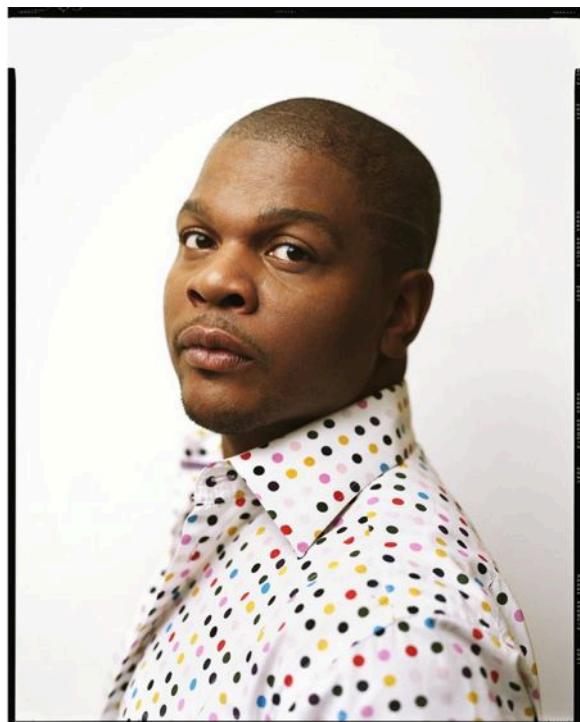


SEANKELLY

Brunett, Zaron III. "More Than a Black Artist: Kehinde Wiley is American Art Royalty," *Playboy*, February 20, 2015.



MORE THAN A BLACK ARTIST: KEHINDE WILEY IS AMERICAN ART ROYALTY



"There is something to be said about laying bare the vocabulary of the aristocratic measure, right? There's something to be said about allowing the powerless to tell their own story."
— Kehinde Wiley

To call Kehinde Wiley "the most famous Black artist alive" is to do him a disservice: he deals with themes as timeless as the Old Masters. His skill with oil paint is their equal. To attach an adjective somehow feels like shoving him off to the side of the art world. He is a painter. You could say he is a black painter. Or, that he is a gay black painter. But, really he's "a history painter, one of the best we have," as *The New York Times* art critic Holland Cotter put it in 2005. "By this I mean that he creates history as much as tells it."

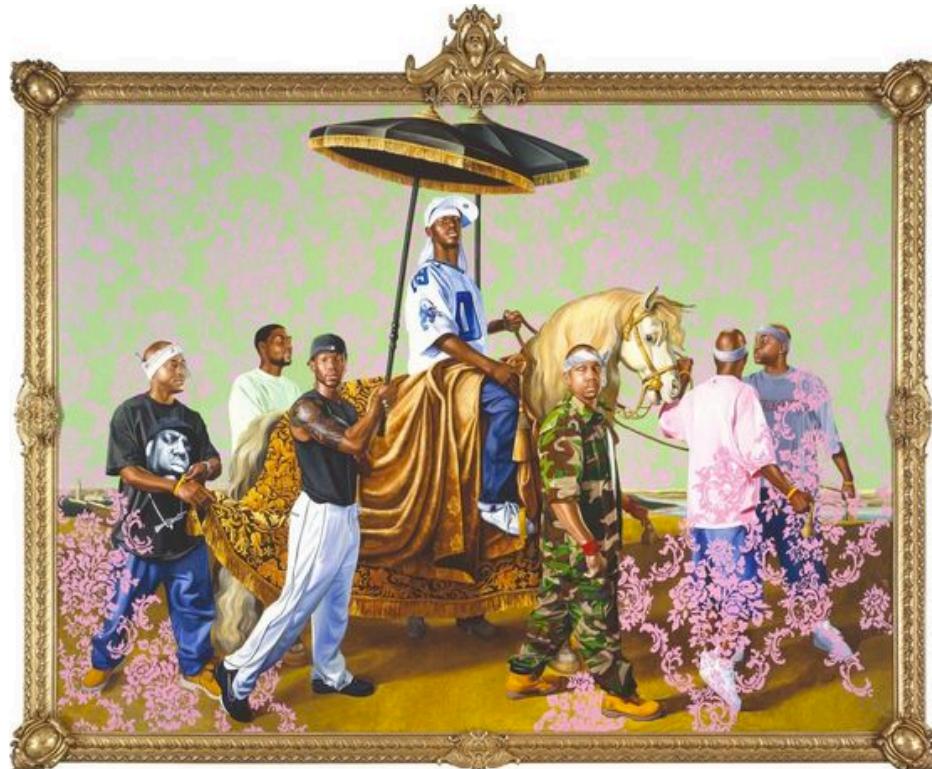
Today, the Brooklyn Museum of Art opens an exhibition entitled "A New Republic," focused on the career of the 37-year-old American artist. It's less a retrospective than a momentary pause to consider a body of work made over the past decade-plus.

After earning an MFA from Yale in 2001, Wiley moved to New York, exclusively painting portraits of young black men he discovered walking the streets of Harlem and Brooklyn. He'd invite them to his studio and pose their black bodies like European dukes and princes of the past. In 2003, he began to work with

the Los Angeles gallery, Roberts & Tilton. Bolstered by the success of this creative partnership, in 2006, he expanded his artistic focus and began his “The World Stage” series, painting men from around the globe, casting subjects from the streets of Haiti, Jamaica, Senegal and Sri Lanka. In 2012, he decided to include women for his show “An Economy of Grace” at the Sean Kelly gallery, which was the subject of a documentary of the same name that was shortlisted for an Oscar nom this spring. Today, his portraits—mostly of urban black bodies in snapbacks, jeans and Jordans, incongruously presented as aristocrats, riding resplendent horses, holding scepters—hang on the walls of the MOMA, LACMA and National Portrait Gallery. Before there was #BlackLivesMatter, Kehinde Wiley said it with paint, and with glamour, but he exceeded the universality of that message by making each of his subject’s blackness unique.

But Wiley also happily fetishizes his figures: the blackness (of the often poor and powerless) is turned into raw material for an expensive art object for the wealthy. Not everyone is cool with this approach. Martha Schwendener described Wiley in *The New York Times*, “as a slightly titillating but not too radical artist whose work nods toward racial and sexual taboos, but is safe enough to be shown just about anywhere.” Others critique his painting style itself: calling his paintings repetitive, thin, or lacking in personal narrative.

This “love-him-or-hate-him” sentiment has made Wiley into a Kanye of the art world: an unapologetic artist who uses uncomfortable cultural appropriation as a tool to his advantage, demanding respect—and paychecks—for black bodies and their beauty. Last week, Playboy caught up with Wiley, after a month that included receiving the State Department’s Medal of Art by John Kerry, watching his work make a weekly cameo on the sets of Lee Daniels’ hip-hop soap opera, *Empire*, and overseeing installation of the most substantial show of his career. A notoriously difficult interview subject and complex thinker, Wiley opened up about his pan-African heritage, his unique bond with Michael Jackson, and what it means to be royal.



CHANCELLOR SEGUIER ON HORSEBACK [COURTESY OF SEAN KELLY GALLERY / ROBERTS & TILTON GALLERY / STEPHEN FRIEDMAN GALLERY / GALERIE DANIEL TEMPLON]

Does it make you feel old to have a retrospective at your young age? You’re not even 40 yet.

In the past you would have to be much further along in your career and be much older to enjoy this type of reception. I think it’s an exciting signal that museums are responding to what’s going on in real-time in the culture, as opposed to waiting for some sort of elusive academic consensus to arrive. In order for any

of these institutions to survive the drive of the 21st Century, a more nimble and much more holistic view of what art is and how it functions in the broader culture has to come to the fore. And this is a great achievement towards that direction.

You grew up in a gritty and dangerous part of South Central LA in the 1980s, and at your mother's behest you spent countless hours in the gallery in the Huntington Library—an aristocratic institution in wealthy Pasadena—how do you feel your unique experience of growing up in LA shaped you?

Without my biography you don't get the work I make right now. One of the things you have to consider when looking at this work: there is an amount of empathy for people who are trying to make it who are struggling, who don't necessarily come from much. I think it takes the background I have to be able to have an opportunity—and a credible opportunity and a responsibility—to tell stories and cast light on, perhaps, aspects of the culture that don't necessarily get told.



EQUESTRIAN PORTRAIT OF KING PHILIP II [COURTESY OF THE OLBRECHT COLLECTION]

You've painted LL Cool J, Biggie, Ice-T, and Michael Jackson, whose portrait you said was based on "a conversation with him about what it means to be an aristocrat. Is it good enough to be an aristocrat, or do you want to be royal? And what's the difference between all of that?" Are there any parallels in the way both you and MJ have used visual humor to demand the world see black men as royal?

Michael, like anyone, recognized the pageantry that surrounded his work. He was his own best creation. But I think he also had a sense of humor. There was something like a fabulist's aesthetic that surrounded everything he does. It was almost decidedly tongue-in-cheek. He sort of straddled this world between fantasy and reality. In terms of what I do is to be able to play within this fantasy of the art-historical pantheon. I have an abiding respect with the history of Western European easel painting, I also have a very critical mind when it comes to not taking it as whole but sort of breaking it into those pieces of what you want to run forward with and leaving to the side what you want to do away with.



HAITI SERIES: JUPITER AND THETIS [COURTESY OF ROBERTS & TILTON GALLERY]

Your mother seems to be a phenomenal person, a woman of integrity and grit. I've read she ran a Sanford & Son-style junk store, and that she was also an academic, a linguist—the person who taught you that languages are a tool. Do you feel your mother showed you how to play with language as a code?

I think code-switching is something that comes so naturally for kids of a certain type. It's something that within my own work, I almost take for granted that I'm speaking the language of high, conceptual art, and I'm speaking the language of an urban sensibility. I'm also trying to be incredibly sensitive and aware of the broader evolution of not only American culture, but of the sensibilities all over the world now. My mother's an incredible influence in that regard. Not only in terms of language but just as an example of how to stay curious about the world.

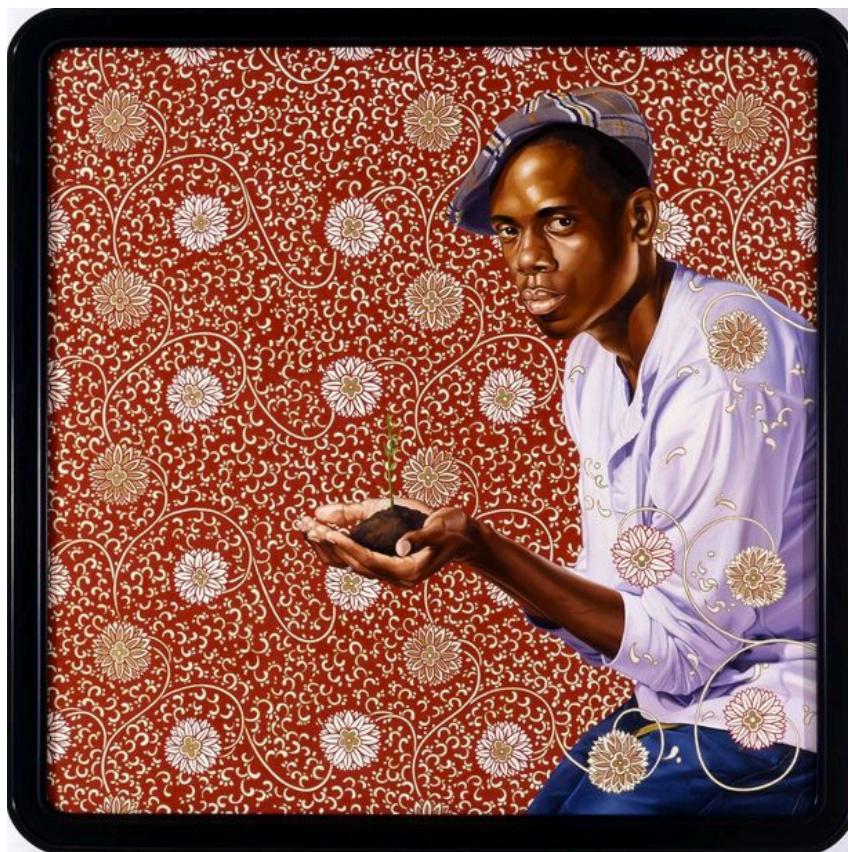
I've read that you went to Africa in your twenties to find your Nigerian father. Did that longing to know your African father inspire your desire to meaningfully connect with the pan-African world?

I think so. I went to Nigeria when I was twenty-years-old and had never really met my father. I jumped on a plane, looking for one man in the most populous country in sub-Saharan Africa. And I found him. It was the incredibly dramatic Oprah-Winfrey style, over-the-top story. But, in the end, what you're pointing out is a very real longing for so many African-Americans. I grew up, for a lack of a better term, as an African-American with a sense of Black American identity. To be able to now know and spend time with people on my father's side of the family—cousins and uncles and so on—it's an extraordinary blessing. The story of my work and its engagement with the broader world, and Africa in particular—it continues to unfold.

In the past you've talked about power and glamour in portraiture. In 2014, in an interview with Artnet, you said, "Glamour was always about the power of the individual to be that wasteful towards themselves. That power dynamic and the power play that's going on in these works has a

lot to do with all of that giving going towards this one person..." How does it feel to play with glamour to grant esteem to the powerless?

There are moments where when you create paintings of people you see their faces when they see those works for the first time ... there's this incredible joy. There is something to be said about that. But at the same time I'm not painting one's life with these paintings. At its best, what the work does is point to a set of possibilities. And I think that that is something. I think that is not nothing. Art is a very tough language to use if you want to get anything done in this world. I chose one of the hardest fields to go into if you're interested in social change. Beyond social change what my work does is that it allows for young artists and for viewers of certain types to be able to see themselves within a more accurate context, to see themselves outside of the ways in which they've been spoon-fed their entire lives. That's something that's certainly meaningful—that has some level of merit. Although, it's simply a painting in the end.



CHINA SERIES: ENCOURAGE GOOD MANNERS AND POLITENESS; BRIGHT UP YOUR SURROUNDINGS WITH PLANTS [COURTESY OF ROBERTS & TILTON GALLERY]

Since art as you say, is one of the hardest fields for "those interested in social change," what do you make of the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter? In a sense, you were way ahead of that social curve. Is the culture catching up to the message of your work?

I think I agree with that. But at the same time I'm also annoyed by that on some level. I agree with it because black lives do matter, and that's the call-to-arms of so much of what I've done. But I hate the idea that that's the only way of looking at my work. I think there's a type of fullness and nuance within the work that sometimes collides a little bit with your more politically-corrected presuppositions or assumptions of the work. Oftentimes my work can be incredibly driven by the redemptive desire, but sometimes, there's very destructive and wasteful and dark impulses that give rise to painting—or ideas surrounding painting. It's all mixed-up and that's what the work is, it's a type of self-portrait, that refers back to conflicting desires: the desire to be present, the desire to be beautiful, the desire to be taken seriously. All of those are in there.

Since your paintings are “high-priced, luxury goods for wealthy consumers,” as you’ve called them, how do you ensure black people in your paintings don’t become simply fetishized anew?

I don’t. And in fact, I think they are being fetishized. That’s my goal. My goal is to look at the culture and to look at some of the trappings of the exotic that black men and black women occupy, to criticize that, but also to be complicit with that. My work ends at the crossroads between the redeemed and the imprisoned. There can’t be a single way of looking at our black bodies in public spaces; and I don’t want to shut down the conversation by simply saying this is a plight of freedom.



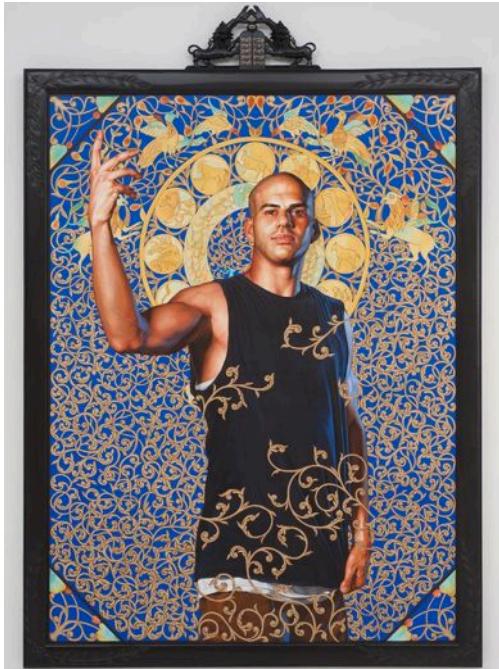
AN ECONOMY OF GRACE: JULIETTE RECAMIER [COURTESY OF SEAN KELLY GALLERY]

As a queer black artist who makes black men beautiful, sexualizing them as objects of allure and desire, do you ever worry that, ironically, you reduced them to objects, no different than how we treat women?

There’s always a difference between intention and interpretation. There’s what I have in mind and then there’s what the viewer unpacks when they look at an object. Much of what I do is based on a set of assumptions I have, but you, as the viewer, bring a history, a personal story to these paintings. In so much as what you’re looking at what I have in mind, you’re also looking at how you see the world. And so, while looking at glorified images of regal black men that are luminously resplendent, regal and resplendent—all of these things can be read differently by different viewers. So, there’s a responsibility for me to be truthful to my own set of impulses; but I can never take responsibility for the viewer’s interpretation.

You once said: “Portraiture is something that’s really suffering in the media environment that we have right now. What I try to do in image-making is try to create something that can compete on the same level—something that’s as sexy and as current and as complex as the world we all continue to evolve in.” Do you feel you’re succeeding? How difficult is it to stay relevant in the crush of memes and gifs and surreal advertising like Old Spice ads—does the Internet challenge you to stay current?

You can’t ever compete in that realm. You have to realize the strengths of what you do. And what I do is I work with a very ancient technology that speaks softly, evolves slowly over time, that requires you actually physically showing up, being in front of a real three-dimensional object in a room and spending time with that object. That’s the very height of intrigue. I think once you make that commitment, once you cross that threshold, other types of communication tend to disappear and the painting itself becomes singular.



ISRAEL SERIES: LEVIATHAN ZODIAC [COURTESY OF ROBERTS & TILTON GALLERY]

You've been called the black Andy Warhol. And he famously said that we'd all have our fifteen minutes of fame. But you did him one better, and said, "Fuck the fifteen minutes. I'm going to give you a painting, and I'll make you live forever." When speaking about how you street-cast your paintings, you often describe the magic of that moment—what do you see in a person that makes you know they should live forever?

Some people are absolutely small and you know immediately that they will translate into something large. Some people have an over-the-top demonstrative personality but you can almost imagine them perfectly in miniature or watercolor or something that whispers. It really has to do with an instant reading of someone. In so far as this is about other people, it's also about me—my own way of looking at people, my own tastes, my own proclivities. I love going into the streets, not knowing for an instant what's going to happen next; and it's akin to the way I try to track my career which is to constantly give myself new challenges, new places to push where my comfort zones are. The idea that, a black American painter is now beginning a conversation around the state of Israel—and trying to think about its history, its very complex history with the outside world—what gives me the right to have this conversation? It's about throwing yourself off-kilter. It's about placing yourself outside of your natural point of strength, and arriving at new, unexpected conclusions. That's one of the reasons chance drives who I choose in my paintings. I want my work to be a place where surprise and serendipity rule the day.



SANTOS DUMONT THE FATHER OF AVIATION II [COURTESY OF ROBERTS & TILTON GALLERY]

What do you say to criticisms of your use of studio assistants to make your art, and that it's "Made in China," as if you're taking advantage of the cheap labor with your Beijing studio? What makes your process different than Apple or other major corporations?

I stand on the shoulders of so many artists who came before me, who participated in and continue to participate in a long tradition of having art studios where there is a division of labor between more decorative aspects and the sort of portrait I concentrate on. I don't necessarily have any issue with people being confused about that. So much of what the popular culture has been telling us over the years is that artists are creatures who live in caves divorced from society and are on the verge of finishing their magnum opus, their masterpiece, and I think that is an unfortunate misnomer. The fact is every single major working contemporary artist that I know has a studio full of assistants. This is the reality on the ground. Much is made of the fact I have studio assistants in Africa, and China, and oftentimes, the critics ignore all the white people that work for me in New York.

Do you have any thoughts on the LA art world? Would you ever return to open a studio here?

I go to LA every year to see my family. I'm constantly being drawn back. And I find myself being sort of jealous of the lifestyle. And it's really encouraging there are so many great galleries, museums and non-profits bubbling up all over Los Angeles. In short, yes, I could see myself having a studio there. We never know what the future holds.



HAITI SERIES: GOSSIPING WOMEN [COURTESY OF ROBERTS & TILTON GALLERY]