

BO BARTLETT

America, 2007
oil on linen, 80 x 116 in.



COURTESY THE ARTIST

RICHARD BLANCO

Writing a Poem about America

An Inaugural Poet's Journey

After reading some Ginsberg, some Frost, some Whitman, our first take-home assignment in graduate school was to write a poem about America. I went home and scratched my head; I was like, this isn't America, this Ginsberg, this is not my America. My America is a little Cuban kid from Miami. That was exactly the same assignment I got twenty years later when President Obama called and said, "Write a poem about America." For about five seconds I was a little cocky, thinking, I've done that poem. I've been writing about America really throughout my whole body of work, which is questioning my cultural identity and place in America. I thought, Don't worry, Obama, you've reached the right number.

That lasted five seconds. Then I realized it was like that poem but then it wasn't, and I started investigating what that journey would look like and just jumped into it because I had to write the inaugural poem in three weeks. I had to learn that things already in regular poems are heightened in the occasional poem. For me, I was struggling with the idea that the occasional poem I was writing in this particular instance would be my first spoken word poem. It would be the first poem I wrote that would be heard before it would ever be read in a book or a magazine or anywhere else. I had seven minutes to capture the imagination of forty million people through the ear. If I didn't do it through the ear, through my performance, the poem was going to go nowhere, and it would die right there in the moment. I started rehearsing the poem, started thinking about the poem in the sense of this triangulation.

There was me the poet, there was the audience that would be right in front of me, and there was the audience, including my peers, that would not be right in front of me and that would read this poem. How do you solve those three things and how can you satisfy those three things? I rehearsed the poem like I have never rehearsed a poem in my life. I rehearsed outside because I would recite the poem outside. I built a makeshift podium in my deck in my house in Maine with a photo of Obama. This is Maine in January. My makeshift podium was overlooking a bluff and a snowman that my nephews had built. I read to the snowman.

With the inaugural poem I had to go through a lot of that emotional searching: what is this America? I started