



*BF's Comment: Laughing My Ass Off*

2012

Acrylic + pencil on canvas

29" x 23 3/4"

Photo: courtesy the artist

Shawn Huckins is a big fan of Ed Ruscha. In fact, a reproduction of Ruscha's well-known *Standard Station, Amarillo, Texas* hangs in the loft living room of the Denver apartment Huckins shares with his partner, Matt. From his spare bedroom studio,

Huckins procures his prized possession, an autographed copy of Ruscha's book "Leave Any Information at the Signal," which he received from the artist in 2009. It's inscribed: "Thank you for your kind letter. Best wishes, Ed Ruscha." The book and note arrived in response to a fan letter Huckins wrote to Ruscha. "I read the book back to front and front to back," Huckins says. "He's a big inspiration to my work. It's very evident with the white lettering superimposed on the canvases."

Huckins is 27, just five years graduated from Keene State College in New Hampshire with a BA in Studio Art. Prior to moving to Denver in January 2012, he worked as an architectural model fabricator and painter for a firm in New Haven, Connecticut. His paintings have already appeared at Aqua Art Miami and in New American Paintings. This June, he will make his West Coast debut in simultaneous two-person shows at L2kontemporary in Los Angeles, and Cain Schulte gallery in San Francisco. But his current 18th-Century-meets-Pop style came about as the result of a happy accident.

Huckins created his first painting in third grade, of a barn with rolling hills, which he copied from a book, using an oil painting kit that he inherited when his grandmother passed away. In fourth grade he became fascinated with Colonial America: the Redcoats, the Freedom Trail, the formal portraits at the New Hampshire state capital. "I guess I'm a traditional kind of guy. I like baking a pie from scratch. Technology is awesome but sometimes it can be frustrating and overwhelming. Their way of life seems more simple, elegant and intelligent," he adds, somewhat nostalgic for an earlier time. Huckins' first explorations as a fine artist featured vivid color palettes, stark scenes of storefronts and cars, realistically rendered. They are more Wayne Thiebaud meets Edward Hopper meets Robert Bechtel. He didn't begin painting 18th-Century style portraits until two years ago. Truth was, Huckins didn't know how.

"I never took figure classes and was never taught to make flesh tones," Huckins admits. His cousin made fun of him and Huckins determined to prove him wrong. So he taught himself portraiture by copying his favorite paintings by John Singleton Copley, the artist who defined the realist art tradition in America. "I'm very technical and detailed with my paintings, and how things are composed," Huckins says. "I have the same style as he [Copley] does."

He would paint, then toss the work aside and keep practicing. One day, a portrait he tossed on the floor slid under a piece of tracing paper in which he had written LOL, the

texting acronym for Laugh Out Loud. It caught his eye, and he realized that the juxtaposition was arresting. His first major work in this style, *GW's Comment: Rolling on the Floor Laughing*, is based on a copy of Gilbert Stuart's portrait of George Washington, with large, white lettering across his face: ROFL. "I really liked the composition and the contrast between our technology acronyms versus the 18th-century civility." He utilizes actual Twitter and Facebook updates, randomly copying them and matching them to imagery. His subjects range from the famous, such as Benjamin Franklin, with the letters LMAO, short for Laughing My Ass Off, to the obscure, like Mrs. Ezekiel Goldthwait, who is partially obscured by the acronym for Laughing Quietly To Myself. "I think they're funny. You're not supposed to know what some of it means. It's like a code you have to figure out. It's a new language."

Huckins' paintings merge traditional American portraiture with Pop Art and of-the-moment language and symbols from today's digital communications in a way that is fresh, original, and visually striking. One suspects it could even make Ed Ruscha an admirer of Shawn Huckins.

*Shawn Huckins will be featured in a two-person exhibition with Billy Reynolds, at L2kontemporary, in Los Angeles. From June 23 -- August 18, 2012. [www.l2kontemporary.com](http://www.l2kontemporary.com)*

*He will also be the subject of a two-person exhibition at Cain Schulte Contemporary Art, in San Francisco, opening June 28, 2012. [www.cainschulte.com](http://www.cainschulte.com)*