

ART



Kinetic Portraits

By Peter Wilkins

At The Rooms, 9 Bonaventure Ave.,
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Curated by Bruce Johnson

A portrait is valued as a status object. One poses with one's hounds, crown jewels, chains of office, or nearest and dearest, and the result is a record for posterity. And a portrait is usually a static entity. The model will "sit" for however many sessions the artist requires to record their posture, expression and character in charcoal or paint. The result is then contained within a frame.

Peter Wilkins has tacked the portrait to a new course. His *Kinetic Portraits of 12 Canadian Writers* are, it is true, flat surfaced, framed, and mounted on gallery walls. But Wilkins employs a novel medium. These portraits are composed of short films (about five minutes, and looped to run continuously). The result: portraits in motion.

Wilkins created these pieces by, first, interviewing his high-powered, high-profile subjects (including Margaret Atwood, Douglas Copeland, Ann-Marie

MacDonald, and Wayne Johnston). He deliberately choose authors whose work was widely-read as capturing authors whom viewers 'knew' would help them contextualize the pieces. Wilkins also selected writers whose work he liked. To create their portraits, he asked a series of questions about such diverse events as their publishing debut, or a first kiss.

Wilkins said the process was "like having dinner with somebody that you're interested in, and getting to ask all the questions. How they feel about their parents, their brothers and sisters, school, university, ambitions."

Then he got out the camera and read some of the interview back to them, asking them to reflect on different touchstones. This, he filmed. Each writer reacts in a distinctly individual manner. Some are quite at home with the camera, engaged and expansive and open, while others are distinctly uncomfortable.

Because Wilkins doesn't disclose what, exactly, he asked the models, and what they said in answer, he has, in a sense, received and kept their secrets. This, he said, "is part of the mystery of the portraits."

There is no dialogue, only expression and response. There is no movement, excepting the subject sitting down at the beginning and rising five minutes later (and Yann Martel's pet bird

walking along his shoulder).

"The great painted portraits are, generally, stunning," Wilkins said. "You really get a sense of the person, the intangible is there." Photographic portraits, though, are a different story – because they only tell part of the story, he said. "With the photo, it photographs the physiognomy, the physical features. But it is only a single instant, an instant of the person being sad, or ecstatic, or pensive, or working. It's not a true portrait, it's not the whole person."

Wilkins' *Kinetic Portraits* leap that barrier. "These are 6,000 images, 6,000 individual photos. They show the person as they think of key moments, good times, bad times, children, family, inspiration. These are moving portraits, bringing them to life."

Wilkins's next project is something he called "moving landscapes", big works that look like abstract stripes, but are in fact manipulated big screen video vistas "Including trains, trees, snow, traffic, anything that moves.

"The video flat screen is the new canvas. I'm readapting it and I hope doing it effectively."

- Staff

