



Some of Canada's best-known writers, including (from left) Wayne Johnston, Margaret Atwood and Douglas Coupland sat through Peter Wilkins' "Kinetic Portrait" process. — Submitted photos

Kinetic life: *Wilkins' moving works acquired by national gallery*

By JOAN SULLIVAN
SPECIAL TO THE TELEGRAM

The Portrait Gallery of Canada has purchased Peter Wilkins' set of 12 "Kinetic Portraits." The portraits, which were featured at The Rooms early last year, are video pieces that Wilkins composed by interviewing a dozen writers (Margaret Atwood, Douglas Coupland and Wayne Johnston among them) by asking a series of questions, then filming them as they listened to him repeat their responses.

Portraiture would normally be considered as "still life," but Wilkins, who was born in London, England and now works from Clarke's Beach, has infused the genre with — not motion, exactly, but a kind of momentum.

Other artists have produced video portraits, Wilkins said, most notably Andy Warhol. "But he was different in that he was forcing a reaction." (Warhol called these pieces "screen tests" and they were related much more closely to short films than paintings).

"I wanted to try and create a natural portrait rather than instigate a performance," Wilkins said.

Of course, the authors knew they were being recorded on film.

"But there was a comfort level. I'd

been with them generally about an hour at that point. And it's a small camera. A big camera might be invasive."

Always the authors' responses to the camera varied, with some directly engaging the lens and others coyly evading it. Each reaction is characteristic and distinct.

In this sense, the writers are direct participants in creating their portrait. For example, Wilkins does not call them "models."

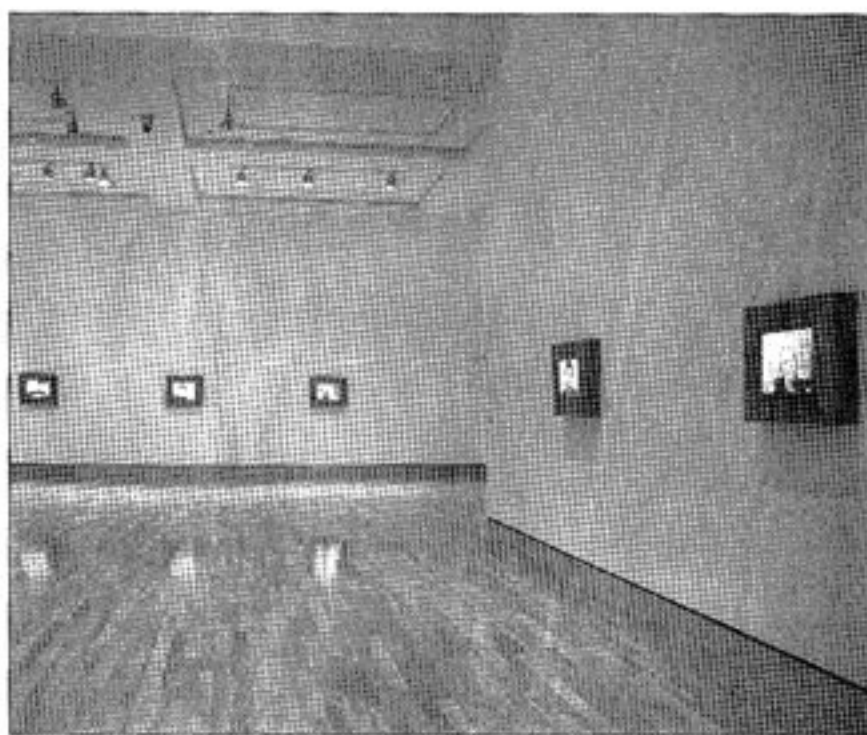
"They are sitters, or subjects. A model is posing, a portrait of a model is about physicality. I am more interested in the person, in making an authentic portrait of them."

Wilkins' subjects include such prolific artists as Yann Martel and Ann-Marie MacDonald, but said he had little trouble persuading such luminaries to be part of the exhibit.

"The tricky thing is to get hold of them. Once I could tell them that this is a series of 12 pieces and it will be at The Rooms, the writers were very supportive, very helpful."

The whole experience was so positive Wilkins is planning two new series of portraits. The first will centre on people in love.

"And there will be a good range of people, some in their old age who've been in love for 60 years, and some teenagers. These will be double por-



Peter Wilkins' "Kinetic Portraits" was installed at The Rooms Jan. 19-May 6, 2007.

— Submitted photo

traits, with them chatting about their relationship, how things are when things are not perfect, what it was like when they first met."

Once again, although the initial conversation is integral to the process, the portraits themselves will be silent.

"When I see portraits I don't want to see talking. Visual art is not really sound-based. And with video art, if there's a verbal narrative, it gives it a linear thread. A start and an end. And I want to take the start and the end out."

This frees the viewer to gaze for 10

seconds or 10 minutes, whatever they prefer, Wilkins said. "They don't have to think, 'gosh, I missed the beginning,' and feel an obligation to watch it all through again."

Wilkins' second planned project includes group portraits — but not just any groups. He wants to focus on Canadian rock bands. Again, he will pursue a broad spectrum of bands, not just the ones he likes. He has "a fantasy list" in mind but he is keeping mum on that for now.

A third upcoming project, on the Gander Airport Departure Lounge, will be shown at The Rooms this fall. This will include both video and Wilkins' photographic strip/monotypes.

This departure space had been described as perhaps the best late-1950s modernist room in the country, Wilkins said, and the exhibition will blend ideas of futurism and flight, movement and stillness.

The Portrait Gallery of Canada was created in 2001 by Library and Archives Canada. Currently it consists as a collection, looking for a gallery — the Conservative government shelved a proposed site on Wellington Street in Ottawa, and several cities are competing to house the new institution. Wilkins' "Kinetic Portraits" are available for viewing upon request.