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Shawn Huckins
Zipper Short and Skinny - Challenging Traditional Notions of Masculinity
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by Jody Zellen



Shawn Huckins is an exacting artist whose works often begin with recreations of American masters that he paints with uncanny skill and detail. His works are a lot more than faithful reproductions however. With each series he injects surprise, be it overlaid text or emojis within the painting, or the addition of actual woven fabrics. In an early series from 2011 he juxtaposed historical works with the now familiar shorthand of text messages. The title *Zippers Short and Skinny* — his current exhibition at Richard Heller Gallery — is a play on words found when re-reading *Leave Any Information At The Signal. Writings, Interviews, Bits, Pages*, a book on Ed Ruscha.

Huckins states, “*The original phrase in the book was ‘Zippers Long and Skinny’, but since my show is about masculinity, I changed it to ‘Zippers Short and Skinny.’ It’s basically an innuendo for small male genitalia.*” In these pieces he “explores the complex phenomenon of masculinity within the societal landscape.”

In some ways, Huckins’ pieces also share a kinship with Vanessa Prager’s recent portraits as her thickly impastoed paintings also reference historical works. Prager replaces the sitter’s facial features with bouquets of flowers to create an unsettling yet evocative mass. While Prager’s works are a feminist critique, Huckins is interested in an abject depiction of masculinity. The first works viewers encounter are paintings of seated male figures partially obscured by drapery. *Portrait in Pink Satin Fabric (Joseph Sherburne after Copley)*, 2024, transforms John Singleton Copley’s realistic portrait of Joseph Sherburne, a wealthy Boston merchant, by covering the face and half of the subject’s body with soft pink fabric that whimsically flows down from the top of the painting. Huckins retains the deep blue patterned fabric behind the figure, as well as the floral decorations on his brown-robe and the frilly white cuffs that surround his hands. *Portrait in Green Satin Fabric (Nicholas Boylston after Copley)*, 2024 similarly focuses on the depiction of green satin fabric that Huckins introduces into the scene.

The draw, however, is *Richard Heber (after Copley)*, 2024. Huckins recreates the upper portion of John Copley’s painting of Richard Heber created in 1782 that pictures the nine-year-old boy casually leaning against a tree. In Huckins’ version, the bottom of the painting has been replaced by tufts of colorful yarn that form a rug descending from the boy’s chest and cascading onto the gallery floor. *The Brown Boy (Thomas Lister after Reynolds)*, 2024, also begins with

the recreation of a historic portrait— Joshua Reynolds' 1764 depiction of the young Thomas Lister, who later became the 1st Baron Ribblesdale. Again, Huckins presents a fragment of the painting, this time installed off-kilter and resting on the floor where it connects to an array of colorful yarns that spill out like a shag carpet. Huckins brings out the colors in the sky, flowers and myriad hues of green, transforming them into an uneven grid. In these pieces, Huckins plays with ideas of masculine and feminine, as well as craft and fine art, to invite a dialogue that challenges traditional notions of male bravado.

Various Fabrics: Portrait of Thomas Abthorpe Cooper (after Harding), 2023, is an earlier work from Huckins' *Dirty Laundry* series. In this painting, he wraps the entire head, obscuring the face from Chester Harding's c.1822 portrait of Thomas Abthorpe Cooper with a turban of colorful and patterned fabrics. In describing these works, he states, "We use cloth to conceal, but also to express, selectively, based on how we see ourselves and how we want others to see us. Of course, we don't express all facets of our identity, some things we hold near out of habit, nature, or fear of ridicule. We all have dirty laundry, literally and figuratively. Dirty laundry, the phrase, is defined as personal, or private affairs that one does not want made public as they would cause distress and embarrassment. Dirty Laundry, the series, employs contemporary fabrics painted over traditional American portraiture to explore questions surrounding what, how much, and how well we share and hide."

These altered portraits, fragmented images of young aristocrats and effeminate hands emerging from silky fabrics challenge traditional notions of masculinity. Huckins presents images from the past in a new light and suggests that male bravado as depicted by American Masters was shielded the sitter's true identities.

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