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Which Artist Should Create Obama's Official Presidential Portrait?  
In a perfect world, who would be the artist that captures the likeness of Obama  
for his official portrait?

By Seph Rodney, 2 July 2017



Recently, J.A. Boyd II, a youth pastor for a Baptist church in Newnan GA, tweeted an image of what he proclaimed to be the "official White House painting" of former US President Barack Obama. Boyd's accompanying paean in praise of the painting is a single word: "BRUH!!!!"

Obama does look resplendent in the beige suit he once famously wore to a press conference in 2014, with just the hint of a smile creasing the area around his mouth. A Dutch artist, Edwin van den Dikkenberg, who has made that portrait in oil, has skillfully apprehended Obama's combination of scholarly aloofness, confidence, and openness to being charmed. In this image there is also the resolute idealism, and curiosity that when I saw him in public appearances would often easily slide into a quizzical grin somewhere between empathic embarrassment on someone else's behalf and outright dismissal as unworthy of further engagement. It is a striking image, but reportedly this is *not* the official White House portrait.

Still, it made me think about what contemporary artist would do best with this assignment. Of course, I immediately imagined Chris Ofili, the heavily stylized watercolor portraits he made mostly of women in the late 1990s. Ofili would give Obama back that superhero quality that initially imbued his presidency, making him an iconic black man in a tie-dyed dashiki, all coffee-with-milk brown skin and high forehead with gleaming eyes.

Better yet, Mickalene Thomas would transform the cool professor into a funkafied, stone cold, groovy cat reclining on a chaise lounge in the oval office, the walls doused in psychedelic patterns and sparkles. Though Thomas most often employs her powers of bringing her subjects' sexiness to the surface with women, she might be talked into doing the same with the former president, turning him into the dancer he sometimes revealed himself to be: giving a little shoulder shimmy and a two-step, gray hair rendered in glitter like an astral field.

Kehinde Wiley is also an option. Of course, his portrait accomplished in the style of courtly painting would give us the triumphant Obama, the Nobel prize winner, the man to pull us back from the brink of financial meltdown. However, the drawbacks are that such a portrait would only emphasize that confidence that too often was read as haughtiness, and if Wiley works like he usually does the overall physical comportment might look too staged, too stiff.

Dawoud Bey could make a wonderfully intimate photograph of Obama, since they are already familiar with each other after Bey took a picture of the then pre-gray senator from Illinois back in 2007. His portrait would be staid, quietly dignified, but forthright — letting through the weariness and perhaps even the inner fortitude of the man who throughout the tenure of his presidency was consistently publicly called a Muslim terrorist from Kenya.

The artist William Villalongo could actually dig into those African roots, via Obama's father (Barack Hussein Obama, Sr. was a Kenyan senior governmental economist), back to a storied past that tends to conflate all the technological achievements made on the continent and shunt them through the legends and accounts of life in Egypt. Villalongo did that digging soon after Obama's historic election, taking an image of the president and making him a kind of celestial *mélange* with Nefertiti, an Egyptian queen, who along with her husband Akhenaten, an Egyptian Pharaoh, was known for fomenting a profound change in religious practices within Egypt. Despite all the shortcomings of his presidency, such a portrait would affirm the fact that change did indeed occur with his presidency.

Lastly, we could stretch the boundaries of the portrait and instead of a painting or photograph, make it a black-and-white film montage by Steve McQueen, in which there is a long shot of him standing by the window in the White House, peering out in silence while in the foreground a clump of advisers and cabinet members talk among themselves, until Obama turns and walks towards them and the camera and the part like the Red Sea and they are suddenly quiet, waiting for him to speak.