

"The right to sit" is what *Charlayne Hunter-Gault* (1961) by Joseph Schwartz asking for

Charlayne Hunter-Gault 1961 (Fig. 1) by Joseph Schwartz ("Charlayne Hunter-Gault.") is a large impressive oil on canvas portrait I saw in the National Portrait Gallery, Washington DC in mid October 2022. It is a great example of fine art that expresses racial inequality to cry out for justice and freedom!

Charlayne Hunter-Gault, the sitter, was born in 1942 (Hunter-Gault, 2002). She was only 19 years old at that time and had dark brown skin and black hair. The artist made an interesting choice to render the background black and brown with her rolled sleeves sweater outfit in similar color, making Hunter's skin tone and reflection on her hair the brightest regions in the painting. The overall black and dark brown color tone, with the golden shell shaped object on her necklaces , frames a solemn ambience. She sat straight in the picture, with her right arm across her chest and resting on the desk horizontally. Her left elbow rested on her right hand, supporting her left arm vertically racked up and a curved left hand. A diamond ring could be seen on the ring finger of her left hand. No rings on her other fingers, nor bracelet, ear rings, or other jewels. She is facing the viewer, but her eyes are looking toward the left with a slight sense of sadness behind her unyielding glimpse. Schwartz illustrated the distinctive features of her face with very simple and efficient strokes- abounding thick lips, solid nose, a pair of large round eyes with deep and dark eye sockets, and a pair of sharp V-shaped eyebrows. Her left ear is partially visible under her classical hair, the same kind of hair style we expect from any 1960 photos of decent females in the USA. Schwartz used a gradient of Spanish gray, Cement, and Lavender gray to highlight the reflection lines and edges on her black hair, creating an illusion of halo around her head. The skin on her face, neck, hands and arms are the brightest spot in the painting- The artist use a mixture of Pearl and Dutch White to render on the bright left side of her face and a mixture of Liver Chestnut, Coconut, and Milk Chocolate to shade her eye sockets and shadowed right face. Her lips are Tuscan Red and Old Burgundy. Similar color tones are also used to render the muscle on her arms and fingers. Schwartz depicted her as a strong, firm, rational, determined, intellectual lady sitting calmly to think about her next move. She is observing this world, with confidence and composedness.

This is an important piece of fine art not only to witness the movement to end segregation, but also as an important part of such an act. Joseph Schwartz, the painter, was an art professor in University of Georgia while the riot formed by the students of the all-white public university protested outside Hunter-Gault's dorm in 1961 (Hunter-Gault, 1993). Charlayne Hunter-Gault and Hamilton Holmes walked onto the University of Georgia campus as the the first African American students to enroll this segregated public college, by the support of the court ruling after a two-year legal battle (Trillin). They stayed firmly on campus even after receiving bricks and bottles thrown into their dormitory windows (Hunter-Gault, 2005). Schwartz painted this portrait of her determinism and facilitated a faculty resolution to reinstate these two students who were suspended by the university in the name to ensure their safety. The portrait showed to the world a courageous act of this young African American female. She was just sitting there, staying around! But in the moment of the Civil Right Movement, sitting and staying in a place the US Constitution guarantees they deserve is exactly the right they are fighting to preserve. It is a painting of a courage act- Sit and Stay!

Works Cited

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Fig. 1: The author Frank Yung-Fong Tang in front of *Charlayne Hunter-Gault* 1961 at National Portrait Gallery, Washington DC in mid October 2022