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Rub-a-Dub-Dubya In the Comfort Zone
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By Scott M. Greene

— Images painted by the 43rd president of the United States, George W. Bush, have gone Internet-viral. My initial response when I learned of his paintings: *Finally! The “shrub” branched out into my world, and it’s time for a serious painting critique smack-down.* But this isn’t a blind alley, and I want to honestly assess these works for what they express. In a spirit of fairness, I disclose that I’m a professional painter and an outspoken critic of Bush. Considering the unpopularity of this president and his tin-horn brand of statesmanship, the paintings are worthy of analysis because they reveal a different side of the man’s character—as well as something about the social values and identity of our politically divided country.

The work was obtained through illegal hacking of Bush's private email account by a person identified as "Guccifer." It was apparently not meant for public consumption, which lends a tantalizing provenance. The quiet and self-reflective act of painting seems at odds with the swaggering cowboy who challenged enemy forces in Iraq to "bring it on," and such a contradiction is reason enough to whet the appetite of inquiring minds.

Already, comparisons have been made to other world leaders who liked to paint, such as Winston Churchill, President Dwight D. Eisenhower and even Adolf Hitler (who might have been a kinder, gentler person if he'd been accepted to art school). Edward Hopper, the American painter famous for scenes of urban isolation and masterfully constructed compositions, was even dropped into the conversation by *The Daily Beast's* Lizzie Crocker. The straightforward, contemplative self-portraits of Bush performing his daily ablutions in the privacy of his shower and bathtub, however, show no qualities to elevate them above what you might find in a thrift store. They are hobby paintings, and if it were not for the fact that Bush painted them, they'd receive little attention.

Contradictions abound in his compositions. In the shower painting, the viewer is cast as voyeur, compelled to participate in an odd game of peek-a-boo. Bush's back is turned to the audience, and we're left to imagine what he might be doing with his hands. There is playful use of a round shaving mirror hanging from the shower wall, which reflects the president's face gazing back. The figure is not in the correct position to align the face in the mirror, yet he stares out—either watching us looking back at his reflection, or catching us in the act of checking out his butt. It's provocative, particularly in the context of a shower scene, where he's actively engaging us in a flirtatious tête-à-tête stare-off.

The sexually charged association is reminiscent of the Contessa Castiglione's photographic portrait by Pierre-Louis Pierson, c. 1863-66. Comparison of facial expressions shows G.W. with a perplexed, deer-in-the-headlights look, whereas the Contessa gazes confidently, even flirtatiously, through a mask. That's notable, considering she is a flower of the Victorian era and yet appears a liberated woman comfortable with her sexuality.



To Bush's credit, suggestive bathroom scenes in the nude constitute risqué and demanding subject matter for a man who courted and procured the Christian fundamentalist vote. The theme was most likely chosen on a whim or with little awareness of possible interpretations. His lack of working knowledge of both human anatomy and the complexities of painting skin tones did not discourage him from using his body as the primary focus—an adventurous choice.

Although we can't be sure about his intent, the paintings seem to insist on creating a steamy psychological rendezvous of sorts. Intentional or not, they are self-referential narratives revealing issues about intimacy and anonymity. This brings to mind the classic German film *Taxi zum Klo* (*Taxi to the Toilet*) about gay life in the early '80s before widespread awareness about the AIDS epidemic. It's a story of a man with two sides: a responsible school teacher by day and frequenter of public bathrooms for anonymous sex by night.

Bush's bathtub painting is more conventional, and although handled with some skill in the articulation of the water, is not particularly challenging or meaningful. It reads as an

attempt to express the simple joys of everyday experience, and provides a viewer's vantage point as if we're taking the bath ourselves. It could easily be a crowd-pleaser for Bush. The compositional device he uses is so banal, it makes me think of those popular lawn signs of ladies bending over and showing their bloomers, or a *tableau vivant* of Hummel-like figurines bathing a puppy.



It's cute, irresistible fare for a mainstream America that places little interest or value in learning how to read a painting. It lacks, for instance, the poetic vision of Frida Kahlo's brilliantly rendered "What I Saw In The Water or What The Water Gave Me," her treatment of the same subject and composition from 1938.



For a more humorous take on a similar scene, refer to the Coen brothers' *The Big Lebowski* when the Dude soaks in his tub smoking a joint. As he relaxes by candlelight, three self-proclaimed nihilists barge into his bathroom and threaten to “cut off [his]Johnson” if he doesn't pay missing ransom money. They throw a marmot into the tub between the Dude's legs; thrashing pandemonium ensues.



Confounding these works is their relationship to Bush's private and public images. We can assume they were not meant for public consumption, so they're in a sense self-portraits at unguarded private moments. It's more than a little ironic that the same former president who had his email account hacked is also responsible for putting in place the most far-

reaching secret wiretapping and Internet monitoring provisions in U.S. history as part of the Patriot Act. But I digress.

A self-portrait is an invitation into the particulars of its creator. Who, then, were these paintings made for? Obviously not only for himself—he sent the jpeg versions to somebody—but why limit the viewer’s access to more intimate details if these moments are truly unguarded?

Perhaps G.W. edited himself out the composition because people close to him might be embarrassed. But paintings are open to translation no matter the audience. Since an artist never knows when their work might reach a wider stage, choices about what to include or leave out become very important. Omissions can be just as telling as what gets left in, and Bush’s artistic decisions risk unintended readings.

What seems evident is that both were painted relatively confidently, controlled in process and content, and made by a person still inhibited by Victorian social constraints. They basically look like products of a self-motivated project to entertain himself. This is not a criticism, because if the artist isn’t entertained by making the work, the viewer can’t be expected to be entertained enough to look at it.

Ultimately, Bush tries hard to show he can still be a fun guy if given another chance. He also comes off as unwilling to show depth or specifics about himself. In so doing, he has created a compelling portrait of a submerging artist, one obscured by poor public opinion and looking to his rear-view mirror for validation.