







Elizabeth Lavin

Visual Arts

Conjuring Spirits and Community at Fort Worth's Kinfolk House

The artist Sedrick Huckaby and his wife, the photographer Letitia Huckaby, set about transforming his late grandmother's home into a community arts space. Let's go inside.

By Taylor Crumpton | March 10, 2022 | 2:31 pm



Tattooed on my right forearm is an illustrated portrait of Helen Marie White, my maternal grandmother. White, a mother to 10 children and grandmother to many more, was the love of my life. As a child, my mother was sometimes unable to care for me because of her autoimmune disorders. My grandmother would tend to me in our family's small apartment in Valley Ranch.

Every morning, my grandmother prepared us fried pork chops, grits, and eggs; a trio of southern delicacies that I can no longer partake in. I would ask, "Momma-Me, who is going to take care of me when my mother is gone?" I didn't know enough to comprehend my mother's fight with arthritis and lupus, but I feared that at any moment she could disappear from my life. In those moments, my momma-me would scoop me up in her arms and remind me of my mother's stubborn will to live and to soldier and to endure, out of love for her children.

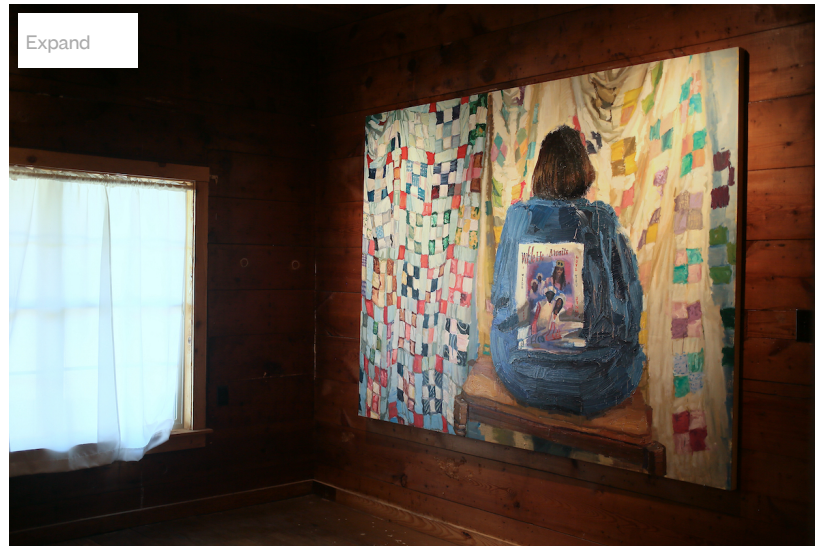
After an intense embrace, my grandmother would guide my adolescent self to my mother's bedside, where she would lead us in prayer. Her words, a stanza of fiery statements of resiliency, declared victory over the adversaries of ill will, chronic health issues, and any ailment that beset my family. In African American folklore, praying grandmothers can stand in the void between life and death to protect their children, grandchildren, and their legacy.

"To the world she has no name, and she has no face, but she feels she has cosmic importance, because there's a God she communicates with in heaven who is eternal. And so she knows that every boss is temporary, that every

rainy day is temporary, that every hardship is temporary,” the Reverend Jesse Jackson once said.

For generations, African American grandmothers served as birth doulas for their children. They were the first people to welcome their grandchildren into the physical world. In the southern United States, grandmothers shouldered the responsibility of their grandchildren's wellbeing while their mothers worked.

The Fort Worth artist Sedrick Huckaby lived his own version of this history, spending afternoons at his Big Momma's house until his mother was able to pick him up after work.



A room inside Kinfolk House, in Fort Worth.
Jessica Fuentes

Hallie Beatrice Carpenter was known as “Welcome” to her neighbors in Polytechnic Heights, a predominantly Black and Latinx neighborhood on the east side of Fort Worth. Sedrick called his grandmother Big Momma. He and his wife, the internationally renowned photographer Letitia Huckaby, bought her house after she died.

The two are keeping his grandmother's warm and inviting spirit alive through what they're calling Kinfolk House, a new community arts space where she once lived. The goal is to transform it into a “living, breathing work of art.” The couple has reimagined the single-family house as a collaborative visual arts venue, which opened to the public on March 5.

The opening felt like a second christening for Huckaby's family home. As cars parked alongside the adjacent streets, neighbors watched visitors and close family friends of the Huckabys enter.

Along the fence, a group of middle-aged and elderly Black men welcomed guests by asking them, “How are you doing today?” The gentlemen looked like a group of uncles convening on a warm summer day. They were already familiar with the space, familiar with the woman they called Welcome. As I approached the front door, I heard brief snippets of their experiences with her.

They spoke with pride, admiring that her grandchild would not only buy the space but transform it and open it to the community. When I walked in, I felt the presence of a familial spirit, the essence of a grandmother. It was as if Sedrick had conjured the spirit of his childhood memories of Big Momma into the collection of fine paintings that now hang on her walls. Although the physical space was foreign to me, the portraits of African American elders, church pews, and photos of Weimer, Texas—where his grandmother was born—felt like home.

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Enrique Nevarez, a Fort Worth studio artist, recalled memories of being in Welcome's house. Nevarez is a graduate of University of Texas at Arlington's Art & Art History department, where Sedrick works as a painting instructor.

He was one of many Fort Worth artists present to pay respects to Welcome and view Kinfolk House in-person. I have no connections to Fort Worth outside of stories from my father. He was a member of the second generation of African American students to attend TCU after integration, so his ties to the neighborhood are seen through the perspective of student-run volunteer initiatives here in "Poly."

I still enjoyed watching the natural cohesion of the local creatives who gathered here, artists Charles Gray and Jessica Fuentes; photographers Donnie Williams and Rambo Elliot; and musician J.L. Fuentes is the director of Kinfolk House. They stood on the porch and traded stories of how the Huckabys transformed the residence.

Last Saturday, community members gathered to assist the Huckabys in preparing for the opening.

But community involvement started long before the celebration. Fuentes already hosted an artist mixer, a convening for local educators, and a community day where people from the neighborhood and its churches could tour the space and offer feedback for future programming. In February, students from Polytechnic High School interviewed the Huckabys and shot b-roll for their school's media course. The school and Kinfolk House are exploring future opportunities for students.

As of now, the community arts space is being supported by sales of Sedrick and Letita Huckaby's artwork. Kinfolk House is in the process of securing

nonprofit status so it can accept donations to support utilities, cover general upkeep, and sustain artists or educational programs.

Toward the middle of the reception, as visitors found themselves outside on Welcome's porch, a warm, inviting breeze settled in, similar to when your grandmother would invite your friends over for a home cooked meal. Outside, people exchanged stories as Fuentes' daughter explored the backyard. Horses and sheep traversed the Fort Worth urban countryside nearby.

I felt like I was back home with my praying grandmother. Although no one can predict the future of Fort Worth's newest arts institution, I truly believe it is covered by Hallie Beatrice Carpenter's prayers.

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