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Art Therapy: The George Bush Paintings

Sharon Knettell · Thursday, April 10th, 2014

'If the George Bush paintings were done by dear uncle Edgar they would be lined up in a rumpus room next to the bowling trophies and the dart board.'

There would be no reason on earth in a normal world to review the work of a "painter" such as ex-president George W. Bush — but there it is. His portraits are in the genre of those encountered at the local lodge of The Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks of The Grand Exalted Ruler or at an art exhibition at a senior center. However, the grand exalted mandarins of the art critic world, Roberta Smith of the *New York Times* and husband Jerry Saltz of *The New Yorker,* dutifully reviewed him because of his fame and the fame or notoriety of his subjects (not of course his cat, dog and shower pictures. Actually I kind of like his double cat picture… but I must press on).

Mr. Saltz's review is titled "George Bush is a Good Painter!" Mr Saltz goes on to say, "Paint, George, paint. Paint more. Please. If you exhibit it, I'll write about it. The Whitney Museum of American Art should get on the stick and offer this American a small show. Or just buy these two paintings."

From Ms. Smith: "Former President George W. Bush is something of a natural when it comes to making oil paintings, a decent amateur. Although he picked up a brush only in 2012, his naturalness emerges as a definite possibility barely a year later." Ms. Smith was more impressed by George Bush's efforts than the works of another celebrity artist, Bob Dylan, who is represented by the blue chip Gagosian gallery.

There of course were other reviews, much less glowing. Jonathan Jones of *The Guardian* called it "The Art of Forrest Gump."

Curious as to the take on portraiture these regnant critics champion, I ferreted out two, Elizabeth Peyton and Francisco Clemente. Elizabeth Peyton, represented along with Bob Dylan at the Gagosian, was reviewed lovingly by both critics. Ms. Peyton, Roberta Smith acknowledges, works mainly from photographs but is now "trying" to work from life. There is a strong similarity between the self portrait of George Bush and Ms. Peyton's John Diorno. Ms. Peyton has also painted well known celebrities such as Justin Beiber.

George W. Bush selfie

John Diorno painted by Elizabeth Peyton

Another interesting juxtaposition of a well reviewed artist by Ms. Smith is that of Francisco Clementem a star at the stellar Mary Boone Gallery.

Vladimir Putin painted by George W. Bush

Allen Ginsberg painted by Francisco Clemente

Both paintings have a penetrating frontal gaze and Mr. Bush's purply background echoes the more insistent pink of Clementes. Frankly I think George Bush's comes across with a greater degree of honesty than the so-called professionals. The *New York Observer* notes that "Clemente depicts phantasmagorical narratives in a wan attempt to prove that incompetence can be chic." So who indeed is the better artist here?

This does not mean that George W. Bush is a good painter or even a tolerable one. He is a man doing art therapy. If these were done by dear uncle Edgar they would be lined up in a rumpus room next to the bowling trophies and the dart board. However in art as in most things, timing and luck are everything and now they are becoming part of the history of post-modern American art, which is looking dimmer by the decade.

There is not much more that can be said about a "painter" whose oeuvre spans a solitary year except to say that it is more of a comment on the back against the wall state of contemporary visual arts where there are no standards left whatsoever. Mr. Saltz *et uxor* Ms. Smith could not very well pan the art of George Bush as it reflects so much of what they think is important and compelling. They have painted themselves into a corner.

From the late, great critic John Hughes: "There are a couple of really great figurative painters around: there's Antonio Lopez in Spain and, of course, Lucian Freud in England. But I don't think you could say that either of these guys were the mirror equivalent of a Velazquez or a Rembrandt. There are times when art, the medium, just isn't producing exceptional stuff."

Top image: Former President George W. Bush shows America his portraits on NBC's Today show; he was interviewed by his daughter, Jenna Bush.

Read more by Sharon Knettell on contemporary portraiture: Why Contemporary Portraiture Shouldn't Show Its Face

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