

PORTRAITS Podcast – MacNaughton Episode

[INTRO MUSIC]

Kim Sajet: Welcome to Portraits: a podcast from the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery where art and biography, history and identity collide. I'm Kim Sajet.

[MUSIC]

Kim Sajet: Portraits are not just paintings and photographs. They might be selfies or statues or even illustrations in a newspaper like those of my next guest, Wendy MacNaughton. I first came across Wendy on Instagram. Yep, that's right; Instagram. Her style is loose and friendly and she sketches people in places in fluid lines; sometimes very sparsely. And then she fills in the contours with watercolors. There's an immediacy to Wendy's drawings that make them really personal. She draws from life and in the empty spaces, there are handwritten quotes that slant and change size like the writing on a shopping list that you carry around with you. Those snippets of conversation often echo much larger issues in the news. In fact, Wendy sometimes refers to her work as drone journalism and her subjects, or sources, include people that we may not have noticed before: inmates, hospice workers, a boot maker, maybe even someone standing next to you in line to buy a sandwich. Wendy has published 11 books including three New York Times best sellers. She also has an illustrated column called, "Meanwhile." We spoke to Wendy from a studio in her hometown of San Francisco.

[MUSIC]

Kim Sajet: Wendy, welcome to our podcast.

Wendy MacNaughton: Thank you so much, Kim. It's great to be here with you.

Kim Sajet: So, how is drawing someone different than taking their picture? You are walking around, I assume, with a pencil...

Wendy MacNaughton: Hmm, mmm.

Kim Sajet: And a sketch book. Do people look at you and go, "What's the creepy woman in the corner doing?"

Wendy MacNaughton: [Laughs]

Kim Sajet: Or how does that work?

Wendy MacNaughton: They usually don't say it loud enough for me to hear it. [Laughs]

Kim Sajet: But, you kind of feel like you're like, "Yeah, they're all watching me."

Kim Sajet: Or do you? Do you blend into the background just like the people that you're depicting?

Wendy MacNaughton: Well, so I carry a sketchbook with me pretty much at all times and I draw with pen and usually a nine and a half inch sketchbook and, um, a pen and I use that to kind of document the things that I see going on around me: moments and people and

certain settings. And you know it's, whereas some people might pull out their phone or camera to capture a scene or a person, um, I'll take out my sketchpad and do some drawings and I think the response that people have is very different; uh, especially when I'm drawing a stranger, right? If you take out a camera and you point it at somebody who you don't know and you're taking their picture, there's a good chance that you're going to feel or that person is going to feel a little bit objectified and a little sketched out so to speak.

Kim Sajat: Yes. Yeah. And in fact, you know, the verbiage that we use that comes from cameras. We talk about, you know, shooting a photo really comes with this sort of hunting gathering sort of approach to, um, finding your quarry and capturing it, right? But you're not doing that when you've got a sketchbook and pen. You don't have this sort of artificial apparatus between you and the other person.

Wendy MacNaughton: No, the machinery is gone, right? We're removing that machine that stands in between two people. Um, and I think that creates a very, very different dynamic. Also, time has a lot to do with it when, you know, I think shooting is a good word for it, right? You're kind of grabbing something as quickly as you can. Sometimes, you know, people on the street used to shoot from the hip; do things surreptitiously like that. Um, and for me, things take a lot more time. Drawing takes time and it requires looking very closely and, and more intimately. And then, so, if somebody does see me drawing them, which usually happens, it usually does. Um, it requires an interaction between us. So, so, if somebody sees me drawing them I'm gonna have to wave, right? I'm gonna stop and say, "Hello. I'm drawing you. Is that okay?" You know, and they'll either nod and smile, wave back or they'll kind of look away and they'll leave. And that is my signal that it's not okay to draw them and I will respect that. [Laughs]

Kim Sajat: Oh, that's great.

Kim Sajat: So, how is the drawing that you do portraiture?

Wendy MacNaughton: Well, um...

Kim Sajat: Sorry, hard question.

[Laughter]

Kim Sajat: It's coming from the director of the Portrait Gallery, so I had to ask.

Wendy MacNaughton: I know! I don't feel like I'm in the hot seat at all in this one, Kim.

[Laughter]

Kim Sajat: Well, maybe we can step back. You know, you talk about what you do as drawn journalism.

Wendy MacNaughton: Hmm.

Kim Sajat: And drawn journalism, to me, is always really about sort of humanity, right? What is happening current day activities? Things that actions that people have taken and that inherently means it's about portraiture? Would you agree that drawn journalism is really about portraits?

Wendy MacNaughton: I would say that everything I do is a portrait, whether it be of a person or of a place or of a community. Yes, it is portraiture.

Kim Sajat: Can you tell me more about that?

Wendy MacNaughton: Yeah, I'm... In everything that I do, I'm trying to capture a very full sense of whether be the person or a community's, um, story, where they're coming from, uh, and represent them in a way that they would feel fully seen. I prioritize my subject. I don't prioritize my drawing. Um, my drawing is very loose. Um, it's very sketchy, so to speak. I draw mostly from life. Um, I prefer to draw that way because, uh, it's in the moment and I'm having experience with the person. And there's an energy there that I don't think can be replicated when drawing from a photograph or from memory. But being there with a person, experiencing that time and then documenting it, there's an accountability that I very much believe in. And so, yes, I think that everything I do is a portrait. Sometimes, they're published in books and um, considered illustrations. Sometimes, they're published in newspapers and consider journalism. Magazines, too. Sometimes, they're hung in a gallery and considered art. But, I would say, yes, everything I do is a portrait.

Kim Sajat: And also, because you really add these portraits, these drawings, but to the text, you literally, um, tell these stories of people who often don't actually get to tell their stories.

Wendy MacNaughton: Yeah and I do it in their words. So, I'm trained as a social worker. And one of the tendencies, you basically never put words in somebody else's mouth, but I tend to work very collaboratively with my subjects and make sure that I have articulated their thoughts and ideas in a way that they're very comfortable with.

Kim Sajat: That's great. Now, um, the first time I really connected with one of your illustrations was a picture of Rhonda that you did in the museum. Can you describe that drawing and a little bit about how that happened?

Wendy MacNaughton: Yeah. Um, well, this drawing was done onsite inside the National Portrait Gallery. Um, it's a pen and watercolor drawing of a guard named Rhonda. She's kind of at a three quarter angle and she's, um, facing away and she's guarding, um, President Barack Obama's portrait by Kehinde Wiley. She's painted, um, in watercolor and the portrait itself of the president is in black and white. And next to her, there is a bunch of text and that text is derived from a conversation that I had with Rhonda. I stopped and chatted with her, without trying to distract her too much while she was working, of course.

Kim Sajat: No, so in the text that you interviewed her, she mentions an older lady who comes and um, literally gets on her knees

Wendy MacNaughton: Hmm, mmm.

Kim Sajat: And is kind of overcome by seeing this, uh, the portrait of the first African-American president. But then she talks about his shoes. Why did you put that into the narrative?

Wendy MacNaughton: Well, I, I thought that was the most beautiful thing I'd ever heard. So, so, um, Rhonda...

Kim Sajat: Can you read it out, Wendy? Can you?

Wendy MacNaughton: Yeah, um. I'll share it with you. Um, the craziest thing is his shoes. Stand here where I'm standing or over there. It looks like his shoes are always facing you. Wherever you go, he's facing you. Um, and, that was...

[Laughter]

Wendy MacNaughton: It's funny.

Kim Sajat: It's really true actually.

Wendy MacNaughton: And powerful.

Kim Sajat: Yeah, I mean often people, you know, those creepy pictures where you're in a, um, sci fi movie and the eyes in the painting follow you around the room. In this case, it's the shoes that kind of always are facing you. It's kind of smart that I never thought about it until I saw your, uh, picture.

Wendy MacNaughton: You know, I didn't either. And when she pointed that out and I started walking around, um, other visitors noticed me doing that as well. And so, all of, suddenly this entire group of people was moving around trying to see if his shoes did indeed follow wherever they went. And, and it was hilarious and it's a wonderful kind of interactive experience with that portrait. You know, much like you say when portraits are looking kind of straight on at somebody, we follow their eyes. In this case, we're also following the direction that he's pointing in, right? Where he's standing or sitting rather and pointing. And I think that's very poignant.

Kim Sajat: I'd love to know, why did you pick Rhonda? How did you notice her in the gallery which in some ways is kind of ironic because the National Portrait Gallery is full of really famous people? And indeed, she's guarding Barack Obama. But you've put him more in the back of your picture and he's in black and white and she's in color.

Wendy MacNaughton: Hmm, mmm.

Kim Sajat: What was going through your mind?

Wendy MacNaughton: With all, with all due respect, to that both, that portrait and the president, and the artist. Absolutely, yeah. Um, so, there's somebody who are, who's supposed to blend in to, um, the scenery, right? They're actually supposed to be quite invisible, um, inside a museum or a gallery.

Kim Sajat: Yes. Yes.

Wendy MacNaughton: When in fact, they are both the guardians of culture, in a way, right? Inside that space...

Kim Sajat: Hmm, mmm. Literally.

Wendy MacNaughton: Yeah.

Kim Sajat: They're literally guarding the culture. Yes.

Wendy MacNaughton: They're guarding the culture and they're also witnessing our experience of that culture. So, so, these guards, to me, um, are, are very important figures. They see so much and they are so rarely asked about their experience, um, about their perspective. An associate should share their story.

Kim Sajat: Hmm, mmm. So, you've done a whole body of work around people in hospice and you've done, particularly these beautiful, very sensitive drawings, that must have been kind of personally, um, difficult for you watching your Aunt pass away. Can you describe what that was like and perhaps even one of the drawings that you did?

Wendy MacNaughton: Oh yeah. I'm taking like kind of a stretch for a second. Before we go into this one.

Wendy MacNaughton: Ooooo. Um, I did a series of drawings of my Aunt, while she was passing away. Um, I drew her almost every day, while she was dying in the last weeks of her life. Um, before that, I had been afraid to look at death, literally or figuratively, I guess. Um, and drawing is a way that I can look at things that I am afraid to or that scare me. And in this case, um, it was somebody I loved dying. So, I, um, like I said, I usually drawn pen and ink but these drawings are done in pencil. Um, they're done at the bedside and you can kind of see my Aunt, everyday, move further towards, towards passing. You can see my dad is with her in some of them. That was, that was hard too. It was challenging. It was, it was, um. To see my Aunt in such a vulnerable place and, um.

Kim Sajat: And your father, as well.

Wendy MacNaughton: And also...Yeah. To seem, to see my dad, um, to witness that might have been something that I would have been inclined to turn away from. But, um, the drawing helped me watch that and witness that. And it's probably one of the most important things that I've seen in my life.

Kim Sajat: And it's so incredibly powerful because you have left, for those of us who weren't in the room, a real sense of, I guess, sort of the arc of life, maybe? I do get a real sense of time slowing down and maybe the deliberate choice that you made to do pencil and not pen is also part of that. And, um, in one, in the sketches that you do, you often separated, you can see a very clear, um, the middle of the sketchbook where you have the bindings. So, it's this sort of also, um, two part, uh, almost quite symbolic actually from the life that we're in, to the life that she's going to. So, I think for other people it really helps us, looking at what you've done. So, thank you for that.

Wendy MacNaughton: I'm, make that, that makes me pleased.

Kim Sajat: Oh, good.

Wendy MacNaughton: Pleased to hear that. No, truly because that, um, I mean, that's, that's kind of why I do what I do is I try and look at things that people might overlook normally or might turn away from. And if I can experience them in an open, vulnerable and authentic way, then maybe it gives other people the opportunity to and, and might help them do it themselves in the future.

[MUSIC]

Kim Sajet: My guest is illustrator and graphic journalist, Wendy McNaughton. When we come back, we'll hear how she sometimes portrays people by linking them to a few objects that are really personal. Stay with us.

[MUSIC]

Kim Sajet: I'm talking to illustrator, Wendy McNaughton, about how she injects journalism and humanity and a sense of humor into portraiture. Her newspaper column called, "Meanwhile," includes serialized drawings. A bit like how you might imagine a comic strip, but instead of the funnies, you'll find illustrations of actual people or objects that tell a story that she's been investigating, like the evolving role of libraries or how to get your face on a stamp.

Kim Sajet: So, let's get back to our conversation. You've done this amazing sort of series called, "Power Tchotchkes." Can you tell us about that? Why did you do it and what is it exactly? It's these things people carry around.

Wendy MacNaughton: Yeah, this is really fun. So, this, um, piece was done for my "Meanwhile" column in The New York Times Sunday business. This is a project that I've done in a workshop for quite some time, where I asked people to bring an object in or possibly some other person. There's always a story behind it. You can take a tube off Chapstick and there is a story behind it. I guarantee you. So, I asked for people, who I greatly respect, to choose objects that they have or an object that they keep in their workspace on their desk that has special significance to them, that maybe reminds them of why they do what they do. I asked Betty Reid Soskin, who is 97 now.

Kim Sajet: Wow.

Wendy MacNaughton: She's a ranger with the National Park Service. Oh, she's so amazing. Um, I asked her what she keeps, and you know, she is a ranger so, she doesn't have an office per say, but she does wear a uniform. So, in some way, that, that is that is her office. And she shared with me, um, an old photo. And this was her story. "This is a replica of a photo of my enslaved great grandmother, Leontine Breaux Allen. She was alive 1846 to 1948, whom I knew. I was 27 when my slave ancestor died. I've carried this fading fragment with me for most of my adult life. It was in the breast pocket of my park ranger uniform, when I was a seated guest on the Capitol Mall, in January 2009, witnessing the inauguration of the nation's first African-American president, Barack Obama. It keeps me grounded in space and time."

Kim Sajet: It's extraordinary.

Wendy MacNaughton: And so moving.

Kim Sajet: Yeah.

Wendy MacNaughton: So, um, so powerful. The last time I'll share. Bernae Brown, uh Research Professor and Storyteller, she, um, sent me some photos of these two little bowls that she keeps, um, in her office and her story is this. "My kids made these two ceramic bowls, years apart, at a paint your own pottery place. I keep them on my desk in my home office. When I'm working, they remind me that what I love most is not perfect, but

real and generous." And you can see, um, in the paintings, there's, um, fingerprints in the bowls and they're, they're anything, but perfect, but they're, you know, real, generous.

Kim Sajet: And then there's a large, sort of giant, green ball and the other one is a sort of small, little blue ball, um, a little mushy blue ball.

[Laughter]

Wendy MacNaughton: A little mushy blue ball.

[Laughter]

Kim Sajet: And you can tell that a child made them, actually. You're so talented and be able to convey that on the, on the page. So, if I was to ask you what is your Power Tchotchkes? What is that?

Wendy MacNaughton: I have, um, a can of generic green beans that I keep in my studio.

Kim Sajet: A can of green beans. Okay?

[Laughter]

Wendy MacNaughton: Those, that can of green beans was a gift to me from somebody I met maybe going on eight years ago. I was drawing in a pretty tough part of San Francisco and I was working on a project there. I was standing on the street, um, everyday. Just documenting, drawing, talking to people. One day, while I was drawing, there was an older woman, you know, probably in her 70s or so, later 70s. She was sitting on a blanket and she was selling food and that food was clearly food that comes from a food pantry. And I had been not drawing her, but drawing near her and I noticed, out of the corner of my eye, that some guy was kind of giving her a hard time. So, um, I moved towards them and he was kind of trying to steal some stuff. Kind of rough her up a little bit and I stopped what I was doing and I went over and I kind of broke it up and I sent the guy on his way and the woman was pretty rattled. Um, she gathered up all of her food in the blanket and started walking off and she got a few steps away and she turned around and, she came back and we had a language barrier between us. Um, but, you know, she smiled and she reached into that blanket and then she handed me this can of green beans.

Kim Sajet: Wow.

Wendy MacNaughton: And I took that as kind of a thank you for, for breaking up the situation. And then she moved on. To me, it was, it was a meaningful moment because my job is, uh, to observe and my job is to record and, but, you know, my job is also to be a human. And so, this was a really important reminder to me that my priority is actually the latter. It's um, it's to step in and I know that some people who are say, "photojournalists" um, have a policy of not stepping in. Well, that's not really, um, how I see things. So, it's, it's just a reminder to me of my priorities.

Kim Sajet: Wendy, do you consider yourself a journalist?

Wendy MacNaughton: I call myself a graphic journalist and that's very ironic because I'm not a graphic designer and nor am I technically a journalist, but I use the tools of design, of journalism, of illustration, of painting, of social work, and even of advertising, and bring

them together to tell stories in the most human way that I can. Um, I would say that I am doing my best, um, to respect my subjects and to communicate, um, their truths. Um, whether that be visually or verbally, um, as, as best I can and I'll use all the tools at my disposal to do that.

Kim Sajat: I love that. It's fantastic. So my whole approach to portraiture is that it's kind of like this three legged stool. So, in one leg you have the sitter that you've portrayed. The other leg is the artist who just as you said are doing the best that they can. And also trying to stay true to themselves. But at the third leg, other people who look at the portraits and they will take with them whatever feels right for them at that moment. So, it's always dynamic. It's always contemporary. Even if a portrait was created 300 years ago, it lives in that moment regardless.

Wendy MacNaughton: Yes. Yes. And that's exciting! That, that dynamism is very exciting to me. Um, and the interpretations of it and that it's exponential, right?

Kim Sajat: Yes.

Wendy MacNaughton: Like, that is, that is very exciting.

Kim Sajat: And it builds, right? Just. They build on top of each other. Yeah. It's like, it's like culture. They... This is layers and the layers keep going on top of each other and on top of each other; gets nice and messy.

Wendy MacNaughton: We are social creatures and portraiture, um, and storytelling is a way for us to commune. It's a way for us to understand ourselves through each other. And so, I mean, I guess that's a little bit of what I'm trying to do with this work.

[MUSIC]

Kim Sajat: Well, Wendy thank you so much for spending some time with me. I'm your biggest fan. I can't wait for the next drawing and the next of those layers of culture that you're adding to our contemporary dialogue. Thank you so much.

Wendy MacNaughton: Oh, thank you so much. It's been such a pleasure chatting with you, Kim.

[MUSIC]

Kim Sajat: You can find Wendy's, "Meanwhile" column in The New York Times business section. She is also in the middle of a pretty remarkable project called, "Meanwhile, in America," where she travels from person to person, based on their recommendations. And you can find some of the illustrations we've discussed on our Web site: www.npg.si.edu/podcast. Our podcast team includes Ruth Morris, Jason Orfanon, Deborah Sisum and Rebecca Case-Meyer. And a big thank you to Andrew Roth our engineer in San Francisco. Our theme music is by Joe Kye. Tarek Fouda is our engineer. Until next time, I'm Kim Sajat.

[MUSIC]