



Women Artists

Wendy Snyder MacNeil

About the Artist:

Known for moving beyond traditional notions of portraiture, Wendy Snyder MacNeil was an artist and educator who was limited by neither traditional definitions nor mediums. She began by studying drawing and painting but eventually came to work with film and video. Snyder MacNeil was introduced to photography while a student at Harvard's Graduate School of Education, Visual Studies Program. She pursued photography further while studying under Minor White from 1966 to 1968 at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). She taught at numerous schools, including the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) from 1996 to 2007, and was awarded fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1974 and 1978 and from the Guggenheim Foundation in 1973.



Wendy Snyder MacNeil,
American, 1943 – 2016, *Adrian Sesto*, 1977, platinum-palladium print, 23 x 18 1/2 in. (58.4 x 47 cm). Collection of the New Mexico Museum of Art. Gift of the Roberta Coke DeGolyer Estate, 1995 (1995.33.24) Used with permission

What represents a person? Often, we think of a person's face in answer to this question. Wendy Snyder MacNeil's work often explores the limitations of the traditional photographic portrait to reveal aspects of a person that the face may not fully share. Among the ways that Snyder MacNeil has shown the values, activities, and lives of people is through photographs of their hands. In these photographs, hands suggest details about the subject through touch, the primary way that we interact with the world. In her photograph *Adrian Sesto*, we see the hand of a young child. The hand is smooth and free of calluses or scars, reinforcing the idea of youth and life not overly burdened by hardship, yet the dirt that fills the lines of the child's hands hint at what they may have been up to recently. The image brings to mind digging in the dirt or mud squishing between fingers in an almost tactile way that suggests the joy of exploring and getting dirty.

Materials needed:

Camera: digital or instant (a camera phone will work fine)

A friend or family member who will let you look closely at their hands and take photographs of them

How to make a portrait using a person's hand:

1. **Observe** your friend or family member's hand closely. What do you see that is unique to that person? If possible, observe their hands over time. Do their hands look one way during the week, but different on the weekends when they work on a hobby or something important around the house? Do they have special tattoos or scars? Are their hands dirty from work or play?
2. **Think** about how what you have observed tells the story of your friend or family member. What have they experienced? What do they value? How do they spend their time?
3. **Pose** their hand in a way that you think best tells their story. Use a neutral background such as a plain sheet, a wall, or even a clean patch of the sidewalk. Try several different poses if you like. It's okay to experiment, and you may find that their hand looks different in the photograph.
4. **Photograph** their hand with a smartphone or instant film camera. If you are using a smartphone, you can try to edit your photograph. See if the camera app has built-in filters and look for one that will change your photograph from color to black and white. Next, see if the app has a contrast filter or contrast slider. Experiment with these controls to increase or decrease the difference between the light and dark areas of your photograph to see if you can make some of the details you find important stand out more to help tell your subject's story.



Bonus activity!

Try the above activity, but with your own hands. You know your hands better than anyone else; you use them every day! Pay special attention to step 1. What can you learn by closely observing your own hands that helps to tell your story?