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# Sedrick Huckaby Paints a Legacy – And Passes It On

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by [Shilo Urban](#) / March 11, 2020



Sedrick Huckaby is one of Fort Worth's most accomplished artists. His works hang in America's finest museums. He's won almost every major art grant on the planet. He's even George W. Bush's art teacher.



photo credit: Shannon Lange Photography

But his greatest achievement is giving voice to the overlooked, overworked, and oppressed through art with a powerful presence and an unshakable belief of every person's unconditional worth.

Huckaby is doing things his way and reaping the rewards of his authentic vision and dedication to his craft. Instead of playing to the market, he creates art from his soul, with a focus that revolves around faith, family, and community. Inspired by his family's artistic heritage and the African American narrative, the father of three has seized every opportunity to create a successful career. Now he's giving back to the Fort Worth community that has given him so much.

Born in Fort Worth in 1975, Huckaby's impressive credentials include a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Joan Mitchell Foundation Grant, and a Lewis Comfort Tiffany Award – three of the art world's most prestigious prizes. After launching his professional studies at Texas Wesleyan University, he earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Boston University and a Master of Fine Arts from Yale. His paintings can be found in the country's foremost museum collections, including the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C. Now working as an art professor at the University of Texas at Arlington, Huckaby was named the Texas State Artist in 2018.

Huckaby creates captivating sculptures, drawings, prints, and installations. But he's best known for his richly textured oil paintings. He's a master of impasto, a robust technique that employs thickly layered paint, sometimes up to three inches deep. It gives his paintings an undeniable weight and dimensionality that complements their complex substance. However, his profound presence imbues Huckaby's work in every medium and is particularly evident in a set of black-and-white lithographs called "The 99% – Highland Hills."

Recently acquired by the Amon Carter Museum of American Art for their permanent collection, "The 99%" installation drew inspiration from 2011's Occupy Wall Street movement. It features 101 portraits of Huckaby's neighbors from Highland Hills, a predominately black community in south Fort Worth. "We knew that the series was virtually unprecedented in the field of contemporary printmaking... as a collective and individual portrait of a local community that explores contemporary meanings of identity," explains Shirley Reece-Hughes, Curator at the Amon Carter Museum. "Huckaby often incorporated quotes by each of the sitters, which deepens our connection to the image and person."



photo credit: Shannon Lange Photography

"The 99%" is a true slice-of-life with a veritable sense of place. With unique poses and preoccupations, the figures ponder everything from world peace to vegetable gardens, allergy season to seven children, prayerful hopes to pork chops for lunch. They share quiet worries, yearn for loved ones, and boast with youthful confidence. Yet shining through them all is the inherent value that they share as human beings, a palpable feeling expressed through Huckaby's detailed strokes. Together, it's a chorus that sings the story of the community.

Little details become potent emotional vehicles in Huckaby's hands, just as ordinary people are given the acknowledgment they deserve. His celebrated series "Big Momma's House" captures vivid memories of his grandmother's home during the final years of her life. Tiny shoes line up by a striped couch. Curling photos frame a mirror with family faces. Crinkled hands rest on an open Bible, peaceful and still beside the scarlet words of Jesus. Huckaby spent many hours in this home as a child. He'd walk over after school, hanging out with his grandmother until his parents could pick him up. "She always encouraged not only me, but all of her kids and grandkids and great-grandkids, in anything positive that they were doing," he recalls.

Huckaby's other grandmother, Mama Sarah, inspired his monumental painting "A Love Supreme." Stretching 80 feet long and 8 feet high, this opus elevates to new heights a humble domestic icon: the quilt. "Mama Sarah was the quilter" in the family, he says. Quilts embody familial

love and cozy nights, childhood memories of grandmother's house. They are often handed down for generations; most Texas homes today have an ancestral quilt stored somewhere in a closet or a chest. Like many of us, Huckaby slept under quilts at grandma's house as a child.

Today, quilts are one of Huckaby's greatest preoccupations as a painter, but they started as an afterthought. "Initially in my work, they were in the backgrounds of the pieces, because [Mama Sarah] gave quilts to all of her children, and so my parents had some. I would borrow them and put them in the painting." Soon Huckaby realized that his backdrops were artistic treasures themselves.





photo credit: Shannon Lange Photography

“As I learned more about art... I could see how there were all kinds of creative cultural and aesthetic things that were passed down through those quilts,” he says. Bringing the backdrop to the forefront, he began painting the family’s quilts as a conversation with Mama Sarah. “I saw [quilts] as an art form that she did. I wanted to have a conversation with her, as an artist and as a quilter, about the aesthetic qualities that I recognized in those pieces — aesthetic qualities that were handed down to her.”

Huckaby's large-scale images of quilts are created with thick daubs of paint that give the heavy folds and patchwork pieces a sculptural quality. His vibrant colors and expressive brushwork call attention to the artistry of the textiles and of the women who made them. "You'll find different narratives being told through the act of quilt making," Huckaby explains.

Quilts loom large in the story of American folk art, from the Puritans' functional bedcovers to the decorative textiles of the early 1900s. They evoke the very idea of America itself: many different pieces that come together into a beautiful new whole, each piece connected yet retaining its unique characteristics. For three centuries, women across the country crafted homespun quilts to keep their families warm and to express themselves through their handiwork.

Often made with fabric scraps or bits of old clothing, quilts hold the memories of the women who made them. They tell stories about family members and past events, all stitched together into new hope for the future: warm nights for loved ones and happy days ahead. Crafted through hours of painstaking effort, a quilt is much more than a source of comfort. It is a physical manifestation of care, patience, and effort made on behalf of another. A grandmother's virtue. A love supreme.

Deeply woven into America's cultural history, quilting has a distinct importance for the African American community. "African Americans have a particular connection because there are some quilting forms, like patchwork quilts, that have certain African aesthetics embedded in them," Huckaby says. "Not only African aesthetics, but they also embedded certain ideas that were a prevalent part of the African American community."

Strip-pieced quilts often featured the asymmetrical patterns, large-scale designs, and celebratory colors of African textiles. Experiences of migration and settlement were expressed through appliqué designs. Quilts are a tangible link to African heritage, as well as a powerful symbol of the community's ability to patch together the pieces and create something new. With innovative talents for multiple patterning and improvisation, African Americans developed a unique quilting tradition and handed it down, one generation to the next.

But long before Huckaby understood the cultural legacy of his family's quilts, he dreamt under them, cradled to sleep in the unconditional love that grandmothers are so good at passing down. Encouraged by his family, Huckaby's creative path was further propelled by local art programs that provided training, mentorship, and connections with other young artists. He competed in ACT-SO (the Afro-Academic, Cultural, Technological, and Scientific Olympics) hosted by the Tarrant County chapter of the NAACP. "If you competed in ACT-SO and won locally, and your work was up to the right stature, then you could compete nationally. I did that two years, and that



was a wonderful experience," he remembers. "I met poets and writers, orators and singers and musicians."



photo credit: Shannon Lange Photography

Another Fort Worth youth organization called Imagination Celebration introduced Huckaby to one of his greatest mentors, local artist and educator Ron Tomlinson. Huckaby took his first painting



classes from Tomlinson in back rooms at the Modern Art Museum. "Ron would take us down into the museum and show us paintings and talk to us about them," Huckaby recalls. "[He] went on to be a mentor and guide in painting, up until a couple of years ago when he passed away. He was always somebody who I would come back to even after I was an adult, to look at his work and to talk to him about art."

This early mentorship helped Huckaby to hone his natural talents and gain artistic confidence, bestowing another layer of blessings alongside his grandmothers' encouraging words and love-crafted quilts. Each has passed down to him a legacy that's interwoven with his artistic values today. Now Huckaby is stepping up to continue handing down the things that have meant so much to him to his students, his community, and his family.

He stays busy with his three children, Rising Sun, Halle Lujah, and Rhema Rain. Huckaby's wife Letitia is a successful artist in her own right, a photographer whose multimedia and textile works also draw inspiration from her family narratives and African American heritage. Together they are bringing up children who are supported in their creative pursuits and interests of every variety, from computer coding and cross-country running to horseback riding and lacrosse.

The couple is also passing on the principles that have guided their lives towards the good. "Love God, and love people," Huckaby says. "Those two things go hand in hand, and I think that's two of the most important values to hand down. You can't hate people and say you love God, and you can't love God if you don't love people," he says, referring to 1 John 4:20 – For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen.

Just as Huckaby aims to inspire love in his children, he aims to inspire passion in his art students at UTA. "Inspiring passion is the primary and hardest thing. Once that's there, everything else is easy," he says. In addition to teaching art like advanced painting and contemporary portraiture, he also guides graduate students with their independent studies.



photo credit: Shannon Lange Photography

Certainly, his most famous student is George W. Bush, a late-blooming artist whose oil paintings have been praised by numerous critics. "He's developed," says Huckaby. "His journey as a painter is a wonderful thing, because it's great to see a former president painting. We expect them to write books, and we expect them to do diplomatic things and have speeches, but we don't expect them to make art." Huckaby still works with Bush, who will be releasing a new collection later this year.

Huckaby's new endeavors include two public art projects that are fueled by his vision for Fort Worth's creative community. "As I move forward, there's more of a social component to the works that I'm doing," he explains. He's in the final design stages of "The Last Train," a train stop-inspired gathering place in the Stop Six neighborhood. Situated at the main intersection of Ramey Avenue and Stalcup Road, the project will feature train tracks and an actual rail car with video storytelling elements.

His second long-term project is found a few miles away in Polytechnic Heights at a very familiar location: "Big Momma's House." Huckaby and his wife are converting his grandmother's house into a public art space, "a type of arts incubator in that community," he says. "We will be reaching out to artists to do community-minded projects, and we'll be finding ways to reach out to the community ourselves." Construction is now underway. If Big Momma was still around, "she would speak positively of it and say keep doing what you're doing."

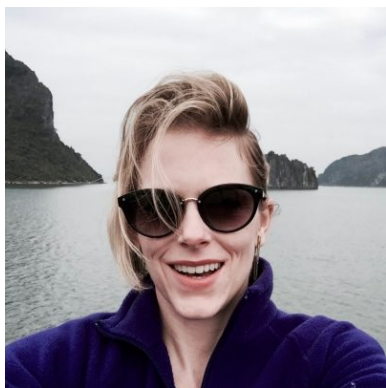
To see some of Huckaby's work en plein air right now, head to the Highland Hills Community Center. Situated under shade trees on the south side of the building, "The Welcome Space" was commissioned by the City of Fort Worth. Two colorful benches that appear to be draped with quilts invite passersby to sit and rest. But upon closer look, the undulating folds and patchwork pieces of the quilt are made of concrete and tiles. It's unmistakably Huckaby's handiwork, his celebrated quilt images in mosaic form. His portraits are there, too, with cameos of neighbors woven into the design. You'll also find several of his works at Valley House Gallery in North Dallas, including paintings, drawings, and original prints.



photo credit: Shannon Lange Photography

But Huckaby's home is here in Fort Worth, just as it has always been. "Having great experiences with other people in the city, other groups and communities, it leads to some of the things that I'm doing now... I seek to give back, to help, to bring out the beauty in certain aspects of the city," he says "I guess you could say the city poured a lot into me, and I feel like what was poured into me is what I pour back out now."

Rising from his heart and revealed through his hands, what Huckaby is passing down will no doubt be a driving force of Fort Worth's artistic growth for years to come.



Raised in the Fort Worth area, **Shilo Urban** moved to Austin, Maine, Paris, Seattle, New Zealand, and Los Angeles before finding her way home a few years ago. Along the way, she has had over three dozen different jobs, including high school French teacher, record label manager, and farmhand for endangered livestock breeds. She's traveled to more than 50 countries and always has the next trip planned. Shilo has been a freelance writer for over a decade and has published in Fort Worth Magazine, Fort Worth Weekly, and Afar. Her

interests include lost civilizations, jalapeño peppers, and Game of Thrones. She is currently writing a thriller and lives in Fort Worth with the stars of this article, Steve and Lenny.