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White House Portraiture: Invasion of Bad Art

Edward Goldman · Thursday, June 7th, 2012

Last week the White House was a happy place where nasty political discourse was set aside, at least for a short moment. The unveiling of the official portraits of George W. and Laura Bush looked like a happy reunion of the First Families of America, past and present. Barack and Michelle Obama greeted two generations of the Bush family, and all of them exchanged light-hearted banter and poked gentle fun at each other.

President George W. Bush and former first lady Laura Bush at the unveiling of their official portraits, Thursday, May 31, 2012

Unsurprisingly, the event became front-page news, with an emphasis on its civility and camaraderie, rarely observed in Washington. What struck me was the fact that not a word, not a peep, was uttered about the quality of the paintings themselves. And my friends let me tell you, these two official portraits, to put it politely, are just painfully banal. To be totally frank, they are inexcusably, embarrassingly bad. Well, it's White House art. I know, with this statement, out of the window goes my chance to be invited for tea at the White House, but someone has to say it.

John Howard Sanden: Portraits of Laura Bush and President George W. Bush, 2012 (Courtesy of The White House)

The tradition of official portraiture goes back for millennia; think of all those imposing, beautiful portraits of Kings and Pharaohs, Popes and Presidents, that we admire in various museums around the world. But all of them were created by the best artists of their time. Unfortunately the 20th century wreaked havoc on this tradition, with figurative art playing second fiddle to its abstract cousin.

But the need for official portraiture will stay with us as long as humanity exists. Just go to any of the thousands of corporate boardrooms around the world and you will encounter lifeless portraits executed by the deadly hands of commercial painters. These portraits always remind me of the "paint-by-numbers" tombstones at Forest Lawn.

In 2009 a bronze statue of Ronald Reagan, with a stiff pose and bland facial expression echoing thousands of similarly banal portraits, was unveiled at the Capitol Rotunda. With the art of portraiture out of fashion in the leading American art schools, the statue was commissioned from a second-rate, self-taught artist who only excels at the art of pleasing his less than demanding clientele.

(L) Statue of former President Ronald Reagan by Chas Fagan, at the National Statuary Hall Collection; (R) Monument of Martin Luther King Jr. by Chinese artist Lei Yixin, on the National Mall in Washington, DC

Last year an imposing granite portrait of Martin Luther King, Jr. was unveiled in Washington. After an international competition, the commission was awarded to Chinese artist Lei Yixin who in my opinion did a relatively good job of honoring the civil rights leader. Many commentators complained that it was wrong to outsource an American icon. They thought the commission should have gone to an American artist, or better yet, to an African-American artist. I thought that in honoring Dr. King the only thing that mattered was the quality of his portrait and not the identity of the artist.

Lucian Freud, Portrait of Queen Elizabeth II, 2001, The Royal Collection © Lucian Freud

Over the last weekend, the world celebrated the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II. Among the innumerable portraits of her that have been commissioned during her six decades on the throne, one stands out not only in artistic quality, but also in the courage and conviction of both sitter and painter. I am talking about the intense, amazing, take-no-prisoners official portrait of her by the late Lucian Freud, one of the greatest artists of the last century. He presents the Queen as a tough, no-nonsense matriarch, who demands respect and doesn't need cheap flattery. I wish that this approach were the prevailing standard for the art of portraiture occupying the halls of power.

Kehinde Wiley, LL Cool J, 2005, © Kehinde Wiley

Which makes me wonder, who would be a good candidate to make the next official portrait of an American President to be displayed in the White House? Could it be the much in demand, highly successful Kehinde Wiley, with his impressive craft and showmanship? Who would you recommend to paint the portraits of Michelle and Barack Obama? I would love to hear your thoughts…

Topmost image: President Barack Obama and first lady Michelle Obama talk with former President George W. Bush and former First Lady Laura Bush during the unveiling of their official portraits, Thursday, May 31, 2012 . Photo by Xinhua/Fang Zhe

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