

Carol Sawyer and Laurance Playford-Beaudet on May Wilson

Carol Sawyer 03:26

Now we are recording. So I'm Carol Sawyer.

Laurance Playford-Beaudet

And I'm Laurance Playford-Beaudet.

Carol Sawyer

And we've been collaborating on this podcast that you're listening to. I work mostly in photo and video and do a lot of research in my practice, and I'm a singer.

Laurance Playford-Beaudet 03:46

Mm hmm. And I work a lot with sound as well as other mediums in my own practice. So I was really happy when Carol asked me to collaborate on a research-based audio piece.

Carol Sawyer

Yeah, me too. And it was fun to collaborate, sort of starting in the middle of a pandemic, when we weren't able to meet in person at Laurance's up on Texada Island. Yeah, I've never even been there. And I'm stuck in Strathcona here. But we finally are meeting in person because it's now July.

Laurance Playford-Beaudet

Yeah. And being able to be in the same space and actually listen together to the thing that we're working on has been awesome.

Carol Sawyer

Because in the making of it, we were sort of sending each other back and forth snippets, what do you think of this and talking through how we might approach this

Laurance Playford-Beaudet

it was a little bit like male art

Carol Sawyer

which is quite fitting actually, as you'll find out. So, we hope you enjoy it as much as we enjoyed making it.

Laurance Playford-Beaudet 05:50

This musical intro is made by extracting audio from the film made in 1969, *Woo Who? May Wilson*, by Amelie Rothschild. I took a sample of May Wilson answering the door in her sing-songy way and looped it and Carol Sawyer's singing on top of the loop that I created. You'll get to hear the full song later in this podcast. Carol Sawyer extensively researched through the SFU archives and other sources about this artist May Wilson. She's going to tell you more, now.

Carol Sawyer 06:35

When I received this invitation to make a podcast about a work in the SFU collection, I started looking through SFU's art collection database. Looking for something that I wanted to talk about, and I was drawn to the work by May Wilson. I didn't know anything about her. They are about the size of post-cards, there's eight of them, and they have a mysterious background that is like a spray painted shadow some kind of stencil. (spray can noise)

On the surface of each is mounted a small black and white stamp that looks like some kind of artists stamp. And the stamps all have images, one of which appear to be found images of women, many from sort of art sources, to which May Wilson has collaged her own face. The May Wilson piece that we're using on the card for this podcast has to have these faces pasted onto a diagram that looks like maybe a medical diagram from around 1900. The other seven stamp images from the set are quite eclectic. She seems to put her face onto various postcards, opera promotional postcards, images of old master paintings. There's also a picture of, what I learned later, is one of her sculptural assemblages, which contains a kind of life mask of her own face, along with a sieve and a potato masher in a saucepan.

So, who is this person? I wanted to know, and I have been in the process of finding that out. So, in this podcast, I'm going to share some of the research with you.

Laurance Playford-Beaudet 08:23

I'd love to play a brief clip from the film of May Wilson's voice and she's talking about the nature of the objects in her studio.

Audio Clip (*Woo Who? May Wilson*) 08:37

In my studio work is all cast-off material from everyday living, cast-off objects that had once had a life as a shoe to wear, or a baby doll for a child to play with.

Carol Sawyer 08:56

Me Wilson was born in 1905 in Baltimore, Maryland, and she grew up poor. Her father died when she was still quite young, and she left school after the ninth grade, to work as a stenographer to help the family. When she was 20, she married a young lawyer and had her first child pretty soon after that. She continued working until she had her second child, and by then her husband was earning enough that she was able to leave her job and focus on being a mother and being a housewife, but she dreamt of being an artist. In 1942, the couple moved to Towson, Maryland, just outside Baltimore, and she began to take courses in art history and art by correspondence. By 1948, they were well enough off to move to a gentleman farm north of Towson, in an area that was quite rural, and she had time to herself to pursue painting and she gave art lessons to neighbours, exhibited her paintings. They were intentionally in a kind of naive style, and she was submitting them to juried exhibitions at the Baltimore Museum of Art and other places, and even winning some awards.

Audio Clip (*Woo Who? May Wilson*) 10:07

When I closed the door behind me the first night I stayed at the Chelsea Hotel, that was the first time I had ever been alone in a hotel room.

[OFF MIC CONVERSATION]

I don't know what to say

I told you, you know, that I just don't know how to make money, I just don't know

That's the bad thing about it

That's a terrible weakness of mine

Audio Clip (*Woo Who? May Wilson*) 10:31

And I knew that I had to sit down and be as reasonable as possible and think what to do.

Carol Sawyer 10:40

When her marriage disintegrated around 1965, she moved to New York to pursue her dream of becoming an artist. She was already working with photo montage techniques and, encouraged by Ray Johnson, she had begun her snowflake collages in Maryland. These are hand cut doily things that look like homemade snowflakes, except they're cut from, in her case, the pages of porn magazines.

Laurance Playford-Beaudet 11:07

That gesture of snowflake cutouts of porn magazines, with other images I've attempted to do as an audio version. So what you'll hear is two different audio extracts with pieces of each coming through at the same time because I just love this snowflake style of collage of taking images and punching holes through it to let something else show through.

Carol Sawyer 11:46

Wilson is folding and cutting holes in centrefolds pulled from porn magazines, both gay and straight. Sometimes [before I arrive at the] hearing and mixing them images material that's been flattened, [finished product] its intended use scrambled, cut up, shot full of holes, her mix of [product] wrapped up with porn [is much] unexpected and funny [charge] and begs a consideration of what it means to poke holes into something [as the moment of assemblage] [which is one case] it seems like [of the jewel of my work] of ventilation [starting with utter chaos] a demystification [and reducing it] letting some fresh air in [to order] or some spray paint out. (spray can noise)

Carol Sawyer 12:56

Wilson's gesture of inserting her face into an art historical or popular cultural image invites us to consider how women have been depicted in art and in other representations. So often, half naked. Posed in ways designed to be sexually titillating to the male gaze, and often as metaphors for something else like virtue, chastity, liberty, the French Republic, or figures from Greek mythology, nymphs and goddesses with gazes shyly averted from the spectator. May Wilson is here, the interloper, the troublemaker, the trickster, the problematic older woman refusing to be erased. Literally sticking her nose in. Not an allegory or a symbol but an actual person meeting our gaze.

Her preferred sculptural material is the cast-off, thrown away trash. She loved to have visitors to her studio but made it a rule that they had to bring her something. It all ended up in her assemblages, shoes, toys, books, plastic flowers, baby dolls, rags. The full range of small consumer goods constrained, contained, painted over. And then there are her snowflake images. I remember making paper snowflakes like this with my sister when we were little, using white paper.

Laurance Playford-Beaudet 14:26

On the subject of May Wilson's creative methodologies I wanted to offer now the musical piece that Carol and I collaborated on. I took excerpts from the film from May Wilson's voice and incidental sound in the film to make a loop which I then offered up for Carol to sing over. Much in the way that May Wilson would take objects and materials from everyday life combining them, spray painting them, collaging them to make something new.

Musical Piece 15:01

May Wilson, "Before I arrive at the finished product, and I don't think the finished product gives me as much charge as the moment of assemblage, which is one of the joys of my work—starting with utter chaos and reducing it to order."

"And I don't think the finished product gives me as much, and I don't think the finished product gives

me as much, and I don't think the finished product gives me as much, and I don't think the finished product gives me as much charge as the moment of assemblage.”

Carol Sawyer 17:38

In one scene, Wilson is coating one of her assemblages with a can of spray paint, while simultaneously holding court with her young friends. So like a mother to know how to multitask. Making art as if she were making dinner, throwing ingredients together, improvising, chatting and entertaining the kids while never losing her focus on the task at hand.

Wilson's Maryland accent, which you can hear in the film, brought me immediately back to the voices of women I remember from when I was a little girl growing up in Washington, DC. Some of the older women at our church in Bethesda, Maryland had accents like that. There's something very particular and familiar to me about it, and it made me feel like I might have met her. [Bird chirping starts]

Wilson talks about the freedom of not taking yourself too seriously. She's playing, she's willing to make herself look ridiculous and that humour allows her to make fun of ideas of restrictive femininity. And what at that time was a culture, highly valuing youth and beauty and women. Women her age, become invisible in the visual field to a certain extent, they weren't depicted anywhere in art, or advertising the way that young women were and are, and that allows her a kind of freedom. She says in relation to her sculpture, her philosophy was to take whatever crosses your path, and that makes me think of ways in which women have often had to be creative with whatever life has thrown at them. I think of the generation of women who make beautiful quilts from scraps of salvaged and carefully saved fabric...

Carol Sawyer 19:28

Waiting for him to cross over...She describes her sculptural practice as starting with utter chaos and reducing it to order which sounds a lot like a description of housework. She makes assemblages of found objects that people bring her and she binds them together and bundles with whatever's handy and then spray paints them. The monochromatic coat of paint unifies all of the elements. She never knows how it's going to turn out. It's not planned at all. She deals with what comes her way. She copes with it and she makes something out of nothing. This could be considered the traditional superpower of the housewife.

Laurance Playford-Beaudet 20:10

So, I'm working on Carol's audio thing, and one thing that she had mentioned was putting some Eastern songbirds in and so I went online I was just like okay, Eastern songbirds blah blah. Like, where May Wilson would have been working, and I just randomly the first file I got is this Eastern Wood-Pewee and listen to this. [Bird chirping continues].

Laurance Playford-Beaudet 20:45

It sounds like the “woo hoo” of May Wilson. So anyways, I wanted to send you a little audio I'm working had a nap and now I'm working on Carol's audio thing. And yeah, so here's a voice message for you hope you're having a nice evening [faded talking].

Music

[Birds chirping loudly]

Carol Sawyer 21:33

I asked Michael Morris if he knew May Wilson, and he told me that Ray Johnson took him and Vincent Trasov to meet her at her place at the Chelsea Hotel around 1972. Not long after *Woo Hoo* the movie was shot. He's really busy because there's a show about the Image Bank coming to the Belkin at UBC. Image bank was Michael Morris, Gary Lee-Nova, and Vincent Trasov. They were instigators key organizers in the male art movement which was international, and they were corresponding with all kinds of people all over including Ray Johnson and May Wilson. There are several works by May Wilson in The Image Bank show and it was pretty exciting to see these. She took part in The Image Bank postcard show and there at the Belkin is her very, very funny postcard. With her face superimposed on the face of a fur clad cave woman holding a baby in one arm, and in the other hand holding a ticket to the Whitney. "Admit one," it's torn off [laughter]. This image also turns up in the stamps on the May Wilson postcards that SFU has. There's a copy of the international image exchange directory in the Belkin show, which includes a collage by May Wilson, one of her snow flaky collages cut out of a porn magazine, a male porn magazine this one. And the artists in the network are listed alphabetically along with their addresses and what they want people to send them.

May Wilson's entry says she wants personal fragments for collage and then the next person says he wants penis pics and rhinoceros, [laughter]. So, so I follow up with SFU staff, and they had told me they had some kind of catalogue for a mail art show in their archives. We think maybe that's how SFU acquired these May Wilson images in the first place, but SFU archives can't share the archive file related to their 1973 mail art show until all personal information in the files has been redacted. [Bird chirping fades out.] Which is so ironic, when you consider that people in these networks freely shared their mailing addresses, publishing them in directories that were circulated in publications like *FILE Magazine*. You can see lots of these addresses on display at the Belkin Art Gallery right now, but I understand that archives are constrained by copyright laws.

When they finally arrive, the SFU files don't reveal very much, except that the main focus of the exhibition appears to have been artist stamps. May Wilson seems to have been in the SFU show from an early stage as she is listed as already confirmed in letters sent by the curator to other artists, he is trying to interest in taking part. So, that seems like the most likely way that her work ended up at SFU and I'm really glad that they did. [Music Plays]

Carol Sawyer 24:38

We carried out a lot of research in the production of this podcast and we'd like to acknowledge some of the useful sources that we drew on.

Laurance Playford-Beaudet

For instance, May Wilson's Wikipedia page and wiki art page was full of useful information.

Carol Sawyer

There's a really good article by her son William S. Wilson titled, "Art is a Jealous Lover, May Wilson 1905 to 1986," on the website, warholstars.org

Laurance Playford-Beaudet

And Pavel Zoubak Fine Art Gallery held an exhibition of her snowflake pieces in 2017. It's on their website at pavelzoubok.com

Carol Sawyer

Artsy.net has a good article on Wilson titled, "The 1950s Housewife Who Became the Grandmother of New York's Underground Art Scene."

Laurance Playford-Beaudet

Another good article on May Wilson is at awarewomenartist.com

Carol Sawyer

And the film *Woo Who? May Wilson* by Amalie Rothschild was produced by New Day Films and you can read about it on their website, newday.com.

Laurance Playford-Beaudet

And you can watch *Woo Who?*, and many other awesome films totally for free using a public library card on kanopy.com.

Carol Sawyer

The Image Bag exhibition that I referred to in the podcast was on at the Belkin Art Gallery at UBC in Vancouver from June to August 2021, and you can read all about it at the gallery's website belkin.ubc.ca. I want to thank Michael Morris for taking time to talk to me about meeting May Wilson and we also both want to thank the SFU archives and SFU Art Gallery staff.

Laurance Playford-Beaudet

Thank you SFU.

Carol Sawyer

Thank you SFU.