fact of wear and tear on an old bedspread, and yet they also point to the upside-down kingdom of Christ's love and sacrifice, the ultimate covering for sin—the sign of the unexpected Messiah and fulfillment of Isaiah 53: "He hath no form or comeliness that we should look upon him…no beauty that we should desire him…but he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities…."

Huckaby did his undergraduate work at my alma mater, Boston University College of Art. He later entered the prestigious MFA program in painting at Yale University, but unlike most of his fellow graduates, he never moved to one of the centers of the art world—New York or Los Angeles—but returned to his home in Dallas-Fort Worth to be near family, including his grandma, Hallie Beatrice Welcome Carpenter, "Big Momma." She is the subject of many of his paintings and a strong influence on his sense of vocation and choice of subject matter.

Sedrick Huckaby has managed to stay true to himself, his family, and to a rigorous practice of lovingly recording the world he knows with great sincerity, revealing a depth of religious wisdom seldom found in contemporary art culture, laden as it often is with fashionable irony. His homage to the mothers of his community, to their great care and sacrifice, and his tough and painterly brand of realism point to a great love, a compelling vision of faith and yearning.

In this, his work echoes John Coltrane's masterpiece *A Love Supreme,* the title of which Huckaby borrowed a few years back for a major project—an eighty-foot, four-paneled painting partly funded by the Guggenheim Foundation. As a painter myself, and one committed to attempting the seemingly impossible task of renewing sacred imagery in our times, I find the work of this younger painter powerfully motivating—and deeply encouraging. He richly deserves the widespread critical acclaim and success that his art is garnering.

Image above is Sedrick Huckaby's *Filthy Rags of Splendor*, 2011. Oil on canvas on panel. 108 x 108 inches. Courtesy of

ARTS (/CATEGORY/ARTS/) / MUSEUMS (/CATEGORY/ARTS/MUSEUMS/)

Big Momma's House

Artist Turns His Grandmother's Humble Texas Home Into a Historic Wonder

BY CATHERINE D. ANSPON (HTTPS://WWW.PAPERCITYMAG.COM/AUTHOR/CATHERINEPAPERCITYMAG-COM/) // 11.09.16

PHOTOGRAPHY MAX BURKHALTER

Artist Sedrick Huckaby

(https://www.papercitymag.com/)

*IN A HUMBLE FORT WORTH NEIGHBORHOOD, ARTIST **SEDRICK HUCKABY** HAS RECLAIMED HIS GRANDMOTHER'S HOUSE.*

Painter Sedrick Huckaby flies under the radar. He's a modest, earnest man with a direct gaze, unmistakable intelligence, and the convictions of a pragmatic idealist. His understated nature stands in contrast to his art-world credentials: This year alone has seen his series "The 99%" paired with Glenn Ligon's work in a special exhibition mounted by the Amon Carter Museum of American Art in Fort Worth, as well as inclusion and commendation in the prestigious Outwin Boochever Portrait Competition at the National Portrait (http://npg.si.edu/)Gallery, Washington, D.C. (a museum under the auspices of the Smithsonian; the exhibit tours nationally).

(http://3q87le1gsko01ibim33e4wib-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/125-6x9-ftworth_july16-9.jpg)

(http://3q87le1gsko01ibim33e4wib-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/125-6x9-ftworth_july16-9.jpg) At Big Momma's House, a 2016 portrait of Huckaby's wife, artist Letitia Huckaby, stands watch.

In an era of painters and the embrace of the figure, Huckaby could have punched a big ticket to anywhere in the art world. But after earning his MFA from Yale, he returned home to Fort Worth, where he has exhibited since 2005 at Valley House Gallery, and reared a family with wife and artist Letitia Huckaby (http://www.dallasnews.com/arts/visual-arts/2016/07/15/art-emerges-force-helping-heal-wounded-dallas), who also has a respected trajectory.

His purpose for being in Texas came into focus after his maternal grandmother, Hallie Beatrice Carpenter, passed away in 2008, and he inherited her historic house in the Poly neighborhood of Fort Worth. Its interiors, as well as Carpenter herself, are the subject of his most memorable canvases. Huckaby contemplated the next step for the homestead, a circa-1901 domicile on two acres of land in a deeply rooted African-American neighborhood, at the moment little gentrified.

Within Big Momma's House, you can see an environment best understood when viewed in the grand sequence of art history. Its sense of place, time, eternity, and community is every bit the equal of Rick Lowe's Project Row Houses in Houston, and James Magee's The Hill in West Texas.

All of these artistic parallels the artist mentions in our discussion about his influences. He also cites a pivotal European sojourn in 2000 to France, Italy, and Spain. "To see the El Grecos, you have to travel to a city that you can only walk into

— Toledo. It's quite a journey to see some of those works and how they are placed. Really, the idea for Big Mom- ma's House started there," Huckaby elaborates further about the years-in-process vision.

(https://www.papercitymag.com/)

He has been working on the home since the fall of 2010. The time-worn homestead was his grandmother's domain for decades — the seat of a matriarchal kingdom where a brood of eight children, even more grandchildren, and their large extended family met for holidays, entertainments, advice sessions, and impromptu gatherings.

"There's that idea in Big Momma's House that a person has to come to this certain spot to see what's going on — and something about the journey is important, and something about place being important," Huckaby says,

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(http://3q87le1gsko01ibim33e4wib-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/117-6x9-NEW-ftworth_july16-53.jpg) In a chapel-like space within the house, Huckaby's portraits of his aunts. From left, "Jeanette, Net, Nanna"; and "Alice, Prophetess Jones," both painted 2013.

Big Momma also watched young Huckaby after school until his parents returned from work. The painter recalls that some of his first drawings of fellow family members were made within the walls of the upright Victorian.

The stalwart Big Momma was the subject of her own exhibition, “Big Momma’s House,” in 2008 at Valley House. Huckaby made the moving meditation on her passing, showing her final days bed bound in the home, as well as her hands on the Bible. Her visage was faithfully recorded in heroically scaled canvases, as were the unadorned domestic details of her dwelling, including the faded chair that took on the air of a throne while dissolving into abstraction due to Huckaby’s virtuoso display of paint handling, becoming both object and subject.

(https://www.papercitymag.com/)

The crumbling Victorian structure has been taken down to its bones — a labor of love equal to a purification ritual. What remains are the walls, natural light (our first visit was sans electricity, and even in the twilight, the rooms shone with pearly rays), and honest materials, especially the shiplap and wide floor beams that would be hard to duplicate today. Huckaby hints at redemption with well-worn pews preserved from his own church’s congregation, reused here to create a beautiful chapel that symbolizes the riches that lie within unadorned human interiors — a central tenet of his artistic practice that underpins his life as a painter.

(http://3q87le1gsko01ibim33e4wib-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/119-6x9-ftworth_july16-57.jpg)

(http://3q87le1gsko01ibim33e4wib-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/119-6x9-ftworth_july16-57.jpg) Big Momma’s House has been taken down to its bare walls.

Big Momma's House will be open to the public when Huckaby perceives the time is right. What does the house signify? Huckaby's carefully chosen words are weighted with conviction.

"There's this whole idea of place and what it can mean and how it can affect the way we perceive both art and how it simply affects us," he says. "With the house, I think like a painter on the one hand … I don't want to say community activist, but an idealist on the other hand. I'm constantly searching for how to make art have a profound effect upon people.

"In terms of art, I don't know that we've asked all the questions of what all it can do and be in a society and culture. For example, if we look at Houston, and we look at Project Row Houses (http://projectrowhouses.org/), what exactly is the art and what is it doing? Project Row Houses is not going to break those houses down and take them down to the museum, but it is helping transform that area of Houston. Who would have thought that art can do that? I try to ask those kinds of questions and push [art].

"We think of it as objects of contemplation, and definitely that is important. But what if, let's say, Big Momma's House can be a place that is a catalyst for transformation of that entire community? Can art do that?"

FEATURED PROPERTIES

Essay

Ecstatic Dislocation: The Art of Sedrick Huckaby

Joe Milazzo | Issue 90 (https://imagejournal.org/issue/issue-90/)

IN 2016, SAINT PATRICK'S DAY falls on a Thursday, bringing with it an early weekend. In the aftermath of apocalyptic north-central Texas thunderstorms, a sultry heat settles on the quiet residential street in Fort Worth where artist Sedrick Huckaby is hard at work preparing for his next exhibition. Huckaby is a painter, sculptor, and printmaker whose works can be found in the permanent holdings of the San Francisco MOMA, the Whitney and Boston's Museum of Fine Arts. We've agreed to meet here, in the predominantly African American neighborhood where he grew up, so that he can show me a very unusual building that's been at the center of his art-making for a decade: Big Momma's House.

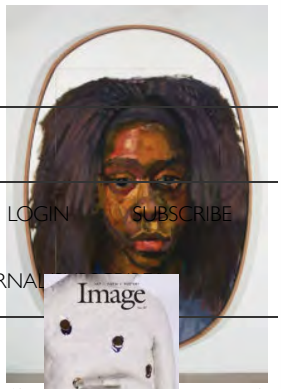
Against all the obstacles presented to her by Jim Crow Texas, Hallie Beatrice Welcome Carpenter maintained her own home in south Fort Worth. It's a house Huckaby knows intimately: Hallie Carpenter, also known as Big Momma, was his grandmother, and she raised several generations of children there. Since her passing, Huckaby and his brother have been renovating it, and dreaming about how Big Momma's House might be used as a space where art can offer transformation and healing to the surrounding community. In 2008, it was the subject of an exhibition of Huckaby's work. More than a building, the house feels like a person, a body that bears all the marks of its history. The more Huckaby exposes its scaffolding and hollows, the more he reveals how its bones have been broken and reset, the more it reverberates with mystery.

There is no name or category for a space like this. Big Momma's House will not be a gallery, nor a studio, nor an installation, but something more like a theater. One room has been filled with pews and a pulpit recovered from the church of Huckaby's childhood. It is a testament to Huckaby's patience and abiding care for the complicated integrity of Big Momma's neighborhood—one that outsiders might see as "disadvantaged" or in need of "revitalization"—that he is willing to take as long as he needs to figure out how best to use the space. The integration of his artistic practice with his social conscience is always evolving.

Though he rarely talks about his art in political terms, Huckaby has said, "The African American experience—our struggles, advancements, curiosities, culture, faith, and families—has always been the great story of my work." His work honors the creativity of generations of African Americans who were victims of one of humanity's great crimes, people once

deemed property who have preserved their story in every sort of artistic medium and form, and in so doing have influenced storytelling the world over. Black Americans have had to exercise daily creativity in order to survive in a world that is modulous to the simple act of black self-definition. Huckaby's work is a celebration of those creative acts.

As he and I drive together from Big Momma's House to his studio, he shares early memories of the people and places along our route. It becomes clear that his definition of community is very specific to Fort Worth. This is the community that provided him with his earliest examples of what it means to labor, to make, to invent, to thrive, and to endure.



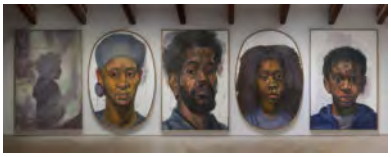
(https://imagejournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Sedrick-Huckaby-Halle-painting-portrait-girl.jpg)

Sedrick Huckaby. **The Family: Halle Lujah**, *2016. Oil and CelluClay on canvas on panel. 95 x 64 1/2 inches.*

The theme of endurance is perhaps most apparent in his portraits. Take for example *The Family: Halle Lujah*, one of a series of paintings in his latest exhibition at Valley House Gallery in Dallas, titled *Three Forbidden F Words: Faith, Family, and Fathers*. I first saw this portrait of the artist's young daughter at Big Momma's House. At eight feet high, *The Family: Halle Lujah* initially impresses with its sheer size. Despite its heroic scale, other aspects of the work give it a more private feel. The portrait's oval frame is a simple, handcrafted hoop of wood whose shape evokes a cameo. Here the artist renders the intimacy he shares with his daughter in a form so expansive that we might almost walk right into it. But it is an intimacy all the same, and while we are welcome here, we are also being asked to remember that we see the girl through a stranger's eyes.

The work is complexly textured, painted in vigorous impasto and built up in places with judicious application of CelluClay, a brand of "instant papier-mâché" that includes recycled paper. (Salvage and reclamation are themes to which Huckaby frequently returns.) His daughter faces forward, neutral and composed. Her gaze seems not to stop at the picture plane but to rest somewhere outside of the painting, behind the viewer. Perhaps Huckaby is painting not only his daughter but an entire generation of young African Americans who gaze out at their future with hope and anxiety.

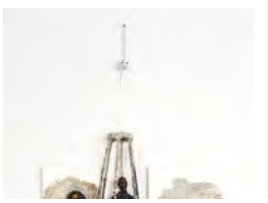
We cannot pretend to be colorblind in looking at any of these portraits. Huckaby paints the faces of black people, but in their technical execution, his portraits also expose the fiction of describing skin in terms of a single color. If we treat this girl's face as an abstract composition, we see oils in a vibrant palette curving across a background that is not so much white as empty. Umbers and ochres predominate in her complexion, but their harmoniousness depends upon an unfolding counterpoint of yellows, reds, greens, and blues. The bands of color in her forehead, cheeks, and mouth recall the Pan-African flag—in which blackness is positioned between the red of bloodshed and the green of the earth on which the blood has fallen. Huckaby uses green for shadows and reds for highlights: warm and cool.



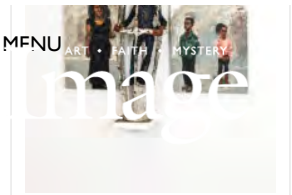
(https://imagejournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Three-Forbidden-F-Words-Faith-Family-and-Fathers-by-Sedrick-Huckaby_1200.jpg)

Sedrick Huckaby. **Three Forbidden Words: Faith, Family, and Fathers**, *2016.*

Huckaby seems to see his subjects through the complications of a love both personal and impersonal. Are the cultural differences between Huckaby, a black painter, and me, a white viewer, surmountable? I want to believe so, but the sense of deep and complex love in this portrait reminds me that I'm looking in from the outside. I want to resist the temptation to try to impose understanding upon my perceptions before they've even had a chance to develop. Witness first, testify later.



Physically much smaller but equally ambitious in scope is *If Perhaps by Chance, I Find Myself Encaged…*, a sort of triptych whose central sculptural element resists integration into the portraiture around it. On painted panels, a woman and her children, rendered with Huckaby's customary realism, flank a nearly monochromatic, faceless, almost allegorical male figure. The man's Giacometti-thin body is molded again from CelluClay, which also covers the bars that confine him. The rough shaping gives a deceptive weight and luster to the light material



(https://imagejournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Sedrick-Huckaby-Encaged_2-Photo-by-Teresa-Rafidi-lightened-20.jpg)

Sedrick Huckaby. **If Perhaps by Chance, I Find Myself Encaged...**, *2016. Oil on canvas, oil wood, wire, and CelluClay. 38 1/2 x 37 x 11 inches. Photo: Teresa Rafidi.*

confine him. The rough shaping gives a deceptive weight and luster to the light material, accentuated by encrusted oil paint. On examination, however, the thick surfaces have a hollow feeling. What at first resembles concrete seems as if it could crumble at a touch.

As with the portrait of his daughter, the framing devices are an important part of this work's meaning. The caged figure is suspended by a thin wire, but it also rests upon an improvised pedestal. Is it heavy or light? This group portrait is of a family both burdened and bereft, reckoning with the emptiness of the man's absence as well as the weight of the reality that took him away in the first place.

Sedrick Huckaby has chosen to make art about a subject—the mass incarceration of black men—which American society has mostly proved incapable of addressing. The power of his accomplishment is perhaps most evident in the incredible subtlety of expression he grants this family. There is no vanity in the three portraits, only character. To the man's left, his wife, who may be pregnant, stares dead ahead, her eyes defiant. She reaches out to him, but the edge of the canvas cuts off her hand—perhaps an ironic reference to the draconian style of justice favored by proponents of mandatory sentencing. This woman has incurred an unjust punishment through a law that robs her of her husband, the father of her children. But still she reaches for him; the two are linked in a way the man no longer is to his children.

The boy and girl stand to his right, facing slightly away from each other. The painter's skilled use of linear perspective makes them recede slightly. The son looks up at his father with a mix of curiosity, sullenness, and disbelief. The hands thrust in his jacket pockets prefigure the resentful adolescent to come. His younger sister feels even more isolated, though her stance echoes her mother's. Her eyes are cast back toward her father even as her face is turned away. Is she afraid to appraise him and his situation? How much of his situation can she comprehend? Does she feel nothing but shame? With her hands clasped in front of her, she looks as though she wants to collapse in on herself.

As I spend more time with the painting, the color seems to grow more intense. The woman is dressed in layers of reflective black, the paint showing the traces of the brush used to apply it. The boy's jacket vibrates with dense yet translucent, stippled greens, and the rose pink of his sister's shirt is rendered with a kind of cangiantismo (exaggerated color contrast in the style of Michaelangelo). The colors are pastoral, and also liturgical, as if the family members are marking the psychological seasons—from innocence to grief—of what is, after all, a ritual for many black Americans. A man is arrested, "processed," and transformed from a father, husband, brother, son, and neighbor into a convict.

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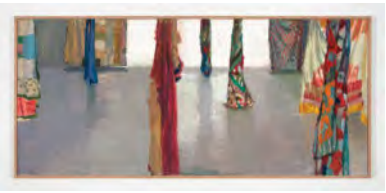
Huckaby's prolific output is diverse in form. His works vary in scale from monumental portraits pulsing with color to medium-sized pen and ink studies to improvisations torn from minuscule sketchbooks. He works on paper, canvas, and hunks of reclaimed wood. His portraits often incorporate text as well. He talks with his subjects as he draws and paints them, and sometimes records their words at the edges of the portraits.

As I study the body of his work, certain postures and poses recur. Like John Coltrane (from whom he has drawn inspiration) in his *Sheets of Sound* period, Huckaby is a vertical thinker. His compositions depend upon variations on the idea of stacking—of layers of paint in Rothko-like oblongs, of thematic preoccupations, and of entire artistic traditions. His series of portraits build meticulously upon each other, but they also respond each to each in a lateral conversation. Even the sculptural elements of *Encaged* can be seen as a diagram of the invisible flow between lower and upper sections, as the man seems to strain upward. The barely perceptible arch of his back doesn't evoke pride, a chest thrust forward, so much as stretching on tiptoe to peer over some obstruction. Or perhaps he is being pulled up by his hair, as if under interrogation.

It is in Huckaby's numerous paintings of quilts that one feels the power of these vertical relationships most acutely. The

quilt paintings operate on a dizzying number of levels. Quilting is a textile art tradition that bridges continents as well as generations. At one level, the quilt paintings are extremely personal, like portraits of the women in his family via their hard-won work. Quilts evoke comfort, warmth, safety, intimacy, and rest. They are maternal love and work in physical form. Yet quilts are more than privately symbolic. Quilts are an entire cosmology, a visual form elaborately developed over centuries of tradition interrupted as well as uninterrupted, a language for telling stories via template and juxtaposition.



(https://imagejournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Secret-Place-Sedrick-Huckaby.jpg)

Sedrick Huckaby. **Secret Places**, *2016. Oil on canvas on panel. 48 x 108 inches.*

In one sense, the quilt paintings are assemblage. The large canvas *Secret Place* documents an actual space, a room in which Huckaby has deliberately hung a number of quilts sewn by his wife, mother, grandmother, aunts, and other women in his family. I cannot help but think of the work of Thornton Dial, the pioneering self-taught African American assemblage artist who died earlier this year. Both artists are world-builders, embracing the tensions inherent in that endeavor.

On the one hand, things are what they are: to make his art, Dial scavenged and repurposed items from his day job building railroad cars in Alabama. On the other hand, in assemblage, things have transactional purposes. We understand one thing in terms of another, so that creation can become Creation. Significance depends on pattern and principle. Dial's forms are biomorphic and weirdly fractal. In the welter of buckets, bedsprings, toy carcasses, television antennae, rags, rope, and screens, the micro- and the macrocosmic become indistinguishable. In the words of curator Joanne Cubbs, Dial's unclassifiable art is "so metaphysical it almost hurts your head."

A similar ecstatic dislocation looms in Huckaby's quilt paintings (https://imagejournal.org/article/herman-on-huckaby/). Are these really quilts in *Secret Place,* or are they curtains, tent walls, or pillars? From where does the light flooding this space emanate? As the title makes clear, this is a sacred space, a temple. (The allusion is to Psalm 27: "In the secret place of his tent he will hide me.") How does a space become sacred? In the lower right quadrant, threads of orange-gold paint run from a quilt's edge to the bottom of the canvas. The quilt may be frayed, or these may simply be expressive drips of paint. As a pictorial element, they exist somewhere between expression and representation, between what can be verified by sight and what can only be understood through the imagination. Perhaps it's the simultaneity of these modes that enables us to enter into a sacred space.

(https://imagejournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Sedrick-Huckaby-Glory-to-Glory.jpg)

Sedrick Huckaby. **From Glory to Glory**, *2016. Oil on canvas on panel. 80 x 30 inches.*

In one sense *Secret Place* is an abstract work; that is, its subject matter—the quilts themselves—is abstract. Other quilt paintings have a more overtly abstract feel. *From Glory to Glory* also alludes to scripture in its title: "But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord" (2 Corinthians 3:18). In this painting, the quilt or quilts undergo a transformation as they rise in a narrow column. The textures and colors shift as the eye ascends. We seem to be in the presence of a kind of transfiguration. What is muddy and coarse below reaches greater illumination and refinement above. The lozenge-like forms that waver across the upper canvas resemble panes of stained glass. They also reveal Huckaby's conversation with the so-called abstract impressionist canvases Philip Guston painted from the mid-1950s through mid-1960s. Both the close clustering of forms in a mosaic-like grid and the color schemes that define the painting's upper and lower halves feel Guston-like. Taken as a body, Huckaby's quilt paintings also echo Guston in their use of repetition. Both artists obsessively explore a handful of images over many works; like Guston, Huckaby sings his refrains. Huckaby plumbs the mystery of being "changed into the same image"—not within a single canvas but across canvases.

From Glory to Glory could be read as all foreground. The only horizon in the painting is drawn so low that, by the time we make our way to the top of the painting, we've forgotten that we were ever on the ground at all. But *From Glory to Glory* is also all background, a wash of texture and color. Quilts, for Sedrick Huckaby, exemplify beauty as much as Guston's (or Michelangelo's, or Rembrandt's or Mark Rothko's) "high art." Huckaby has been looking at these quilts all his life. He has seen them—and showed them back to himself through his paintings—so many times that they're present to him all the time. Through that

showed them back to himself through his paintings—so many times that they're present to him all the time. Through that repetition, they accrete meaning. The paintings work the same way. These patches of carmine and turquoise and white, these bands of paint and the warp and woof of canvas, all these details, like quilts, must be re-seen, reimagined, reckoned with. Again, what makes something sacred? Huckaby's quilt paintings propose that through sustained attention, the mundane can become transcendent.

As an artist committed to telling and retelling the African American story, Sedrick Huckaby understands how painful incremental change can be. At the recent Valley House show, an entire room was given over to a series of works on paper entitled *A Dialogue with an Unknown People*. Based in part on photographs from the collection of the Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth, these paintings take their inspiration from stereoscopic images of African Americans living in a small Kansas community around the turn of the twentieth century. Huckaby writes that these photographs presented him with the challenge of "mak[ing] connections between the images of the past and present lives of everyday people."

(https://imagejournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Sedrick-Huckaby-Sisters-Photo-by-David-Wharton.jpg)

Sedrick Huckaby. **A Dialogue with an Unknown People: Two Sisters**, *2015. Mixed media on paper. 12 x 15 inches.*

In *Two Sisters,* a modern young woman in a bright blue graduation gown smiles, proudly holding a diploma. In a split panel to her right, an anonymous woman sits for her portrait. Her hands are folded in her lap, and her expression is slightly dour, but she somehow radiates a comparable sense of pride. Huckaby's description of the original photographs is illuminating: "Fading in and out of the misty charcoal gray hues are men and women, children and babies with heads held high, facing the light, boasting proud demeanors." This woman's dress has much to do with the impression of pride. Its tight collar and cuffs are understated but formal, its buttons opalescent, giving her a polished, self-contained look. While the modern graduate meets our eye, engaging us, this woman looks slightly away and beyond us, lost in her own thoughts. It's tempting to try to treat this as a true stereoscopic image, to merge the two into a single portrait that will tell us something about the experience of black women past and present. But that's not possible; despite a shared history and a shared genealogy, they remain individuals, not types. The wide gulf of time is underscored by the contrast between the "misty charcoal" of the past and the bright hues of the present. Although *Two Sisters* is a celebration of achievement, this double-portrait also reveals something about how slowly history has moved for black Americans.

At our present cultural moment, when the question of how we value black lives is so urgent, it feels necessary if not entirely fair to ask: how political is Sedrick Huckaby's art? I have written, rewritten, and scrapped entire essays attempting to address that question. In my conversations with the artist, we haven't discussed this directly—not so much out of discomfort or even Dixified politesse, I think, but because the only common vocabulary for such a discussion is in the images Huckaby makes. And that vocabulary is remarkably free of grievance. In any case, he prefers to defy expectations. As he says when I ask him about what looks like a certain restlessness about media, "you can draw with anything."

Huckaby's joyful concern for images is what I most appreciate in his work. Throughout his oeuvre, marks made on a surface yield a generative experience for image-maker and image-receiver alike. However, I do not doubt that Huckaby's work has deep political implications. His love and the sense of responsibility he demonstrates for his community and its hard-won culture are palpable in everything he makes. For Huckaby, this love finds its expression first and foremost in the simple act of making images, an ability that can never be destroyed or taken away. He doesn't mount spectacles, nor does he simply mirror what he sees around him. Rather, the act of looking in a sustained and loving way at the people and artifacts of his longtime community, combined with a faith in the power of image-making, consecrates his work and gives it a power beyond the merely documentary or conceptual. As he said of one unfinished abstract piece on which he was working: "The closer you get, the more faithful it becomes. The more you pay attention, the more it repays you with its attentiveness. So, really, it's all a matter of devotion."

Letitia and Sedrick Huckaby: An Artist Couple Reaches Into Shared Memory For Inspiration

BY PETER SIMEK | PUBLISHED IN ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT | APRIL 23, 2010 | 11:57 AM

RATING

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LOCATION

South Dallas Cultural Center

3400 S. Fitzhugh Ave.
Dallas, TX 75210

DATES

Mar 13 — Apr 24

When it comes to an artist couple, it is almost as fascinating to watch the relationship between the two unfold through their work as it is to focus on them as individual artists. Often with romantic pairs, ideas cross-pollinate. One affects the other's style and form, and in some cases, two minds seem to merge into a single artistic force. Think Jean Claude and Cristo, Gilbert and George, Pablo Picasso and Dora Maar, Lee Krasner and Jackson Pollock.

While Letitia Huckaby, who has a show on view at the South Dallas Cultural Center, and her husband Sedrick, who recently exhibited at the McKinney Avenue Contemporary, haven't yet collaborated on any specific works, it's impossible not to see that the bodies of work of these Fort Worth-based artists are growing closer together. Sedrick's latest exhibition represented a momentous step forward in terms of style and content. He moved away from his customary vignettes of home life, often populated with iconic images of African-American culture, and began to focus on one image in particular: handmade quilts that have been passed down by his family as heirlooms. Working on large wall-sized canvases, Sedrick's paintings create huge and fascinating emotional landscapes by focusing on the shape and color-shifting form of quilts made with found materials.

Sedrick Huckaby with "A Love Supreme" (Image courtesy of the McKinney Avenue Contemporary)

The image of the quilt forms an obvious parallel with Letitia Huckaby's work at the South Dallas Cultural Center. In her exhibit, the photographer displays sculptural-like dresses made of quilt materials, and framed quilts made of various fabrics, with photographs printed on them. The images have been reconfigured and stitched together. Both artists are

dealing with ideas of incarnation – memory embodied in physical objects. They are each questioning how the ritual of handing down, across time and generations, causes objects to become more than objects. Both also call attention to the handcrafted quilts themselves as the art of their ancestors. By repositioning these crafted objects in the context of their own artistic form, for Sedrick painting and for Letitia photography, they manage to elevate the objects themselves to the level of art. These representations of quilts and quilt making remove functionality from the idea of the quilt, thus making the heirlooms function the incarnate objects the Huckabys see them to be.

For Letitia, her current body of work represents an artistic development that would have been unthinkable had it not been for her relationship with her husband.

Letitia Huckaby: In undergrad I was doing more documentary-type photography. Sedrick was painting quilts, so I was around quilts a lot. Then my father died shortly before I started graduate school. He was from this small town in Mississippi that was the fourth largest producer of cotton in the country. After he passed, it got me to thinking about where I was from and how I got to be where I was. And I started to look at the quilts [Sedrick] was painting differently. They started having more meaning to me, and so I wanted to start playing with that. And I started experimenting with images on fabric, and then quilting them together.

Sedrick Huckaby: I've been putting [quilts] in my paintings for years. Originally they were backdrops in different paintings, and we got them in the family. So we slept in them when we went to my grandparents' house. And they end up being backdrops, and then at some point, I think during grad school, I decided the quilts were enough of a subject not to be the backdrop, but to be the subject of a painting too. And that came about through mostly cultural study. I started to realize

that we always sort of liked the quilts – we had them around, they were sort of family heirlooms. But after studying, I started to realize that they were my grandmother's art. And so it was something to be an artist, and this became an opportunity to investigate a kind of family legacy through art. Hers was quilt making, and mine is painting. So it was a kind of dialogue. And the interesting thing that happened to me at some point is what started off as a personal investigation, I began to show the quilts around, and I began to find out that this history of quilt making was something that had a profound effect on so many people.

Letitia Huckaby: I had a quilt from my great grandmother that I had in my room as an undergrad in Austin. But for me it was just a blanket at the time. I didn't really start thinking about it as art until after I was with [Sedrick], and I started losing family members: that this was handmade for use and these things get handed down, very similar to the things that you learn in a family – your faith, or how to raise your kids, your personality. The quilt is a kind of physical representation of that, and it is a beautiful art piece in its own right, that they just took and made out of scraps and made something beautiful. So for me, I use the quilt a lot as a compositional tool, referencing sort of a conversation between them and me making art – sort of what he was saying about her art and his art. I use the patterns and the way they lay things out and incorporate them into my photographs.

Main images: From Letitia Huckaby's series "LA 19."