

Fullerton, Elizabeth. "Kehinde Wiley: 'Museum collections are like echoes of acceptability'." *Art Fund*, March 2, 2022.

Art Fund_

With an exhibition at the National Gallery inspired by its Romantic paintings, American artist Kehinde Wiley talks about subverting stereotypes and interrogating the sublime.



Production photo from on-location filming in Norway for Prelude, 2020 © Kehinde Wiley

Who is Kehinde Wiley?

Kehinde Wiley creates monumental canvases that reference Old Masters, but replaces white sitters with contemporary people of colour, elevating them to heroic status to redress their marginalisation in Western art history. In recent years his focus has shifted from portraiture to epic landscapes and maritime scenes recalling those of Caspar David Friedrich and JMW Turner. Wiley's *Ship of Fools* (2017), acquired by Royal Museums Greenwich with Art Fund support, is a modern allegory evoking themes of the Middle Passage, imperialism and migration. A version of it features in his free exhibition 'The Prelude' at the National Gallery, London, inspired by the Romantic sublime, and comprising five canvases and a film shot in Norway.



Portrait of Kehinde Wiley, 2020 © Abdoulaye Ndao

Q. How do museum collections inspire your work?

What is in a museum collection is a direct outcome of certain political realities. A lot of it is pretty messed-up history relating to domination, power, wealth, ego. The collections are like echoes of acceptability. What do we do with this vast repository of a specific type of Western cultural object? My job is to try to allow it to live again, give it some relevant context. As institutions at the forefront of guarding what culture means, museums have the fiduciary responsibility to recognise all of us. Exhibitions like this are testament to the fact that things have to change, but not so radically that you burn down the house. The political fact of my being the descendant of enslaved Africans creating images on the walls of one of the greatest empires in the world is itself provocative.

The National Gallery has an amazing collection of Romantic paintings, portraits of ladies and gentlemen of leisure, some epic landscapes. For an artist like myself, who's been invited in, to ignore that would be a great folly because this is the best ready-made that one can contend with. So, it becomes the stage, the lens through which the viewer can receive the work.

What's fabulous about this project is, I was able to do casting here in London and allow Londoners to populate these works. So many of the portraits you'll see in the rest of the museum are people who have established reputations. Most of the people in my paintings are completely unknown to me. I invite them to imagine themselves within this field of power.

I looked at Ralph Waldo Emerson specifically because of his American can-do attitude towards self-betterment. You have to realise he's coming from an entire field of thought born in the revolutions of Europe, the desire to throw off the

SEANKELLY

chains of aristocracy and class domination but, ironically, existing in this blind spot, in which Black people are not part of that conversation of freedom. It's so bizarre.

The *Ship of Fools*, obviously, comes from the historical practice of rounding up politically inconvenient peoples. The sense in which Black bodies have been controlled, and in which the colonial project will drive you crazy, is very clear.



Kehinde Wiley, *Prelude (Babacar Mané)*, 2021 © Kehinde Wiley, Courtesy Stephen Friedman Gallery, London and Galerie Templon, Paris

The concept for this show was the stereotypical notion of the wanderer: the male, white, Western figure who goes out into nature to find himself, often with a backdrop of Black and Brown folks who help him on his voyage to self-discovery. What does that look like visually and rhetorically when the hero happens to look like me? It demands the viewer take this person seriously as a human being, as someone with their own autonomous dreams and love affairs and proclivities.

For me, Caspar David Friedrich is painting a hyperreal, imagined space that never was. His mountainscapes become these highly erect totems of masculinity in sheer white, a stand-in for the rational Western civilised world. There's also the incredibly penetrative metaphor of the light of God beaming down, bestowing His grace upon the sitter; a sense of the epic and the state as being God's work and inexorably bound. There's something decidedly sociopolitical going on that has to be dealt with in order to move forward.

When thinking about the sublime, you have to think about the larger-than-human; inhospitable temperatures; an environment that will consume you. I wanted to use this totemic notion of vast whiteness as a field through which to look at structures of society. I wanted to talk about the brutality that existed in the

SEANKELLY

imperial and colonial project, to use the landscape as a metaphor of survival and of how people can find a way to warm themselves, to play, to imagine their own childhoods and survivals. There's a desire on my part to picture youth and playfulness as a political alternative to the staid, fixed nature of the narrative within so much of this work in the museum.