Foreword

Figures & Landscape

Creating contexts for the exploration of interdisciplinary influences within The Rooms Provincial Art Gallery has been a priority and we are very pleased to present this exhibition that brings together literary and artistic domains in the form of Peter Wilkins' kinetic portraiture representing 12 Canadian writers. Transposing traditional elements of figure and landscape within a contemporary technological register over the last several years, Wilkins has been evolving a new media inquiry of time-based representations of subjects through a methodology that shifts attention from the final result of the creative process to the process itself.

Equally central to the encounter with Wilkins' kinetic portraits is the act of looking and the engaged position of the viewer. In this particular series of representations, one does not encounter anonymous subjects, but rather figures that are familiar due to their presence and role within the Canadian literary realm. Margaret Atwood, Roch Carrier, Austin Clarke, Douglas Coupland, Wayne Johnston, Ann-Marie MacDonald, Alistair MacLeod, Yann Martel, Anne Michaels, David Adams Richards, Jane Urquhart, and M.G. Vassanji are not on a roster that has been selected randomly or innocently. Rather, it is value-laden, and cannot be separated from the degrees of recognition and association that may be brought by viewers to the encounter with each figure.

What the writers share, their articulation and exploration of distinct and diverse experiences in relation to Canada and the world, suggests the need for deeper levels of interpretation with regards to figure and 'landscape' within this particular portraiture. As Jennifer Dyer notes in her essay, Wilkins ties together "aesthetic concepts of text and image through his own deployment of traditional and contemporary visual media, without a word from his subjects." The kinetic representations establish a dialogical relationship with the viewer, brought, literally, face-to-face with the weight of forms of literary expression as significant and potent processes of self-definition and self-imagination with regards to place, memory, and social identity. In the encounter with the portraits, emerging from the slippage between outward appearance and inner thought, writer and work, representation and interpretation, is a clear sense of the way that mental spaces and social realities are inevitably and always inseparable.

I would like to express our appreciation to the artist for his enthusiasm and his commitment to the development of this work, and a great thanks to all of the writers involved for their participation. Contemporary visual arts programming of The Rooms Provincial Art Gallery is supported by the Canada Council for the Arts and by the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador.

Shauna McCabe, Director

Peter Wilkins

British multimedia artist Peter Wilkins, based in Clarke's Beach, Newfoundland, is also a web publisher (www.wilkins.ws) and TV host. With side projects including regular television appearances for Sky TV in the U.K. and a cooking show here in Canada, Wilkins is becoming increasingly known for his kinetic portraiture. Initiated in 2004, *Kinetic Portraits* is a series of thematic works investigating the intersections of portraiture, audience and celebrity. Wilkins' initial suite captured across-section of prominent Newfoundlanders, ranging from artists and business people to politicians and clergy. In this most recent body of work, *Kinetic Portraits of 12 Canadian Writers*, Wilkins critically engages twelve of Canada's most notable and celebrated authors. The artist would like to acknowledge the support of the Newfoundland and Labrador Arts Council.

Peter Wilkins:
Kinetic Portraits of 12 Canadian Writers

January 19 – April 29, 2007

Curated by Bruce Johnson

Peter Wilkins:
Kinetic Portraits of 12 Canadian Writers
Jennifer Dyer

Peter Wilkins' digital video installation features 12 video portraits of some of Canada's most renowned authors. The portraits are simple and direct, for other than looping each five-minute video, Wilkins does not technologically manipulate them in any way. Yet as portraits, they are complex and quietly engaging. Wilkins visually presents his figures with the added dimension of time, shifting focus from the artist's final depiction to the process of representation – the real time of sitting for the portrait. And even in this respect the kinetic portraits differ from the viewer's expectations.

The kinetic portraits do not suggest the increasing boredom and escalating discomfort associated with an extended pose. Unlike figures found in the earliest days of portrait photography, the more recent photo-portraits by Sam Taylor-Wood of weeping film stars, or the portrait paintings of Franz Hals, Vincent Van Gogh, or Francis Bacon, Wilkins' subjects appear neither trapped in a static pose nor existentially 'unraveling' in their own being. Instead, each subject is presented in self-contemplation, reflecting alone on his or her own ideas. In contrast to such work as Andy Warhol's 'screen tests', Wilkins' subjects do not react to artist nor camera as an overriding authority by demonstrating bashfulness, uncertainty, or pointed unconcern. Wilkins does not allow the camera any glamorous, silver-screen hold over his subjects. They are instead encouraged to participate in their own self-presentation.

These differences are tied to Wilkins' method, which develops the meditative attitude of his sitter and the viewers' perception of witnessing something real and unfolding. The artist asks each sitter a series of personal questions about experiences, beliefs, ideals, hopes, and fears. After switching on the camera, Wilkins relays back their answers. While the video portrait is being recorded, the sitter is asked to consider this self-presentation. Dispensing with audio permits a

range of individualized signs of contemplation to emerge: smiles, reverie, frowns, or intense scrutiny. This is the key to the 'kinetic' nature of his portraits. Wilkins affirms that his subjects are active, differentiated not by how they look but by what they do, and how they act or react to themselves. It is this methodology and vantage that distinguishes Wilkins' portraiture.

Stylistically, Wilkins follows a long line of Realist artists, including Jean François Millet, Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, and Benjamin West, re-introducing a concern for the impartial depiction of real people in everyday, contemporary settings with an emphasis on the present moment. His work offers a new media extension of this historic trajectory, placing emphasis on the current and contemporary moment through technological form. Not only does he represent his subjects in real time, but this representation mimetically represents the durational processes of their reception as artworks. Wilkins' installation, like those of Douglas Gordon (*24 Hour Psycho*), Alex McQuilkin (*Fucked*), or Stan Douglas (*der Sandman*), picks up on the modernist themes of iteration, duration, and the active nature of existence itself, articulating these themes in a new way. The repetitive structure of his portraits is not the incessant reproduction of an exact copy. Rather, this structure mirrors the ongoing process of differentiation, making a representation that combines the artist's agenda, each author's identity, their mundane surroundings, and the viewer's experience of looking.

Playing on the 'authorial' nature of his subjects, Wilkins produces portraits which offer no real beginning, conclusion,

or single narrative. One result of this repetitive, circular process in which subject and viewer are immersed, is a slowing down of the perceptual experience. Removing the audience from the ongoing flow of images and the habitual connections made within media culture, Wilkins' infinitely looped portraits generate a 'temporal space' of contemplation within the gallery – a space in which the activity of perceiving the same image is never repeated the same way twice. Repetition de-familiarizes the familiar. After several of loops, even the most iconic (Margaret Atwood) and intense (Austin Clarke) portraits lose their initial bite.

A sense of empathy remains. The viewer is mirrored, as the act of looking mimics that of the sitter who stares back. The images invite the audience to relate to or identify with each author, encouraging the viewer to follow or even anticipate a narrative of thoughts or events in the portrait. Any determinate narrative or meaning attributed to the representation is stalled by the serial loop of the medium. Ultimately, the narrative goes nowhere; the figure leaves only to return and begin the process over again. Denied the satisfaction of a fixed narrative of events and given only an ongoing, durational process, after the first run, subsequent loops allow repeated reconsideration of interpretations of the image. With each loop, there is increased awareness of the infinity of new interpretations that can be ascribed to each portrait. They become about thought, self, voyeurism, power, literacy, gender, death, and even boredom.

Although the repetition of the same subject matter eventually becomes monotonous, this too is part of the meaning. The

cyclical structure that lacks clues to any one final interpretation has the further effect of creating awareness of position in relationship to the image, as a viewer within the gallery. How to respond to this person's gaze? How long to watch? How long to stand here? These questions are affected by the images and their interpretation, connected to the way each viewer responds to the subject within the physical setting. Wilkins' kinetic portraits place the viewers firmly as embodied subjects, engaged with the world and affected by what is seen. They can playfully interact with the portraits, as if the authors were standing before them, but ultimately they are returned to the contemplation of their own selves.

Wilkins has zeroed in on what are two overarching themes shared by the Canadian authors he portrays, namely related notions of place and identity, including the impact of environment and geography on the development of people's lives. Wilkins' achievement consists in structurally including the viewer in a visual aesthetic that explores and expands upon these themes. His portraits tie together aesthetic concepts of text and image through his own deployment of traditional and contemporary visual media, without a word from his subjects. Aesthetically, Peter Wilkins' installation, *Kinetic Portraits of 12 Canadian Writers*, is firmly and historically grounded in the art of Realism, while fully exploring the canny new register of new media to create portraits that are profoundly human, contemporary in feel, and timeless in their range of affect.