

# SEANKELLY

Symonds, Alexandria, Kehinde Wiley. "Again in the Age of Shenanigans: Kehinde Wiley x Spike Lee,"  
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*Interview*

## ***ART IN THE AGE OF SHENANIGANS: KEHINDE WILEY X SPIKE LEE***



Kehinde Wiley x Spike Lee. Photography COURTESY OF MUSTACHE

On a recent sunny afternoon at Kehinde Wiley's airy, industrial studio near McCarren Park in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, Wiley's conversation with filmmaker Spike Lee was briefly interrupted by something that can't be ignored: the sudden appearance of two stately Great Danes, nearly as tall as the handler who'd shepherded them into the studio.

The dogs aren't Wiley's. Rather, they were canine models on hire for the day, due to play a part in the project that brought Lee and Wiley together in the first place: a portrait Wiley was painting, in partnership with Grey Goose, in his signature subversive-historical style. Lee's is the first of three portraits to be released at events this summer in celebrating "modern kings of culture"— he's joined in this designation by Carmelo Anthony and Swizz Beatz—pegged to the release of Le Melon, a new Grey Goose flavor that incorporates the Cavailon melon, once beloved of French aristocracy.

Before the portrait session got underway, we joined Wiley and Lee for a discussion about the art market, inspirational women, Mike Tyson, and Michael Jackson—over, of course, a couple of cocktails. (Ironically enough, Lee is actually allergic to melons; since Le Melon's flavoring isn't artificial, he opted for the regular stuff instead.) —Alexandria Symonds

**KEHINDE WILEY:** As you may know, I've been following your filmmaking work for a long time. But I think many people outside of the art community don't recognize that you've been quite excited about

contemporary art for a number of years. In fact, one of my first opportunities to really discuss your work in depth was with artists; I'm specifically thinking about a young artist from Texas, Michael Ray Charles.

SPIKE LEE: Michael Ray Charles! I own several of his works. I got to know Michael Ray Charles through Tony Shafrazi, who had his stuff in his gallery. I just came back from Martha's Vineyard yesterday, and your work is hanging up in my writer's cottage, brother-man with the Jackie Robinson, Brooklyn Dodger road jersey. I hadn't been there since October, so it was good seeing it this weekend.

WILEY: If memory serves me correctly, you contacted my gallery a number of years ago, and that's how that painting happened. Is this something that you do with artists a lot, where you come through and sort of have a sense of what their universe is, or is it specific to portraiture, the stuff that I was doing?

LEE: No, I like the work. *[laughs]* It's not really that deep. I really appreciate artists. All forms. My wife Tonya and I like art and we like to hang it, and it's great to hang contemporary, African-American art also—Elizabeth Catlett—

WILEY: Amazing artist.

LEE: You know, I've got a bunch of [James] Van Der Zee prints, Jacob Lawrence, Elizabeth Catlett. But there's a new generation, and you're a big part of it.

WILEY: I was thinking, someone should make a movie about Catlett's life. I mean, she's got such an extraordinary backstory.

LEE: Well, there's a ton of people. *[laughs]* She's not the only one!

WILEY: *[laughs]* Not to put you on the spot!

LEE: There's a ton of people that hopefully will get the right treatment in the future. But it's a tough business, and I've always tried to—when I've been able to—support young artists, no matter what medium.

WILEY: We need more of that. In fact, it means a lot more when it's coming from another artist. There's something to be said about the art-industrial complex, the collectors who recognize that your work has some sort of future economic value. There's people who are simply speculating on these high-priced luxury goods for wealthy consumers, but it means something when you have a fellow artist who says that this resonates. And I think on some level, it acts as a type of affirmation, because my audience is ultimately my peers. It's not necessarily the conversations that are happening in the academy, it's not the conversations that are happening in the marketplace. It's about the people who are thinking and creating, and how do I challenge myself? The closest thing to myself are other makers. That's it.

LEE: But me, I never understood this—the art industry, with the art dealers in cahoots with the reviewers... *[laughs]* Shenanigans! We put a frame around that wall right there, it's \$10 million!

WILEY: *[laughs]* Right.

LEE: Come on. *[laughs]*

WILEY: This goes back to that comment I made about who do you make your art for, right? The art world has become so insular. The rules have become so autodidactic that, in a sense, they lose track of what people have any interest in thinking about, talking about or even looking at. So...

LEE: But they're in cahoots because you can't have this without the art dealers and the art critics!

WILEY: The art dealers and the art critics—

LEE: They're in cahoots!

WILEY: I don't want to have a conversation about art dealers and art critics! We have an opportunity to talk about more interesting things!

LEE: No, boy, but for me, it's—how many millions? I mean, these paintings going for crazy!

WILEY: Sure.

LEE: I guess art is in the eye of the beholder. But goddamn! *[laughs]*

WILEY: *[laughs]* This is true. And I share some of the surprise when you see some of the numbers moving up and down.



Kehinde Wiley x Spike Lee. Photography COURTESY OF MUSTACHE

LEE: Now, I know if it was you who was getting—you wouldn't be hating getting \$95 million for a painting, one piece, would you! You would not be hating that, would you?

WILEY: Let's be clear, my prices are nowhere near there.

LEE: I'll say it. If one of your joints sold for \$95 million, you wouldn't be hatin' on that, would you?

WILEY: I would not be hating. However, I would question the logic about why any one art object would be worth that much.

LEE: Any? I could see some, but some of this stuff... Cahoots. Shenanigans. Subterfuge. Malarkey.

WILEY: Think about it: Why do we value anything? What is art value predicated upon? It's predicated upon a certain group of people who've decided collectively that we feel that this is—it's market dynamics. So I can't say that this is wrong. It's simply the way it is. I participate in the system, which is both beautiful and terrible. It's availed me opportunities I would have never imagined. It's given me a voice to talk about issues that have never been seen here before. And I think I can't throw out the baby and the bathwater—

LEE: *[interrupts]* I know, but tell me, tell me, you've never looked at a painting that's in Sotheby's and went for \$120, \$135 million and you said WTF?

WILEY: I have. *[both laugh]*

LEE: Thank you. We can move on now. That whole world intrigues me. What would Basquiat say now, if he knew—you were too young; I think he died before you...

WILEY: He died before my time in the art world, but I do understand what a trickster he was, what a joker he was. If you look at his work, you also understand the way he sort of inside-outside—he wants to manipulate the system and point to it as a prison at once. I think he, much like many artists, was capable of negotiating the value of his work, which—during his lifetime, he actually saw quite a bit of success. Let's never forget how complicit some artists are within the manufacture of their own image in the world, right?

LEE: I'm not against so many artists making a buck. Goddamn! [both laugh] I mean, I'm totally alien to this art world, as far as the commerce. So I just don't understand it. I'm not hating on it, I just, you know...

WILEY: I get it. I get it. I mean, we could talk about the commerce portion but I think what's more interesting, what's overwhelmingly interesting, is this new culture of art in popular culture, and how so many young people are starting to see artists like myself, artists like Mickalene Thomas, Wangechi Mutu, and Glenn Ligon. All of this work is being discovered not through museums but through social media, or through hip-hop. I remember seeing Marina Abramović's latest collaboration with Jay Z and thinking that we've really reached a saturation point where the artificial lines that define high and low culture are starting to fall. I think it's an extraordinary time to be a working artist.

LEE: What age did you start drawing?

WILEY: My mother sent me to art school when I was 11.

LEE: Where?

WILEY: It was a small community college program that was about two hours outside of where we lived, in South Central Los Angeles. I would get on the bus.

LEE: South side? South Central? NWA, and all that?

WILEY: That's right. Boyz n the Hood.

LEE: How old were you when Boyz n the Hood came out? That was 1991.

WILEY: I was 14.

LEE: So you were right in the middle of it.

WILEY: Yeah. In fact, during 1989, my mother, who was exceedingly good at finding these free programs—you know, we were on welfare, just trying to get through—but she would find these amazing programs. She sent me to the Soviet Union at the age of 12 to go study in the forest of then-Leningrad with 50 other Soviet kids.

LEE: Whoa-oo-oo-oo-oo-oo. Hold the roll. [laughs] Your mother sent you to Russia when you were 12?

WILEY: That's right.

LEE: With who?

WILEY: Well, there was a program called the Center for US-USSR Initiatives. And it was started by the United States State Department to create a sense of cultural understanding between the two, but it was also—

LEE: Spying, in other words.

WILEY: *[all laugh]* I am not a spy.

LEE: You were 12 years old and a spy. Right.

WILEY: Right. But it was interesting because Michael Milken was the one who paid for me and a couple of other kids to get out there. You know, not all of us had the means to.

LEE: So that had a deep impact on you?

WILEY: It really did. It really did. I mean, I'm sure in your own story there must be some way in which storytelling opened itself up. What was that sort of spark, that moment? Or was there one?

LEE: It really wasn't one moment. I just used to like creative writing in elementary school and gravitated towards it in college. But I've always been around the arts, all my life. My father's a jazz musician, my mother taught English at St. Ann's in Brooklyn Heights. My grandmother taught art for 50 years in segregated Georgia. In 50 years, she never had one white student. And for 50 years, white students missed out on a great teacher. Picasso was her favorite painter.

WILEY: It's interesting that you reverse the terms about how access to your grandmother was a greater loss to society than it was...

LEE: She was great.

WILEY: Yeah. Do you think that she gave you a way of thinking about the creative process?

LEE: Oh, yeah. She was a big supporter of mine, put me through Morehouse, put me through NYU, and she saved her Social Security checks 50 years for her grandchildren's education. I was the eldest. I had first dibs.

WILEY: You see, no one's talking about this. I hear these amazing stories of women like this, who are the bedrock of education, of creative people, of communities even. I did a show that was dedicated exclusively to African-American women and their presence, their beauty, their invisibility on some level. I think it's wonderful, the way you come to that.



Kehinde Wiley x Spike Lee. Photography COURTESY OF MUSTACHE

LEE: You sell a piece to Miss Winfrey yet?

WILEY: You know what, I haven't.

LEE: Whoa, whoa, whoa. Why not?

WILEY: Well, you know, Oprah doesn't go to a lot of the art events. I see Gayle a lot, at everything.

LEE: Well Gayle should tell her friend. I'm going to, the next time I see her, you gotta get with this.

WILEY: I rarely meet a lot of the people who buy and collect my work.

LEE: But do you know who buys it, though?

WILEY: I do. I mean, we maintain a pretty airtight database with all the information. It's just important to have. But my life, I have the luxury of being able to separate that side. And, you know, it's an incredibly valuable place to be, because mentally, there's this space-clearing gesture that happens where you can just... I keep a studio in Senegal, in West Africa, I keep a studio in Beijing, I keep a studio here.

LEE: Beijing!

WILEY: That's right, that's right.

LEE: Williamsburg.

WILEY: From Beijing to Dakar to Williamsburg. And it's a sense in which you want to be able to get outside of the marketplace, to get outside of the same ideas, or the same thinking, and to find new fields of providence. That's a privilege.

LEE: Do you go to Gorée Island?

WILEY: I have been to Gorée. And, you know, it was really wonderful.

LEE: What's that called—The Door of No Return?

WILEY: That's right. It's the point at which all of the African enslaved persons had left the west coast.

LEE: Once you went down there, you didn't come back.

WILEY: And one of the things that I love about being in that part of the world is it's so easy. People don't realize getting on a flight from New York to Dakar is the same distance of New York to L.A. So you can be on the west coast of Africa, sitting on the beach, fishing, in the space of six, seven hours. It's great. And I understand you were in Brazil recently?

LEE: Yeah, I just came back. Shot a short film, and doing a documentary about Brazil called Go Brazil, Go!, which is in editing now.

WILEY: Is that right? Now does this coincide with the World Cup and the Olympics?

LEE: The documentary we want to be out in time for the World Cup, but stuff is so fluid in Brazil, so much stuff is happening every single day, we're gonna be between the World Cup and the Olympics.

WILEY: It's better that you not try to squeeze it into the space of some artificial deadline and just let it be.

LEE: Yeah, those artificial deadlines are murder. *[laughs]*

WILEY: Yeah. I mean, I've seen that you've done a number of projects that go outside of traditional storytelling. I loved the piece that I saw recently of Tyson's monologue work.

LEE: The HBO piece.

WILEY: That's right.

LEE: You should have seen it on Broadway, though. That was really...

WILEY: I was in Beijing. I missed out.

LEE: Globetrotter. [laughs] Yeah, we did that on Broadway first. And Mike, he was great.

WILEY: Do you feel like you were able to capture that sense that you felt in the live performance on Broadway? Do you feel like that was the real Mike, or his essence was somehow...

LEE: No, no, no. I think that you get it even more because the camera puts everybody first-row-center.



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WILEY: And I'm sure as an artist, you know that toying with smoke and mirrors and sound and lighting can add content or heighten or diminish things that are there or aren't there.

LEE: The goal is not to do anything that's going to diminish what Mike's story is. We're just there to support him, because it's a one-man show. He's out there alone. So we had music and we had projector stuff behind him every now and then. For the most part, you know, we're not using that as crutches, because Mike was up there baring his soul, and we didn't want to get in the way. So we kept it to a minimum.

WILEY: There were a couple of effects that I think were really well placed. That opening shot was extraordinary. The light, hanging over.

LEE: Oh! That's when he swings on the boxing stool? And Nat King Cole's "Nature Boy."

WILEY: That's right. That's right.

LEE: Mike chose that song.

WILEY: And, you know, what was great—and I think a lot of people don't realize—the level of intelligence and sophistication...

LEE: Mike Tyson's no fool. He's very intelligent, very articulate, and I have the utmost respect for him because not many people are gonna—forget about doing it on a stage, just in the company of two or three people—gonna bare their soul to people. The strangers will say all the fucked-up things they've done, or all they've been through, and it's rough, and we always brace for the part in the play when he talked about his daughter, who died tragically on the treadmill.

WILEY: It was on a treadmill! It was so bizarre, just out of nowhere.

LEE: Yeah, it was on a treadmill. And you could tell as we got to that point, every show, that he knew it was coming, and when you have to do that every night... That's not acting, that's not performing.

WILEY: Right.

LEE: That's really real. That's not made up. His daughter died tragically on a treadmill. No one wants to lose your child, but like that? Crazy.

WILEY: That's real life.

LEE: It's real life, but still, you wouldn't wish that on your enemy, for your daughter, or your son, so early.

WILEY: It calls to mind a number of really famous monologues or people who've taken the theater and allowed their life story to become the role of a lifetime and thinking about Elaine Stritch at Liberty, when she began talking about the full scope of her career in Hollywood and then Broadway. I'm wondering if, for you, there's any difference working on documentary and...

LEE: I get asked that a lot. For me, it's all storytelling. So whether I'm doing a 30-second commercial with Michael Jordan for Nike or the video I did for Michael Jackson in Brazil was four minutes, or Malcolm X was three hours, or When the Levees Broke and If God is Willing [and Da Creek Don't Rise], the documentaries on New Orleans and Katrina, those were four hours. It still comes down to being a storyteller. I don't really get tripped up by the form. I want to tell a story, whether it's 30 seconds or whatever length.

WILEY: You and I have both been blessed to work with Michael Jackson. I had a number of conversations with him about how he wanted his portrait to be done. And surprising as it may seem to hear about Mike Tyson and his intelligence and his understanding of the world and people around him, I think many people would be surprised to know the extent to which Michael was engaged in art history.

LEE: He was very well-read and knew his art.

WILEY: That's right. That's right. I remember talking to Mike about the difference between early Rubens paintings and his brushwork compared to the later work in his career.

LEE: And Mike knew what he was talking about, right?

WILEY: He knew exactly. And it was a conversation you can rarely have with people who aren't within the art establishment.

LEE: Can't have that with me. [laughs] I don't know what the fuck you're talking about!

WILEY: *[laughs]* No, but I would imagine that there is some—a type of knowing, or intelligence that transforms itself. Mike was also a talent that you just can't put into words. What was it like to be in Brazil—I believe you were in Salvador da Bahia?

LEE: Well, we did—the favela was in Rio, but the other part was in Bahia. It was one of the highlights of my film life, going to Brazil with Michael to do "They Don't Care About Us."



Kehinde Wiley x Spike Lee. Photography COURTESY OF MUSTACHE

WILEY: So much of what we're dealing with as artists, and me specifically, is to do with the ego, and the personality. All of those great portraits in the world, whether you go to the Louvre, or you go to the Tate, you're seeing people who, over centuries, have developed a language of power. How to aggrandize themselves and the people around them. There's a vocabulary—

LEE: Like Napoleon with the hand inside his jacket?

WILEY: All of that, all of that. I mean, it's evolved itself into a very specific vocabulary, and we break it down and we start using it even today. Even the way that film is shot, the way that you choose to crop somebody, that all comes from painting, right? How do you make someone look great? Lighting and so on. I think it's a really exciting opportunity to be able to do your portrait, specifically, because it almost feels like the culmination of all these different subjects, all these different elephants in the living room that may not be immediately what you may think this portrait is about.

LEE: We shall see. *[both laugh]* Well, you know, I wouldn't be here if I wasn't a fan. I have the complete, utmost faith in your artistic ability, and I love what you do, so let's get to it!

WILEY: Let's do it.

KEHINDE WILEY'S PORTRAIT OF SPIKE LEE WILL BE REVEALED BY GREY GOOSE IN MID-JUNE; CARMELO ANTHONY AND SWIZZ BEATZ'S PORTRAITS WILL FOLLOW THROUGHOUT THE SUMMER.