

By Caricature Artists in Times Square (series)

Thomas Ray Willis

Abstract

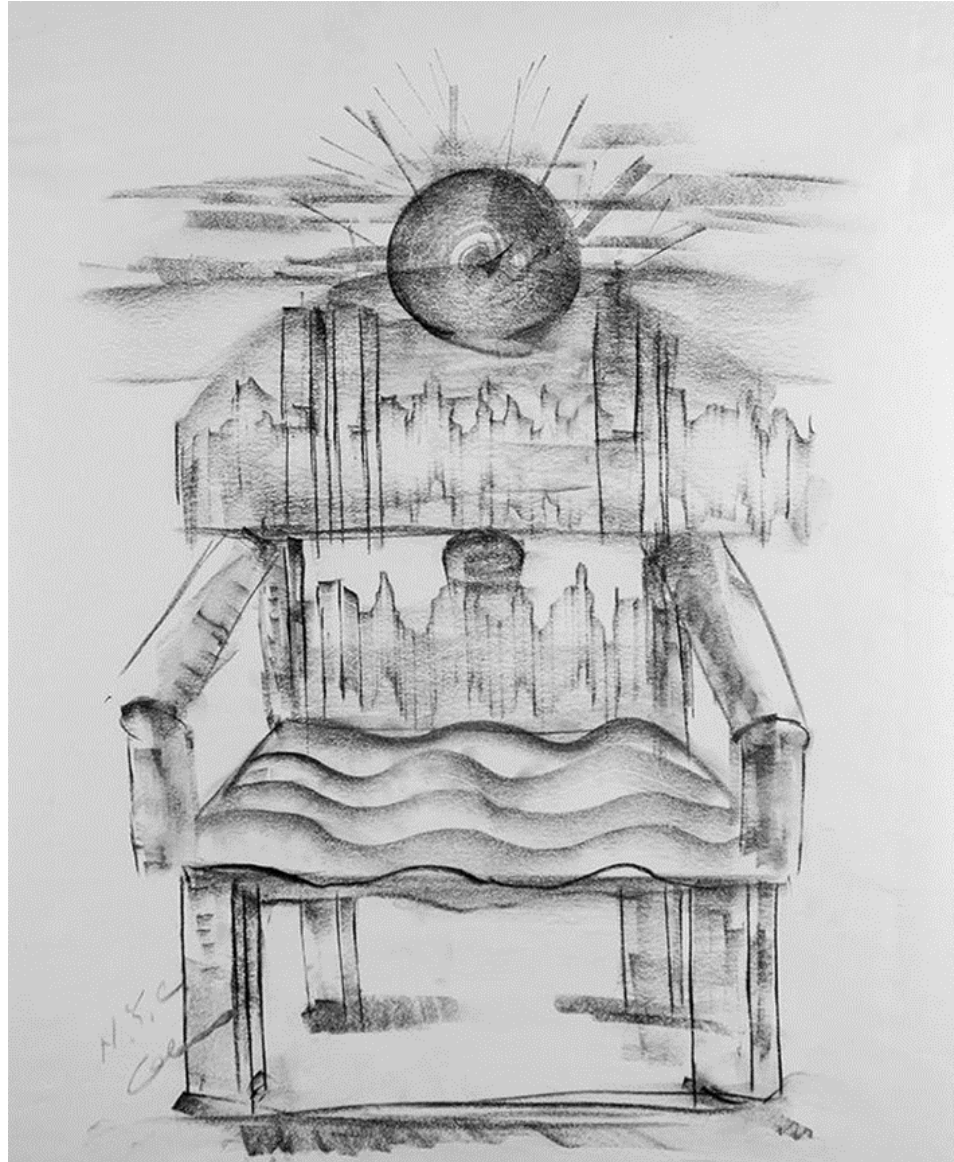
In this series of drawings commissioned by Thomas Ray Willis, Portrait Artists in Times Square depict their pandemic-affected environment. In a project statement, Thomas Ray Willis provides his experience sitting with artists.

Project Statement: “By Caricature Artists in Times Square (series)”

Caricature artists are a long-running staple of Times Square. In stark contrast to the look-at-me, fast-moving digital ads of major brands made from staggering budgets, these artists are able to request stillness, create individuality, and allow active engagement through their small-scale works. Artist Thomas Ray Willis was interested in how the pandemic affected caricaturists working in Times Square when there were no subjects to draw. Where do labor, experience, and anonymity fit in an ecosystem that favors capitalism, technology, and extreme visibility?

Unlike the affixed billboard screens and commercial storefronts, caricature artists are nomadic, unable to obtain permits, and compete for coveted spots. The lack of foot traffic during the pandemic emphasized the instability of their profession. Willis asked several caricaturists about how the last few years have impacted them: despair, quiet, and the unknown. As the pandemic eases, caricaturists once again face the challenge of a saturated space with new street vendors looking to pursue a living, resulting in an acute feeling of invisibility. The labor and skill they put in for long hours without guarantee of pay show the will to create and survive, while the surrounding commerce continues to generate billions in revenue for the city—a microcosm of urban life.

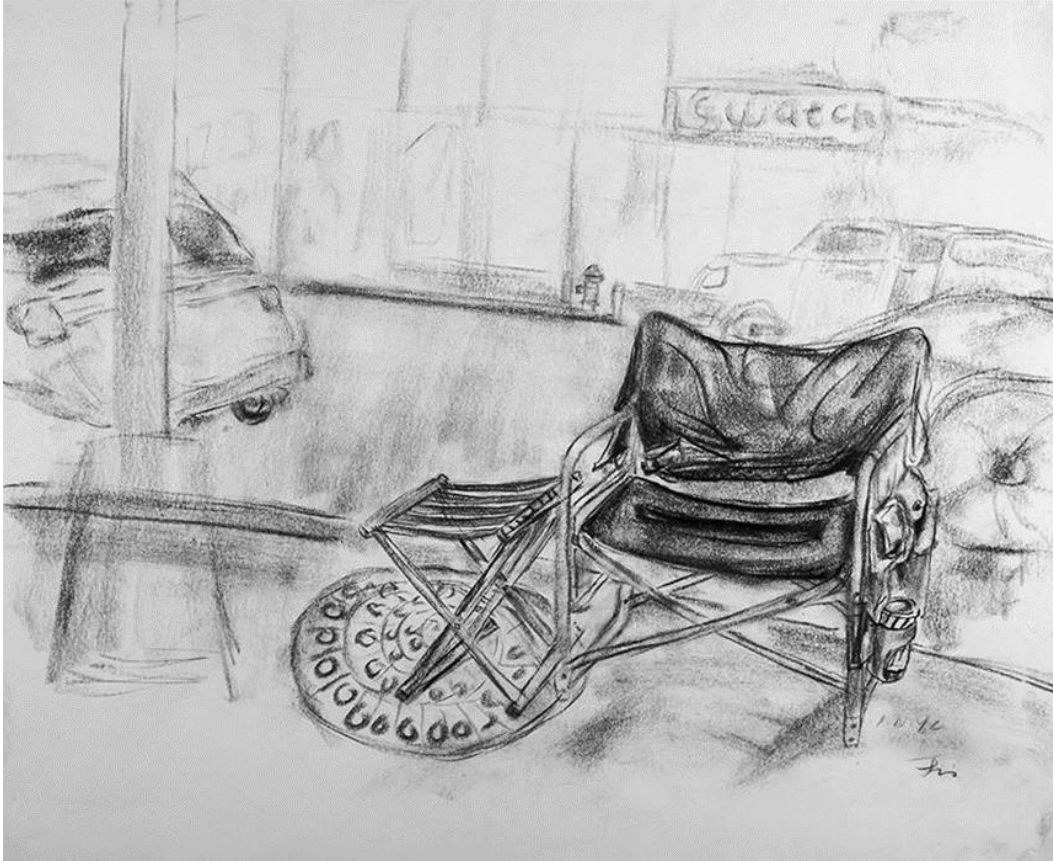
In the series of drawings commissioned by Willis, he asked them to depict their workplace when no one is there. From humor and hope to the broad strokes of the big city, the caricaturists did what they did best: draw what they see. As the artists were working, Willis was able to experience the anticipation, stillness, and patience as a patron. The dizzying noise around them quieted, the digital screens blurred, and the hurrying of people slowed. He walked away with some of the pieces you see here, outlasting an ad impression, overly priced burger, or cheaply made T-shirt. What will you see the next time you’re in Times Square?



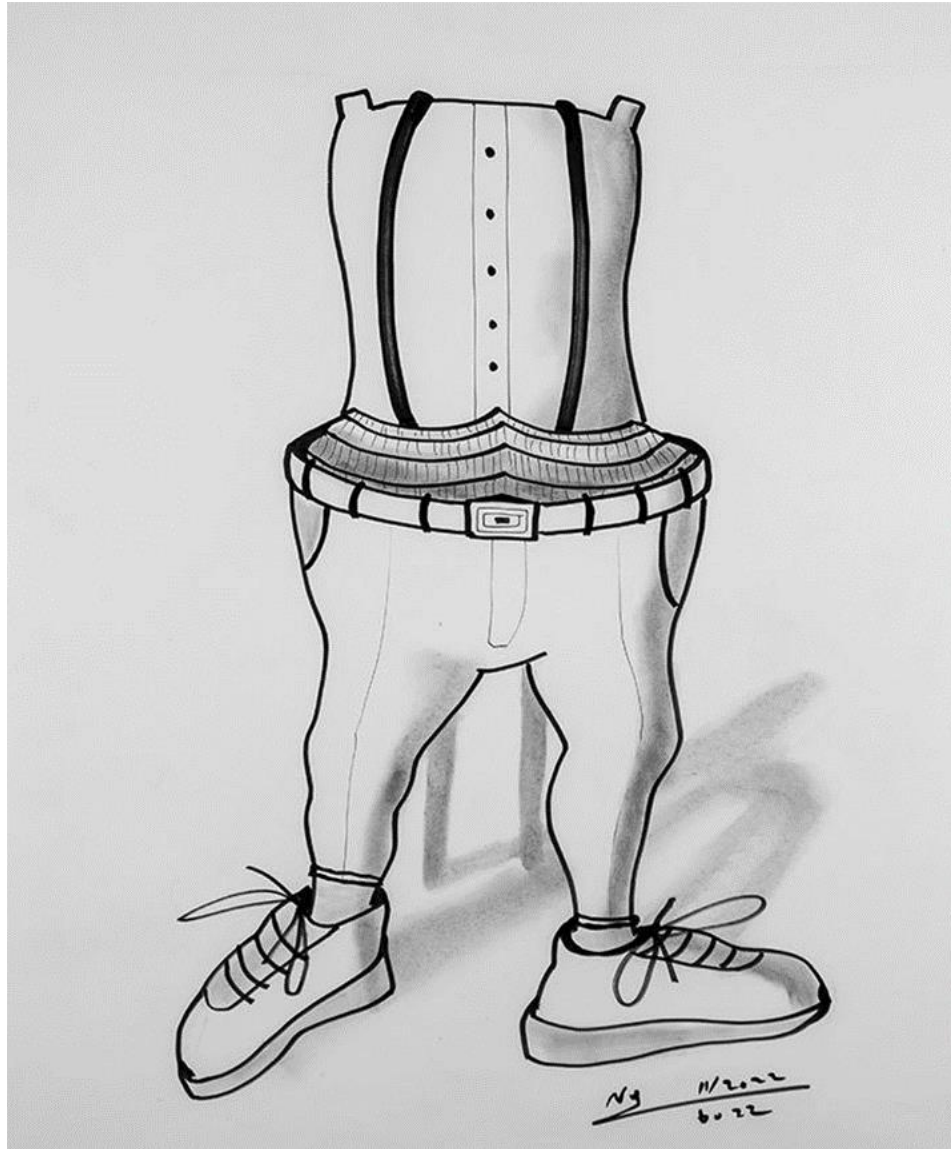
Thomas Ray Willis. "Untitled by Joe (New York City sunrise as an artist chair)" 2022. Charcoal on newsprint, 12 x 16 inches.



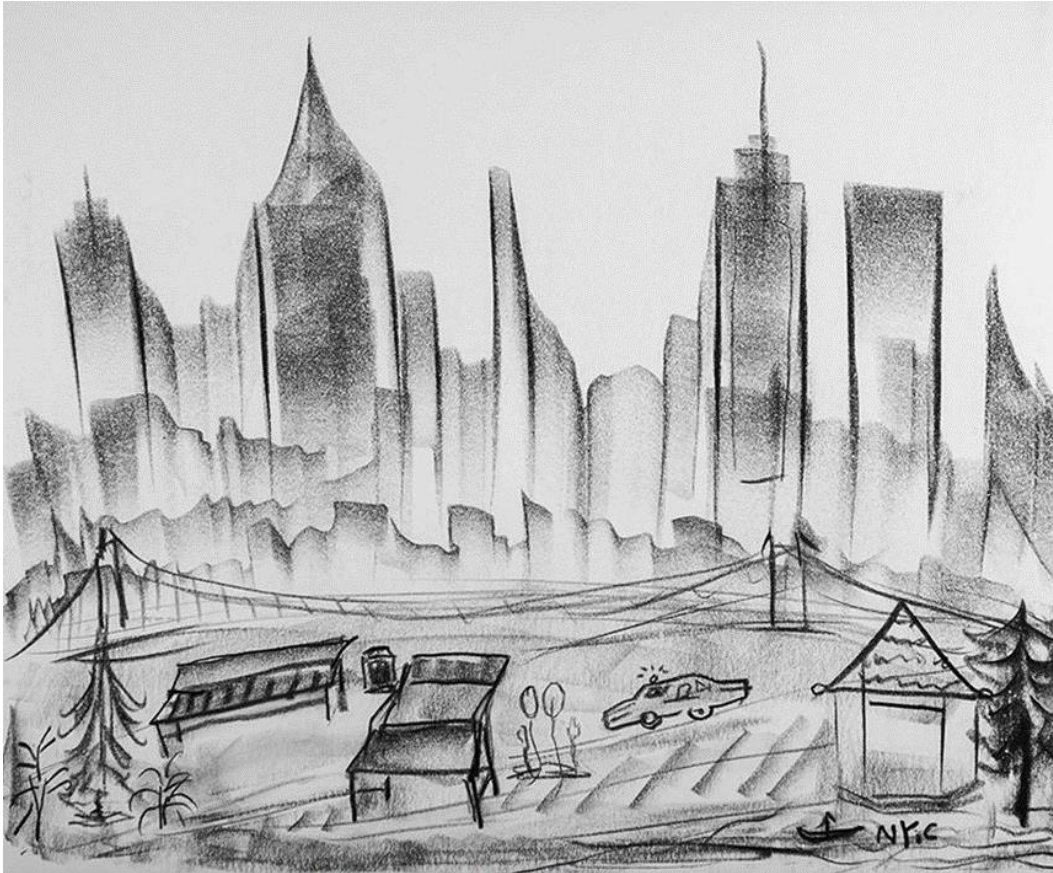
Thomas Ray Willis. "Untitled by anonymous (artist chairs at a party in NYC). 2021.
Charcoal on newsprint, 12 x 16 inches.



Thomas Ray Willis. "Untitled by Lin (empty artist chair in Times Square)". 2021.
Charcoal on newsprint, 12 x 16 inches.



Thomas Ray Willis. "Untitled by Bozz Arts (human artist chair)". 2022.
Marker and charcoal on newsprint, 12 x 16 inches.



Thomas Ray Willis. "Untitled by anonymous (Lonely artist chair in NYC)". 2021.
Charcoal on newsprint, 12 x 16 inches.

About the Author

Thomas Ray Willis is a multimedia artist and designer whose practice ranges from light installations and brand management to concept-driven drawing and painting. His hometown of Las Vegas—a dichotomy of community and spectacle, consumption and production, reenactment and reality—informs his outlook and work. Willis received his BFA in painting and drawing from University of Nevada Las Vegas in 2009 and his MFA at New York University in 2019. Willis' work is in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art Archives, the Whitney Museum Library, the New York Public Library, Printed Matter, and with the Art Production Fund of New York. Willis is a former visual art professor at Rhode Island School of Design, NYU Steinhardt, and Bentley University. He currently lives in New York and is an Assistant Professor of Studio Art at the College of Mount Saint Vincent in North Bronx.