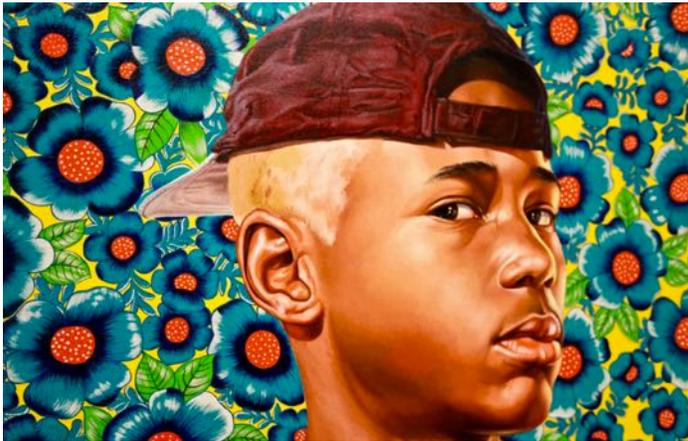


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The New York Times

Review: 'Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic' at the Brooklyn Museum



Byron Smith for the New York Times

You can love or hate Kehinde Wiley's bright, brash, history-laden, kitsch-tinged portraits of confident, even imperious young black men and women. But it is hard to ignore them, especially right now, with scores of them bristling forth from "Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic," the artist's mind-teasing, eye-catching survey at the Brooklyn Museum.

Since 2001, Mr. Wiley has been inserting black individuals into the generally lily-white history of Western portraiture, casting them in poses — including on rearing steeds — derived from Renaissance and old master paintings of saints, kings, emperors, prophets, military leaders, dandies and burghers. Usually these works have titles identical or similar to their sources, among them "Napoleon Leading the Army Over the Alps," and "Colonel Platoff on his Charger," creating the delicious sense that Mr. Wiley's updates are perfectly normal, which in a way they are. Still, they are conceptually provocative and should startle just about anyone, regardless of race, creed or color, even if his often thin, indifferently worked surfaces can leave something to be desired as paintings.

In a way that few other living artists match, Mr. Wiley's art is overtly, legibly full of the present. His paintings reflect some of the problems and pleasures of being alive right now, in times fraught with corrosive bigotry and inequality; flooded with images, goods and sounds; and enriched by the incessant, even ecstatic interplay of cultures — whether high, low or sub — around the globe.

In the 44 paintings here, Mr. Wiley's subjects wear hip-hop fashion or designer gowns, and in addition to posing as kings and saints, they mimic aristocratic ladies in well-known paintings from the Louvre or masterworks of African sculpture. Very occasionally, we see someone famous and in costume, as in "Equestrian Portrait of King Philip II (Michael Jackson)" based on a painting by Peter Paul Rubens. In Mr. Wiley's reprise, produced in 2009, the face of the tragic pop star, who died that year, is overwhelmed by the ostentatious royal armor and hovering cherubs.

Often, Mr. Wiley's subjects are seen against decorative patterns based on textiles from various cultures — rich brocades, British Arts & Crafts designs, Africa-inspired Dutch wax-resist fabrics. Mostly floral designs, they curl across the figures, confusing foreground and background. Anointed with carved black or gold frames that look a little too fake, these paintings keep company with other borrowings from art history: among them six imposing full-length portraits in stained glass that are too photographic, and

four bronze portrait busts that muster a terrific hauteur but otherwise are generically academic. In nearly every instance, the figures are larger than life; some paintings are nearly as big as billboards.

But there are also small-scale portraits of young black men, some on gold leaf, like Byzantine icons, and others ensconced in sturdy wood frames equipped with doors. Resembling portable altarpieces, and based on the austere portraits from the 1400s by Hans Memling, they bring to mind the quiet perfection of Northern Renaissance works amped up with a contemporary sense of seductiveness.

When it comes to art history, Mr. Wiley has not only scores to settle but also possibilities to explore. He sees this terrain as ripe with potential, a revisionist approach that he shares with artists as diverse as Nicole Eisenman, Dana Schutz, Carroll Dunham, John Currin and especially Mickalene Thomas, who also inserts black women into art history (and with a degree of painterly innovation that exceeds Mr. Wiley's).

Mr. Wiley also belongs to a tradition of Pop Art-infused figuration that includes Mel Ramos, Wayne Thiebaud and Barkley L. Hendricks. And he owes something to the flamboyance and painting-consciousness of artists from the 1980s, especially the slyly layered images of David Salle and the sampled patterns of Philip Taaffe.

But as an artist and a persona, Mr. Wiley may best be described as a combination of Andy Warhol, Norman Rockwell and Jeff Koons. Like Warhol, he makes striking images of his contemporaries. Like Rockwell, he elevates everyday Americans with somewhat corny portrayals that are more interesting as images than as art objects. Like Mr. Koons especially, Mr. Wiley's is largely an accessible public art that also raises issues about the role of the artist's hand and the use of workshop production. Like all these artists, Mr. Wiley has a carefully cultivated public persona, and is, along with his art, the subject of considerable art-world argument, which matters little. Mr. Wiley's work is part of the larger culture, and so is he.

Mr. Wiley was born in Los Angeles in 1977 and grew up looking at old master paintings and sculpture at the Huntington Library in San Marino, Calif. He earned his B.F.A. from the San Francisco Art Institute in 1999 and his M.F.A. from Yale in 2001, followed immediately by a residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem. One day, on a street near the museum, he picked up a piece of paper featuring the image of a young black man; it was a confidential police mug shot of a suspect. Looking at the image in the catalog, or the painting from 2006 based on it, one can see why the innocence and nobility of this young face became, as Eugenie Tsai writes, "a catalyst for his subsequent work."

Covering just 13 years of activity, this exhibition was organized by Ms. Tsai, the museum's curator of contemporary art, and offers an early midcareer report on Mr. Wiley's progress. It presents the scope of his ambition and his carefully constructed artistic and social project, which has improved as he has gone global, finding subjects in Africa, Brazil, Jamaica and Haiti. It shows his willingness to risk and fail. The primary flaw is his seeming indifference to the physicality of painting, as he more or less said in a recent article, but that may be changing.

However, Mr. Wiley is, as all artists should be, aspirational. In the first gallery, "Conspicuous Fraud series #1 (Eminence)" portrays a young man in a business suit whose black hair swirls around him like a large, powerful serpent. It is so cursorily painted as to seem unfinished.

His later paintings adhere to a formula of repeating elements: figure, pose, garments, props, background, as do most portraits. The problem is that in many of his efforts, the elements battle one another. The figures, which are painted by Mr. Wiley, convey a certain intensity, but the backgrounds, painted by assistants, often seem skimpy, filled in, not quite up to the task. The imbalance can be even worse in canvases that replicate the actual setting of the borrowed work, as in "Gossiping Women" and "Santos Dumont: The Father of Aviation II," in which marvelously solid subjects (two women and two men respectively) are set in landscapes that resemble sloppy stage sets or images painted by numbers.

The patterned backgrounds are especially overdone in the first paintings Mr. Wiley made of young black women, a 2011 series titled “An Economy of Grace.” For this he went all out, outfitting the women in Givenchy gowns, with piled-up hair and elaborate makeup. It doesn’t help that they also seem ill-at-ease, having been removed from the comfort zone of their own clothing in a way that their male counterparts are not. The fashion photographs that Mr. Wiley orchestrated for a recent issue of New York magazine, using some of the same models, are better. And so are his latest paintings of women in everyday dress: especially “The Sisters Zénaïde and Charlotte Bonaparte,” after another Jacques-Louis David, where two young women, seated, reading a letter before what may be the artist’s simplest background pattern, based on a William Morris design.

A general complaint here is that the labels cite the paintings’ high-art sources intermittently. The origins of the backgrounds are almost never mentioned. Full disclosure for each would strengthen the show.

But aspiration pays off. Like the artist’s most recent paintings of women, his three small and highly detailed portraits based on Hans Memling in the show’s final galleries end the exhibition on a high note, especially the muscular, slightly androgynous Rasta-braided subject of “After Memling’s Portrait of a Man in a Red Hat.” This is perhaps the only work in the show that you can imagine seeing anywhere near its Flemish original. The smooth pore-less surfaces and intimacy of Mr. Wiley’s effort have a rare physical and emotional concentration. Now that he has our attention, he may find his true métier working small, in oil on wood panel, in the manner of Northern Europe’s self-effacing early portraitists. At least for a while.

Correction: February 21, 2015

An art review on Friday about “Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic,” at the Brooklyn Museum, misidentified the artist who made the painting on which Mr. Wiley’s “Equestrian Portrait of King Philip II (Michael Jackson)” is based. He was Peter Paul Rubens — not Jacques-Louis David, whose paintings of Napoleon crossing the Alps inspired another work by Mr. Wiley.



