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BULLETT

Painter Kehinde Wiley Brings Black American Culture to the Foreground



KEHINDE WILEY: Judith and Holofernes, 2012 ©Kehinde Wiley, Courtesy Sean Kelly, New York / Photo by Jason Wyche

Young black men clad in flashy basketball jerseys, Adidas sneakers, and assorted streetwear gaze intently into the viewer's eyes before a flamboyant backdrop of baroque decorative patterns. With highly affected poses that recall Western portraiture's most powerful figures, these unlikely protagonists shake up the often stodgy and shortsighted painting tradition. It's no wonder 37-year-old African-American artist Kehinde Wiley ranks among the world's most sought-after painters, with a celebrity fan base that counts Russell Simmons, Denzel Washington and Elton John. His vibrant canvases are instantly recognizable: large-scale, vividly rendered, photo-realistic portraits of contemporary black men and women in majestic poses inspired by Thomas Gainsborough, Peter Paul Rubens, and a long line of portraitists of centuries past. The Yale-educated gallery darling radically reinterprets the works of Old World masters he first discovered as a student, prompting a conversation about power and wealth by training his gaze on everyday folks—nurses, prison guards, athletes—he handpicks during his spontaneous "street castings."

Wiley is the subject of *An Economy of Grace*, which deservedly took home the Grand Jury Prize for Best Short Documentary at the South By Southwest Film Festival earlier this month. Sitting on a sun-soaked patio at the Austin Convention Center during the festival,

producer Jessica Chermayeff recounted how she instantly knew Wiley's practice would make for great storytelling. "Generally, painting is pretty...boring, solitary, drawn-out, and it all looks the same from the camera's perspective. But Kehinde's process is not just painting; it's genuinely exciting as it involves so many other people. In some ways, he's a performance artist." We also spoke with a very debonair Wiley, sporting patterned suit and oversized shades, about his South Central upbringing, the mad science of street castings, and bridging the gap between art world elitists and contemporary pop culture.

Growing up in rough-and-tumble South Central L.A. in the 1980s, your mom sent you and your twin brother to art classes on weekends to keep you off the streets. How much do you think pursuing art professionally was a result of her efforts?

She wasn't just encouraging me, she was telling me what to do. (laughs) On Saturday mornings, my twin brother and I had to take public transportation an hour and a half in each direction. I don't even know how she'd find these things, but oftentimes we'd be the two only black kids at an all-Jewish summer camp because they had a few openings for underprivileged kids. I remember going to Russia and having my entire world rocked in terms of what was possible, how big the world felt all of a sudden, how significant

art could be. Seeing all these gold leaf-gilded surfaces with icons and portraits, it just made everything feel very pregnant. I owe her everything for that.

So much of your conceptual practice revolves around your unique casting process, which you've been documenting as short film companion pieces to your exhibits. What prompted you to sign on to a more substantial documentary film?

I keep cameras rolling wherever I go, whether it be Africa, Brazil or Asia. The last ten years have been about global travel. Documenting that via tiny films has always been a huge part of it. But it recently became clear that there was more there. I saw the film [production company Show of Force <http://showofforce.com/home/>] had done about *Marina Abramović* [*Marina Abramović: The Artist Is Present*] and I loved it. I thought, if they can make a really moving film about staring into space for hours, then these are the people I need to work with.

From Tel Aviv to São Paulo to Columbus, Ohio, you carry out street castings around the world. The people you're drawn to clearly hail from all walks of life, but what is it that immediately strikes you about a stranger?

Sometimes, it's sexual attraction, but it's much more complex than that. You don't really have time to think about it. There's this IT factor, this state of self-possession, this swagger – you're imagining what someone's going to look like on canvas. Some people don't photograph well. Over time, you start to realize what works in photo, and oftentimes it's heightened features, things that seem a little bit exaggerated. Sometimes, people that have a meek presence can be quite dominating on the picture, depending on how you manipulate the pose. It's a lot of calculating.

The documentary presents the diverse range of responses you encounter in the streets of Harlem when accosting women. One in particular seemed very turned off, later going on to say she initially thought you were “full of it!” Why are you so keen on pursuing people who are difficult to win over – a painter's equivalent to the thrill of the chase?

(laughs) I think so. There's a certain excitement to the chase, being able to convince people. There's a certain look in people's eyes as well when they see examples of the paintings, the art historical references, and they start to imagine themselves in this story. It gets pretty addictive, the ability to allow that story to prove itself. What you're doing is begging for legitimacy in the middle of New York City, when everyone's got better things to do. You're saying: stop for a minute and recognize this is something of merit.

Your eye-popping canvases are rife with references to art history. When you began depicting black Americans in the heroic and powerful poses preferred by Old Masters such as Memling and Ingres, were you already aiming for a contemporary spin on classical portraiture?

I think it's an additive process. It's about saying that history is beautiful and terrible, about saying that I'm in love with the material practice of painting, all of it, but also recognizing the ills that exist throughout the project of Western easel painting. It's saying yes to people who happen to look like me, and yes to the material practice of painting.

You've been getting lots of media attention of late, with many journalists keen to peg you as “the most famous Black American painter since Basquiat.” What do you make of that comparison?

I don't know how that got started... it's weird. Once it's said, it becomes this echo chamber. The world has changed since Basquiat – he's one of the most important artists we know of, but his conversation was very different. It's great that people are having this appreciation for painting, to see the broader culture embrace it and see [the visual arts] transcend their traditional boundaries. It's a great testament to the cultural awakening happening in America, which you can see in literature, fashion, and even food. We're becoming less myopic in our views, and it becomes easy for those who are newly introduced to this community to make simple comparisons. I think that is one of them.

Would you primarily consider yourself a painter?

I call what I do conceptual painting, to the extent that the ideas and the paintings are so co-dependent. If you simply look at a painting of mine without a broader understanding of the context, you're only seeing about 30% of what's there. But there's no art school in the world that prepares you for the skillset required at this point in my life. I never imagined that I would have to figure out how to be both someone with a winning, persuasive personality in the streets while at the same time, manage to have a very focused

conversation on my craft's technical nuances – painters for painters, which has been criticized historically for being 'ivory tower' and elite. I think my blessing is that I'm able to make work that engages at once a very closed system of art world insiders and popular culture.



Kehinde Wiley poses Dacia Carter and Khalidiah Asante at the photoshoot for An Economy of Grace © Show of Force / Photo by Jessica Chermayeff



Kehinde Painting in Beijing Studio © Show of Force / Photo by William Peña



KEHINDE WILEY Femme piquee par un serpent, 2008 ©Kehinde Wiley, Courtesy Sean Kelly, New York



Kehinde Wiley and Riccardo Tisci of Givenchy design the dresses for An Economy of Grace © Show of Force



Kehinde Wiley paints in NY Studio



Kehinde Wiley poses models Dacia Carter and Chanel Stephens for An Economy of Grace © Show of Force / Photo by Jessica Chermayeff