

# Connor, Painting

CONNOR:

My name is Connor and I'm a painting, a portrait painting of President William Howard Taft. You see him from the waist down and he's wearing a double-breasted suit, sort of leaning back looking after the left foot, your left foot but my right. I'm a good painting, not a great painting, you know, I'd admit to that. And I think it's fitting, he was a good president from what I gathered, you know, probably not an old timer, maybe, but... yeah, I wouldn't pick another president to paint.

IAN CHILLAG:

So, you're not... you're a painting of Taft but we shouldn't... you are not Taft.

CONNOR:

No, I'm an image, it's an illusion, it's an optical illusion, it's an easy mistake made, I'm not him but I look like him, or I look like, part of me looks like him.

IAN CHILLAG:

Mm-hm.

CONNOR:

You know, a little bit of me looks like the wall behind him.

IAN CHILLAG:

I imagine though, you did... you did have a chance to meet him when you were being created?

CONNOR:

I only recall meeting him once, I was running for a while but my back was to him for the actual, when the... when it was being painted.

IAN CHILLAG:

I'm interested in that process because, you know, when I was born, I was born... I was a tiny version of myself and I grew in size but like, everything that I am now was there was just smaller.

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CONNOR:

Yeah, my very first moments I was the... dimensions never change, I was always the same basic dimensions. It was more a matter of, sort of feeling of the textures and at first... My first memory is feeling like, I was not sure what I was. And I was aware, the tiniest little sort of like flex of colour texture and I remember having a feeling of, "Oh, oh, I'm an image, but what am I?" You know, I... a bit of a man who's painting me. At first, I remember thinking am I... am I... Do I look like him? And then realising now, I didn't look like him. I look like someone else.

And I remember when I was complete when Taft came around. And I was so nervous and I remember him looking at me and having a sense... I sensed that he was perhaps not disappointed but... I had a sense that he sort of thought to himself, "Is that what I look like?" And That's exactly what I was thinking at the time, I was thinking is that what I look like? And I'm thinking, we're both thinking the same thing but for different reasons, because he looks that way because that's how he is but I look that way because that's how he is. We both look the same because it's how he is.

IAN CHILLAG:

It's interesting because today you look, you know, it's 2019, you're in the National Portrait Gallery, you still look today like Taft looked on that day.

CONNER:

Yeah, I mean that was the point of me, to a certain extent.

IAN CHILLAG:

Yeah.

CONNOR:

And that's not something I take lightly, I know that I'm a memory, that's a sacred obligation 'cause I'm here to represent someone who's gone. And I know that half of these paintings here if you ask them, they would happily switch places with, you know. Obviously, right now the Obama painting is very popular, that's, yeah, he's the new guy around. I haven't seen it but what I've heard people are very...you know, and it's not... I don't get jealous about that, you know.

IAN CHILLAG:

Would you like to see the Obama portrait? I could bring it up here.

CONNOR:

Yeah, I would love to.

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IAN CHILLAG:

Sure, hold on one sec.

So, there... there you go.

CONNOR:

You know what? I think I have seen this on a mug. He's also sitting, that's interesting, just like Taft. Interesting, they both sitting.

IAN CHILLAG:

Yeah.

CONNOR:

But you see his legs and on me you don't see... you just see the upper body. It's interesting to see the whole man there, I actually think... I like to... I mean Chris (INAUDIBLE) painting and all but actually, I like being partial, I like leaving a little bit to the imagination, I don't know if that's 'cause I'm old fashioned but I like the fact that when you see Taft sitting there, you know, I don't think you need to see the man's shoes, you know?

IAN CHILLAG:

Really? It could be anything happening down there. We don't know for sure that Taft was wearing pants.

CONNOR:

I mean I think... I mean I don't know, I don't know for sure because I only saw him after when he was taking a look. And he was wearing pants then.

IAN CHILLAG:

We know actually very little about what's happening outside the frame of many paintings, you know?

CONNOR:

Yeah.

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IAN CHILLAG:

Like it's not impossible that Mona Lisa... it's not impossible that she's riding a tiny bike.

CONNOR:

Yeah, I mean that's the thing that people don't understand which is that the... I mean a lot if this is open to interpretation but paintings have secrets, they are, you know, there is an objective reality that's just outside the frame of most paintings, not all paintings but most paintings. Whoever seen Cezanne, the apples (INAUDIBLE)

If you were to see the... just outside the frame that there's tremendous amount of bread like an unreasonable amount of bread, to the point where if you could see the bigger picture, there's so much bread that you'd actually think, why would anyone... is this a bakery?

And in a way it's... it raises too many questions, to the point where I think the beauty of that painting is here, there are just some apples and pears. And you could just consider them as they are, whereas, I think if you see... if you saw how much bread there was, I think it will be upsetting to people, I think people would just be almost tormented by the idea that anyone would make that much bread.

It looks like something's gone very wrong and it makes you question everything about it like, it starts to the point where it actually breaks you. And so, I think that's why like that painting is what it needs to be because if you were to see what was actually there in that room, you'd be horrified and I think you wouldn't wanna do anything, it would stop you in your tracks, and your life would be over.

IAN CHILLAG:

So, getting back to Obama, I'm curious what it's like for you and the other paintings in the gallery.

CONNOR:

Yeah.

IAN CHILLAG:

Like is it competitive when some presidents, I guess, are getting more attention than others?

CONNOR:

I mean I don't know. I will admit it is a little frustrating when most of what you hear from people is, you know, where is the Obama, where is the Obama? You know, but I wouldn't say it's competitive. I would just get tired of hearing that, you know?

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IAN CHILLAG:

Yeah.

CONNOR:

It's art, it's not a competition, you know? It's not like when the painting was in the Summer Olympics.

IAN CHILLAG:

When painting was in the Summer Olympics?

CONNOR:

Yeah, painting was a sport in the Summer Olympics, you could win a gold medal for painting, they also had literature, sculpture, architecture, town planning.

IAN CHILLAG:

So, there was like swimming, the marathon and town planning?

CONNOR:

Yeah, yeah.

IAN CHILLAG:

I feel like that would be great, like do you know why they stopped doing it?

CONNOR: I mean, I really know why people do anything.

IAN CHILLAG:

Hello, is this Richard? This is Ian calling.

RICHARD:

Oh, hello, how are you today?

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IAN CHILLAG:

I'm good, I wanted to ask you about the Olympic art competitions. I just heard about them and I looked around there's very little about them out there, you've researched this, how did you go about it?

RICHARD:

So, once upon a time, I was reading an Olympic history and there was a casual three-word inclusion about the comment about some Olympic art competitions. So, that's where I take off to the local libraries, the Universities' libraries and I ran into absolutely, nothing. So, I asked the researchers from all these libraries, if they could find anything, lord behold, they couldn't either. I enquired another linguagist, other libraries in other countries all over the world, they all came back with there is nothing. You know, one question leads to another question, all this then I find myself confronted with something that's written in Greek.

I don't happen to speak Greek, so, I had to stop and learn Greek but, you know, it is an example of this, dumb little things like that, you can spend a lifetime all of a sudden.

IAN CHILLAG:

Wait, so you learned Greek to just do this research?

RICHARD:

Sure, (INAUDIBLE) as a language but at least, you know, just, you know.

IAN CHILLAG:

Sorry, you learned Greek and Polish just to get to the bottom of this?

RICHARD:

Yeah, I know it. So, I spent 10 -15 years spending money and taking the time to try to put it together.

IAN CHILLAG:

So, they stop doing the competitions after the 1948, Summer Olympics, My understanding from your research is that this was mostly because the Olympics were suppose to be for amateurs and artist were mostly professionals, do I have that about right?

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RICHARD:

Well, at the time that they were terminated, the President of the International of the Olympic Committee was a very strong amateur supporter and he was infuriated by the incursion of professionals entering the game. Now, here is an interesting side that President had also competed as a competitor himself, in the literature competitions two times, in the history. One time he received (INAUDIBLE) the last time he didn't get any acknowledgment at all.

IAN CHILLAG:

Wait, so the person responsible for putting an end to the Olympic art competitions was a man who had attempted twice to win a medal and failed?

RICHARD:

That's correct, it was evenly grounded, yeah, is it a consideration, sure it is. Draw your own conclusion, have a good day.

CONNOR:

I would love to compete in the Olympics. I just, I think, I sometimes fantasise about what it would be like to be, you know, Having won the gold medal. And you know, I'm up there on the Olympics... on the medal stand and they put the... they hang the medal around my frame and (INAUDIBLE) is playing. And I just picture I'm standing there and everyone in the crowd. The crowd is all other paintings and everyone is standing or on stands, perhaps, and they're all so proud of me.

Everybody is there in the crowd and we got Mona Lisas' there and Melted Clock's there, Dali's there. (INAUDIBLE) is the scream, you know, but you know like scream in support like excited for me. And both hands on my face and just like so thrilled that I've won a medal. I know it can't happen, you know, I am a realist, I am a realist at painting but it's hard not to think about that.

IAN:

Conner, I wanna ask sometimes when I'm at a museum or gallery, I think what would happen if I touch one of the paintings, has anyone ever touched you?

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CONNOR:

Oh gosh, yeah, it was a child and someone was, I assume it was the father, he was holding like a toddler and he wasn't paying attention and he sort of swiveled, he sort of (INAUDIBLE) So, the adult's attention was not me but the child was firmly focused on me and I see this little hand is coming just right towards me and just, you know, this is the nightmare scenario because the hand is covered in just oil, the natural oils. And I felt it, like it was just a split second but I mean it damaged me, I still feel it. And you know what the weirdest part was? The kid looked right into Taft's face and called him mommy.

IAN:

That is weird.

CONNOR:

Yeah.

IAN:

Thinking about you being damaged, I guess we do kind of think about you as something that will be around forever.

CONNER:

Yeah, yeah, you can, I won't be there forever, you know. I mean, I've... I have already have a little bit of work done.

IAN:

Yeah?

CONNOR:

Yeah, just very minor touch-ups here and there to kind of make sure, you know, you've cured a little bit of damage over the course of a century.

IAN:

Yeah.

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CONNOR:

Everything deteriorates, you know? I very much have the illusion of permanence, that's part of my job, you know. I'm a comfort to people, the idea that you know when a person is gone that their memory lives on but you know even that has its limits.

IAN CHILLAG:

Connor, I'm curious to know what it's like to live in the National Portrait Gallery, there is just, there is thousands of people who pass through there every day. You must just see so much of the (INAUDIBLE).

CONNOR:

Yeah, you see people at their best, you see people at their worst. I see a lot of fights, I see a lot of people who, you know, they had a fight and they're clearly not talking to each other. I once saw a marriage proposal, I think it was actually a couple and his last name was Taft, and I don't know if he was related or there was just a coincidence. But he had brought her to this place and he was sort of asking her like "What do you think about this name, do you like this name? He like picked this as a momentous place, is like a place of significance or something, and then he got down on one knee and then everyone's paying attention - it's a strange thing when you have everyone's attention was focused in my direction but not at me, you know?"

IAN CHILLAG:

Yeah.

CONNOR:

And then, I was sort of the spectator, I thought "Oh, this is what it's like to have your eye drawn to something", they were the painting I was looking at.

IAN CHILLAG:

Dude, so, what happened, did she say yes?

CONNOR:

She did, she said yes. Although, I have to say I don't... I got the sense she was saying yes because she felt all eyes were on her, I wouldn't bet money that they actually got married because there was just enough hesitation that I thought, "Oh boy, this is not necessarily a guarantee". Because I think she felt the pressure, I think he'd picked this public place, and there were like friends who jumped out from around the corner, there were like friends and family.

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And I just, I remember thinking like "I know what's that like, I know what's that like to feel like everyone's looking at you and expecting something from you. I'm built for it but I can tell when someone else doesn't like it, you know? And honestly, like the way, I would describe her face she looked like a bad painting like, she looked like a bad painting.

IAN CHILLAG:

Yeah?

CONNOR:

Yeah.

IAN CHILLAG:

You know I was in a gallery the other night and there was so many people it was actually hard to see paintings like there were crowds, like lines to see each piece.

CONNOR:

Yeah, you know, I am happy that there are paintings that get that kind of a pop, you know, I've never really had that, even when I was new I was not... I was not ever the kind of painting that a crowd would form around. There is a story about you know, the Mona Lisa, there was a point which Mona was stolen from the Louvre and it was like 1911, I was a baby and when she was not... when she was stolen from the museum there were still lines of people stretching out of the museum just to stare at the space in the wall where she had been hanging, and think about that, like, people are lining up, they wanted to see the absence of her, more than they wanted to look at paintings that were still there on the wall. I think that's insane, you know.

And I'm saying this as someone who, you know, I mean, I've seen pictures of Mona, I've seen her on t-shirts, I've seen her on canvas bags, and, you know, I mean, she's captivating. You know, I get it. I don't... I wouldn't... I understand the appeal, you know, I would love to meet Mona. She's a little older than me. She's 400 years older than me but I don't mind that at all. That's not something that...and that's just a number.

I mean, I've actually thought, what it would be like if we were both in storage and we were improperly stored, we got wrapped where we were facing one another. And we were wrapped in brown paper and bubble wrap and we were damaging each other but at the same time, there was like a - I can't believe I'm telling you this - the paint was rubbing off. Like parts of Mona Lisa were getting on Taft, and parts of Taft were, I mean you hang around all day, your mind goes places. I'm not gonna apologise for it.

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IAN:

We talked to at the beginning about you being created, you know, like, the first moment, there was also a moment when you were finished, you know?

CONNOR:

Yeah.

IAN:

There was like a stroke before you were done, and then a stroke when you were done.

CONNOR:

Oh yeah. And you feel it, I mean, you know. That's one thing - you know when you're done. Like I have never had a sense, you know, there's the portrait of Washington, that is not finished and that is no way to live. That's... I'm not meaning to bad mouth that painting in any way - I think he's great but he's not finished. That image just...you know fades into nothing and it's just... I... that would be a living hell to me. And that's just my point of view, but like I'm done and it's a very satisfying feeling because that's just one area of anxiety that you can just put to rest, you know, you're done. And now you are what you are. Can I ask you, at what point did you feel like you were finished?

IAN:

I... Humans don't... I don't know if I am finished.

CONNOR:

So you don't feel like you've reached a point... you never feel like you reached a point where you're done and you are who you are?

IAN:

I just feel like it always changes, I certainly feel more secure in who I am, than I was... I don't know, five years ago - ten years ago. But I don't know that I feel finished. I don't think it's...

CONNOR:

Do you feel like you are constantly being painted over? On the one hand that sounds incredibly frustrating, to not be finished but on the other hand, there is some comfort in knowing that if you are not finished, that means you are not deteriorating, because as soon as you are complete, you're deteriorating and it's a slow process, it's gradual, you don't always feel it happening but it is happening and it's impossible not be aware of it happening. I mean, this is maybe a strange thing to mention but, you know, people look at me and they remember Taft because someone painted Taft so that we would remember him. But I know what no one is ever going to do a painting of me.

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IAN:  
To remember you.

CONNOR:  
Yeah.

IAN:  
Yeah, you don't see a lot of paintings of paintings.

CONNOR:  
Yeah.

IAN:  
I could... What if I drew a picture of you - I made up a portrait of you and you can...whatever you want.

CONNOR:  
Sure. Yeah, I'd love to see you try. I have a feeling it will look like a picture of Taft because I know that's what I look like.

IAN:  
Well, so...

CONNOR:  
Well, it's a good start, I'm a little bit taller than I am wide. Of course, you start with Taft's face. That's the face thing that you draw.

IAN:  
I did.

CONNOR:  
That's a drawing of Taft. That would be like if was drawing a picture of you and I started with your elbow.

IAN:  
Well, what else should I include this is to be a portrait of who you are?

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CONNOR:

It may be impossible, you know. I'm disguised as someone else, and that's by design. You know how a secret services agent is supposed to jump in front of the president and take a bullet for the president?

IAN:

Yeah.

CONNOR:

They sublimate their own life, you know, they put their own life beneath that of the president that they have sworn to protect. They are there to serve. I think a similar thing with me. I'm like the last secret service agent for President Taft and the bullet that I've taken is that I am never truly seen, and it's fine. That's the job. It's not something to feel sad about, but I do sometimes.

IAN CHILLAG:

This is everything is alive. The show is produced by Jennifer Mills and me, Ian Chillag with (INAUDIBLE). Special Thanks to Emily's feedback. This episode was edited by Hilary Frank, she's the author of 'Weird Parenting W/Ins' and the creator of the podcast, 'The Longest Shortest Time'. A big thanks to Richard Stanton for telling us about the Olympic Art Competitions, he wrote a book, which again, he learned Greek and Polish just to research. It's called, 'The Forgotten Olympic Art Competitions'. We are also grateful to the reporting of (INAUDIBLE) from whom we learned about the line to see the space where the Mona Lisa had been.

Connor the Painting was played by Connor Ratliff. The painting of Taft in the National Portrait Gallery was painted by William Valentine Schevill. Everything is alive is a very proud member of Radiotopia from PRX and without Julie Shapiro, executive producer, we would be but a blank canvas. You can find us on twitter @ianchilag and you can get in touch with us any number of ways. At everythingisalive.com. We'll see you soon.