Portraits Podcast – You Say Madman, I Say Patriot, With Vann R. Newkirk II (Season 4, Episode 5)

[Intro Music]

Auto Narration:
Individual freedoms or rights are protected in the United States.

Separate Audio Clip:
All of our rights are just being taken away.

Auto Narration:
We have the right to freedom of assembly.

Separate Audio Clip:
To new questions this morning over law enforcement in response to the protests. Protests, which themselves were against police brutality.

Auto Narration:
We can ask the government to change or correct a problem.

Separate Audio Clip:
The Senate failed to even open debate on new Federal Voting protections this past week.

Separate Audio Clip:
It's very easy to take for granted this really rather fragile and somewhat mysterious thing that we call democracy.

Kim Sajet:
Welcome to Portraits. I'm Kim Sajet the Director of the National Portrait Gallery. We take certain things for granted here in the United States: that we're all subject to the same laws, that we can speak our mind, and that we live and will always live in a participatory democracy. But my guest today says American democracy is actually not as sturdy or as old as we like to think. In fact, when it comes to voting rights protections, he likens them to the scaffolding on a building that's in various stages of construction and demolition. I'm talking about Vann R. Newkirk II, senior editor at the Atlantic,

Vann Newkirk:
And as a reporter, I have been covering voting rights, environmental justice, anything to do with the 14th amendment and climate change and the future of democracy in this country. So, you know, have a very light workload.
Kim Sajet:
You might also know that voice from the flood lines podcast. Vann is the host. In it, he revisits the legacy of Hurricane Katrina. And he looks at some of the inequities that the storm exposed. Vann is currently working on a book about Black America's fight against the climate crisis. And that's where we started: with a portrait of a man born into slavery towards the end of the Civil War. A man who came to environmentalism through his own hands. Don't forget, you can find the portraits we discuss in the show notes of this episode. Vann, welcome to Portraits, the podcast.

Vann Newkirk:
Thank you for having me.

Kim Sajet:
So, let's go first to someone that you admire from history. And this is related to environmental justice. And that's George Washington Carver. He didn't know his exact date of birth, but we believe it was in early 1864. And he died in 1943. So he had a long life and such an impactful life. Who was he Vann? Tell us about who George Washington Carver was.

Vann Newkirk:
So he's maybe I think, still, to this day, the most famous Black scientist. He was an agricultural scientist. He was very well-known inventor. A lot of people believe he invented peanut butter, which he didn't. But he did help popularize peanut butter and the cultivation of peanuts as a way to preserve soil in the south. And he's also a big booster of African American cultural foodstuffs. So a lot of the reason that we consider that you can go and have a high cuisine, soul food meal is somebody like a Carver was going and saying, the sweet potatoes that people eating actually have value. They're not trash food. He is also a leading black environmentalist. He was among the first to look at when we had the Dust Bowl and saying early on before it became standard. Acknowledgement that human practices helped cause the Dust Bowl. So he's somebody who looks at the world and is not afraid to say that our economic activities, the things that we're often proud of as his country, they also have the drawbacks of degrading and destroying the environment we live in. And we have to find a different way. And he worked to find a different way.
**Kim Sajet:**
We have a lovely portrait, and we use it all the time in our galleries. It's part of our struggle for justice galleries painted by Betsy Graves Renaud in 1942. What do you see when you look at this portrait?

**Vann Newkirk:**
This portrait is so incredibly beautiful to me. And I think so unlike lots of portraiture of especially Black men. You've got George Washington Carver, as an elderly man. He is in a garden that is so immaculate and well kept, and he's tending to flowers. If you consider the history of the portraiture of Black men, you know, one, there is even the fight to get black men and their figures into portraits in the first place. That's a big deal. And you see somebody like a Frederick Douglass come along and challenge that long history of absence from the from the portrait. But you see, in his efforts, he portrayed a very stern, very, sort of prototypically masculine figure to the camera, to anybody who was painting him, you'll get all the pictures of Martin Luther King, a century after Douglas has his portraits. You look at MLK, and he's a very serious man in those photographs. There's a couple of pictures from like Life Magazine of him on vacation, maybe a couple of him playing pool, but you never see anything in color in him. There's never him wearing florals. And also, there's very few pictures of Black folks generally engaging with nature. And so this portrait of George Washington Carver, it's so tender in a way that he's not presenting an image of somebody who's super imposing. He's old, he looks kind of frail. And he's there tending to flowers that are also frail. He has his hands-on nature. And you see this lovingness that he has, this nurturing. And that's something that you just don't see often, especially in historical portraits.

**Kim Sajet:**
We had the pleasure of working with Vann on a collaborative project that we've just unveiled here at the gallery. We invited current Atlantic contributors to write personalized wall texts about some of the big thinkers and influences who've written for the magazine in the past. Many were abolitionists like Frederick Douglass and Harriet Beecher Stowe, they were trying to explain an idea. They called it the American idea, at another time, when people felt democracy actually might be pretty fragile due to slavery. The texts are now on display next to the portraits. Vann wrote about one of the Atlantic founders, the philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson, and I asked him why he chose Emerson in the first place.

**Vann Newkirk:**
Well, today I've been thinking a lot about what it took to change, public opinion, public sentiment, the National trajectory away from slavery. And of course, you know, you have your dyed in the wool, super fervent abolitionist. You have the enslaved folks themselves, primarily who were advocating for their own freedom. But then you had a group of people who might be declared sort of squishy, you know, people who were not in favor of slavery, but who didn't have a dedicated stance, advocating for its erasure for getting rid of the institution. And Emerson was among that crowd. You see that stance in favor of abolition, in favor of union wasn't all that strong or radical to begin with.

**Kim Sajet:**
This idea of the squishy middle. What do you mean by that? Is it being that pejorative or do you admire the squishy middle?

**Vann Newkirk:**
I see the squishy middle mostly as potential. And, you know, I think that can be potential both for great good and also great evil. So you look at somebody like an Emerson, who I think in the 1850s and 1960s, might have represented something close to what a standard say white collar upper class or educated northerner would have thought. You know, nothing to say the Southerners. And we know that those folks, despite the overwhelming sentiment against the spread of slavery, at least, they didn't really act on that. They didn't really move in favor of it. It took somebody like a John Brown, and it took the enslaved folks themselves to move against slavery, in order for anything to get done. And so I think you look at today and you see people still sitting in the squishy middle, and the country's trajectory, where we go from here, turns on whether they go in favor of inertia or whether they move to change things.

**Kim Sajet:**
Emerson stance on slavery was galvanized by the hanging of the abolitionist John Brown. He was not in the squishy middle. He believed violence was necessary to end slavery. And Emerson rose to his defense. We have several portraits of John Brown in the collection, but to my mind, they don't all portray the same thing. And I wanted to get Vann's take on this.

**Vann Newkirk:**
He is most famously known for his raid on Harpers Ferry, he, in kind of a prelude to the Civil War, he decided that one way to hasten the downfall of slavery would be to set off a chain reaction of slave revolts in Virginia in the south. And his plan to do so was to take over the federal armory at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, with a crew of formerly enslaved folks. And he thought that by doing so he would help set off that chain reaction that would help topple slavery in the South. Now, we know that did not happen. He was captured. The Ray did not go as intended. He did not set off the chain reaction that he thought he would. The word didn't quite get out the way he thought he would. And he didn't get the assistance that he thought he would. But it is considered to be kind of the thing that helps set the civil war in motion. And before that, John Brown had had a life as a committed to the point of arms abolitionist who had built kind of the most radical militant wing of the movement until the Civil War. And that was John Brown.

**Separate Audio Clip:**
He captured Harpers Ferry with his 90 men so true. He frightened old Virginia till she trembled through and through. They hanged them for a traitor, they themselves the trader crew.

**Kim Sajet:**
Can you actually describe for us this portrait that Augustus Washington, the photographer took. It's a daguerreotype dated around 1846. So it's about 13 years before the raid on Harpers Ferry and John Brown's hanging on December 2nd, 1859.

**Vann Newkirk:**
Yeah, so this is it's quite a striking portrait. So before he grows the long beard that he's associated with during the raid, he's a bit of a younger man but still a very severe looking man. And in his left hand he is holding the flag of the subterranean paths that he helped found. It was a more radical version of the Underground Railroad. And his right arm, he is holding up with his palm out as if he's taken an oath.

**Kim Sajet:**
Yeah, it's extraordinary. And like you said, he has this sort of chiseled, severe of features on his face. He's looking directly out at you. So there's no you know, avoiding the gaze right. He is calling you in and calling you to account. I asked Vann to read from a speech that Emerson gave about John Brown on November the 18th, 1859, as he was waiting for the gallows.

**Vann Newkirk:**
"He is a man to make friends wherever on Earth, courage and integrity are esteemed, the rarest of heroes, a pure idealist with no buy ins of his own. Many of you have seen him and everyone who has heard him speak has been impressed to like by simple artless goodness, joy with a sublime courage"

**Kim Sajet:**
So November the 18th, 1859. Literally the next day, November 19th, 1859, there is a really large engraved portrait of John Brown on the front cover of Frank Leslie's illustrated. Maybe you could read out this little quote that I took from that article.

**Vann Newkirk:**
Yeah, wow. "In fact, John Brown, a traitor to the American Union would have been a patriot by the side of Oliver Cromwell. He was miserably unfitted to the age in which he lived and will pay the penalty for his untamable and headstrong nature"

**Kim Sajet:**
So literally within 24 hours, John Brown goes from being a patriot who people were lucky to know to being a violent extremist. Which version of John Brown did his portrait artists go with? We'll find out right after the break.

**Kim Sajet:**
We're talking about resistance and resilience on this season of Portraits. And sometimes that simply means challenging a popular narrative, a way of seeing things. For example, that John Brown was diluted so that his stance could be dismissed. You just heard my guest Vann R. Newkirk II, read two opposing accounts of who John Brown was: a true idealist or a madman. What I find fascinating is the engraving that ran with the article Vann read, portraying John Brown as a trader. That image was the basis for a famous portrait of Brown in our collection. It's an oil on canvas painted in 1872 by Ole Peter Hansen Balling and I asked Vann to describe it.
Vann Newkirk:
I think you have roughly the same likeness, but it draws out something about the purported craziness around Brown. You see somebody who is just so intense, he's a little cross eyed. The way they have his hand in the lower part of the portrait. He’s bound. He looks like, I don't know, he looks like a zealot.

Kim Sajet:
Yeah, I mean, even the hairs standing on the top of his head. Very faintly, at the bottom of the right-hand corner you can see that he's got iron cuffs on around his wrist, so he is a prisoner. But it does have the sort of the crazy look, right, the fanatic look that many Americans I would argue, still think of John Brown today.

Vann Newkirk:
Yeah, I'm from the south and that was how, if you learn about John Brown at all, which is not a guarantee; if you learn about him at all, you learned about him as a as a madman. He's a historical aberration. He's not really taught in schools as part of any tradition, or part of any sort of larger goings on in America.

Kim Sajet:
Does this relate to journalism and writing and literature? Does this relate to what happens in your world?

Vann Newkirk:
I think so. I think if we are not skeptical as writers as journalist, we can often amplify and repackage previous misreporting or misrepresenting what was happening, and we can actually make them worse. So, I think a lot about this with Hurricane Katrina since we worked on flood lines. And what we found was this happened constantly. So you had the early amplification of false or misleading reports that were then packaged into larger stories of dysfunction on the streets and especially the black citizens of New Orleans being inhuman to each other. And so if you write a story today, about Hurricane Katrina, in 2005, and you were not skeptical and aware of what the sources were doing, then you run the risk of essentially bringing that story to the President. And then the kid who was reading about Hurricane Katrina for the first time and sees your report, based on these misleading sources is going to buy that.

Kim Sajet:
So when we were prepping for this interview, we asked you to name people that you admire and you actually brought up your mom, Marilyn Thurman Newkirk. And you provided us with a portrait of her and you relate it to this moment. You actually have written about this where you said that really the United States has only had real democracy in terms of universal voting since 1965. With the passing of the Voting Rights Act. Could you tell us a story about how you’d linked your personal memory and your family's story to the larger story of democracy and voting rights?

Vann Newkirk:
Well, I'd say I always thought about democracy and voting rights through the lens of my mother's life. My mother was born in 1964 in Greenwood, Mississippi, during Freedom Summer.
Separate Audio Clip:
The summer of 1964 will be marked in history as the summer of Civil Rights.

[MUSIC]

Kim Sajet:
Vann is referring to a 10-week campaign in Mississippi when White volunteers came down from the north and join activists on the ground to register Black voters.

Separate Audio Clip:
And I hope we can reach the lives of as many people as possible and try to raise the aspirations of people who, well, by their very birth deserve much more than they have in Mississippi.

Vann Newkirk:
And the headquarters for that effort was literally down the street within walking distance from where my mother was born.

Kim Sajet:
At the time, African Americans trying to vote in Mississippi could lose their jobs or face eviction. Less than 7% of the state’s eligible Black voters were registered to vote compared with more than 50% in the other southern states.

Separate Audio Clip:
Is this America? The land of the free and the home of the brave.

Kim Sajet:
In 1965, Congress passed the Voting Rights Act and prohibited racial discrimination in voting. For Vann, this was when the clock starts on true democracy in the United States. His mum was just one year old.

Kim Sajet:
And we have a portrait that you posted on your article for the Atlantic. Can you describe your mum? Tell us about who was she and what did she look like? And what similarities do you share with her?

Vann Newkirk:
Yeah, the portrait of my mother was taken... it’s her high school graduation photograph. And the reason why I love it... I look at it and I see myself in high school. I was considered her doppelganger growing up, you know, I was kind of not too pleased about it. Everybody: "you look just like your mama" And but now, you know, the reason why I used the photograph is because now I look in the mirror. And even though she’s gone I don’t run the risk of forgetting her face. My son looks like me. And so, I look at his face and I see her.

Kim Sajet:
So you know, I look at this portrait, she has this really large eyes and this big smile. Was that a feature that people recognized in her? Or is that just the photograph?

**Vann Newkirk:**
Yes, the eyes or anybody will tell you and after this she actually wore really big glasses for most of her adulthood. So she had these really big sort of piercing eyes, and she magnified them with these glasses. And also, the smile. She's giving the kind of standard high school half smile in the portrait. But if you ever got her just laughing in church, or you told her a joke, or she saw a picture of her grandkids: her smile was so wide and took up so much of her face. And between just like the wideness of her mouth and her eyes opening up it was it was an unforgettable smile.

**Kim Sajet:**
She passed away very tragically at a young age. Could you read this out about what you wrote about your mother?

**Vann Newkirk:**
"In the fall of 2020, you tried to schedule your chemotherapy appointments so that you'd be able to cast your ballot in person, as you'd always done. When I got a call, as I watched the results roll in on election night, I thought it was going to be you telling me about how you voted and how closely you were watching on television. The call was a bit more urgent than that. I flew a day later to your side and held your hands and gave you sips of water as accounts in Georgia and Pennsylvania and Nevada and Arizona all dragged on. We saw the early indications of record turnout. Watched news reports about people with a felony conviction voting for the first time. Saw the footage of lines at the polls stretching down streets. You died early in the morning, before we knew who won. You lived 56 years; you witnessed the entirety of what might be considered genuine democracy in America. I fear that era might not last much longer"

**Kim Sajet:**
Vann tell me about the fear. The fear about voting rights and why you're so concerned as many are that time is turning back upon itself.

**Vann Newkirk:**
Well, the first thing that I thought her life was so instrumental in showing is just how brief this era is. We like to think of democracy as this granite foundation or, you know, strong building that we have lived in for generations that cannot be destroyed by any generation. But really, essentially, everything we take for granted today. It was passed by a margin of a dozen or so people in 1965. And just as easily could have been written out of law, just as easily could have been struck down by the courts before it even had a chance to take root. And we live in this era. It's so fragile. It is by nature fragile. It's a single piece of legislation. So essentially, the entirety of what we consider to be, quote on quote "democracy", which is something of a guarantee that regardless of who you are you will have the ability to vote. We live at the whim of one or two bad Congresses, basically. So that's where we are. And I think something about the fragility of her life helped me understand that.

[MUSIC]
Kim Sajet:
A huge thanks to Vann whose upcoming book is titled: "Children of the Flood". And don't forget, if you are here in DC, you can see his wall text and all the others by Atlantic writers here at the National Portrait Gallery as part of our Perspectives installation. And if you're not in DC, you can find them online. Go to our website@npg.si.edu. Ruth Morris produced this episode. Our podcast team also includes Justin O'Neill, Ann Conanon, Deborah Sisum, Abel Berhan and Rebecca Kasemeyer. Our music is by Joe Kye and Breakmaster Cylinder, and our engineer is Tarek Fouda. Until next time, I'm your host, Kim Sajet.