

# ARTTALK

## The Portrait Is Now in Session

She was down-to-earth. She had a folksy vibe. She didn't make a fuss about what to eat for lunch. Above all, she liked to talk, talk, talk.

These were some of the impressions that members of The Painting Group had of their recent guest muse, **Sandra Day O'Connor**. In October the retired Supreme Court justice sat for members of the artist collective in their New York studio. The result was 25 different portraits, ranging from realistic to impressionistic, each from a slightly different angle. The works are on display at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C., through October 8.

During her six hours of immobility (including several breaks), O'Connor, 77, regaled the group with tales from behind the bench as well as stories of her childhood on an Arizona ranch. "She was talking so much that we couldn't paint her mouth," recalls graphic designer **Walter Bernard**, a 30-year veteran of the group. "So one of us politely alerted her to this, and she replied, 'OK, I'll shut up for 20 minutes.'"

A camera crew filmed the entire session for a documentary Bernard is making about

The Painting Group, which was founded 40 years ago as a collective for artists, professional and amateur, to hone

could finish their portraits later. O'Connor declined to comment for this article.

**Marc Pachter**, director of

**David Levine**, the veteran caricaturist and a cofounder of The Painting Group, chose watercolor on cardboard for his portrait. "I disagree with her politics," he says, "but that's OK." In 1998 Levine drew an unflattering caricature of O'Connor for the *New York Review of Books*. "I mentioned this to her and said, 'I wish I could take it back,'" he says. "She shot me a look as if to say, 'Yeah, right!'"

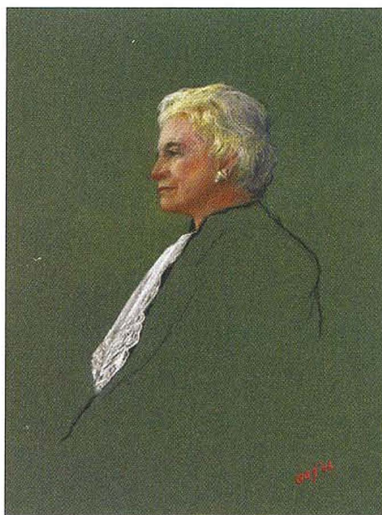
For the session, O'Connor wore a black robe with a white jabot around her neck and sat on a makeshift throne supported by cinder blocks. "She was very pale, with white hair," said **Aaron Shikler**, a cofounder of the group. "I did a simple drawing, but I had trouble with it. I just couldn't get her likeness."

The other portraits included works in charcoal, pastels, and oils. **Emily E. Vines** contributed the only sculpture, a clay bust that

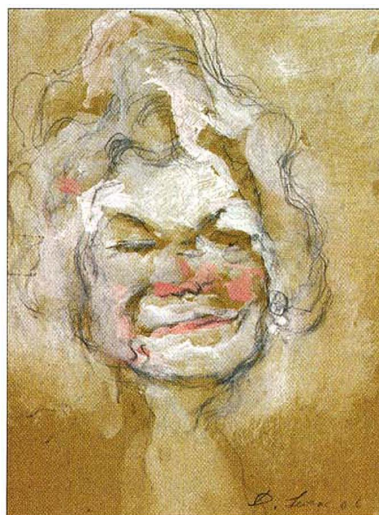
stands about seven inches tall. "She was a solid woman but very feminine," says Vines, who helped O'Connor ascend to and descend from her throne during the session. Vines recalls, "She had a strong grip. It was nice and firm."  
—David Ng



Retired Supreme Court justice Sandra Day O'Connor sitting for The Painting Group.



Aaron Shikler did a pastel portrait (left), and David Levine a watercolor on cardboard.



their craft in an informal setting. The 25 members meet weekly in their SoHo studio and usually hire a model for several sessions; Bernard was able, through a friend, to arrange a single sitting with O'Connor. A photographer took her picture so the artists

the National Portrait Gallery, says, "I was intrigued by the project because we tend to think that a portrait is the person. It leads to misconceptions about subjectivity. The portraits in this show are extraordinarily varied. They're not mirrors; they're reflections."