

SEANKELLY

Kemp-Habib, Alice. "Inside Kehinde Wiley's Opulent Artist Residency – and the New African Renaissance." *Vogue*, 2022

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The pool deck and main residence of Black Rock in Senegal. Photo: Kylie Corwin

Walking through the wooden doors at Black Rock—Kehinde Wiley's Senegal-based artist residency—is an incongruous experience. The courtyard is dense with greenery and the towering black walls that surround it are slick and modern. But just outside, the dusty roads of Dakar are lined with bare, half-built housing blocks. The city feels unfinished, and I say as much to Wiley when we meet. "This is what a developing country looks like when it's coming into its own," he says, motioning toward the scaffolding outside. "It's a really exciting time to be here, to be able to say that you bore witness to the development of a nation."

Wiley's own relationship to Senegal began at the age of 19, when he was traveling to Nigeria to meet his estranged father for the first time. "Back then there was something called Air Afrique, and you would have to go through France or Dakar in order to get there," he says. "It made an impression on me, just being the first place in Africa where I had ever physically touched down. It has a kind of emotional resonance."

Some 25 years later, he is reclining on a plush gray sofa in Black Rock's open-plan communal area. Wiley established the program in 2019, bringing artists from around the world to Dakar for one- to three-month stays. Designed by the Senegalese architect Abib Djenne, its complex

includes a residence for Wiley, three apartments with adjacent studio spaces for visiting artists, as well as a spa, gym, library, and professional kitchen, in which a resident chef prepares three meals a day. It's incredibly luxurious. "There's a level of quality that I demand," Wiley says. "I want to set the bar for the way that you think about an experience in West Africa."

Our interview takes place in a living space lined with works by the photographer Dwayne Rodgers, who was specially commissioned to create a series for Black Rock. The hum of conversation drifts in from the dining room, where a group of Wiley's friends are gathered, and floor-to-ceiling windows reveal an infinity pool pouring into the Atlantic Ocean (each studio benefits from the same breathtaking vista). Inky volcanic rocks, after which the residency is named, hem the shore.

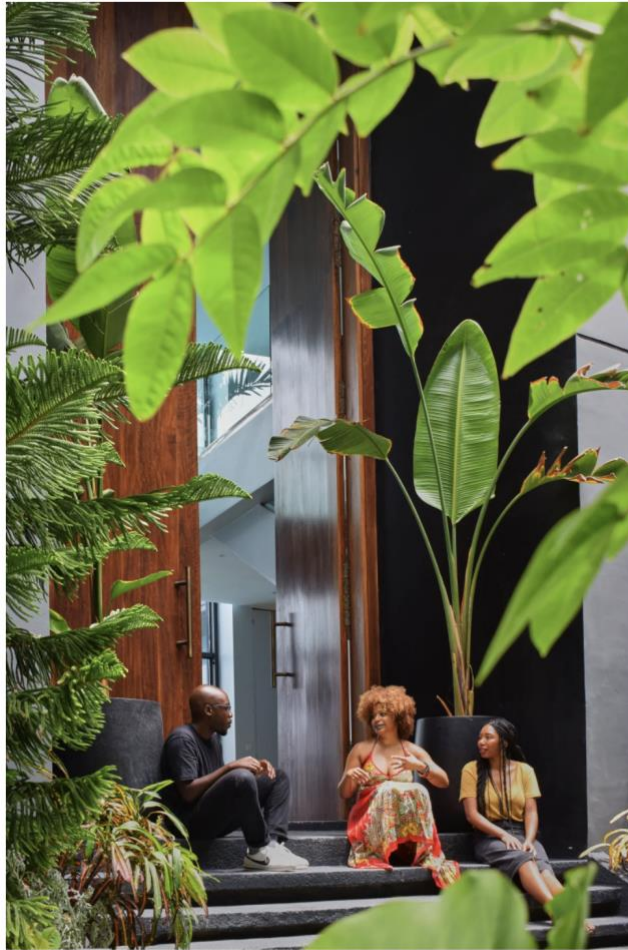
As Wiley's artistic practice took off, he found respite in Dakar's unique terrain. "There was something to be said about those early years when I was maybe a little overwhelmed with the new career that I was exploring, and just wanting to find a moment of peace," he says. "My batteries get charged here. This landscape, the Sahel, the coast. It's like a pause button for me."

Soon after graduating from the Yale School of Art in 2001, Wiley became one of three artists in residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem. His work featured in two exhibitions there ("Ironie Iconic" and "Black Romantic"), which helped propel him to art-world-darling status. "The program [at Black Rock] is a mirror image of the Harlem residency. My experience was one of three; I wanted to have that same sense of community on that exact scale," he says. "Having my first exhibition in New York gave me the opportunity to be seen. The press coverage gave me a level of visibility that changed my life, so this is a kind of paying-it-forward opportunity."

Now, 40 former and current Black Rock residents are taking part in a group exhibition at Doua Seck culture center, in downtown Dakar, for the city's 14th Biennale. The opening is a who's-who of Africa and the diaspora; in the VIP section, architect Sir David Adjaye holds court while the award-winning Nigerian singer Tini lights up the stage. Burna Boy and the fashion designer Telfar are spotted in Dakar too, not to mention a number of influential collectors and curators. All of these people seem to orbit Wiley (it's no wonder that Alicia Keys and Moses Sumney have done private concerts at past openings), and through him the Black Rock 40 are gaining an unparalleled level of exposure.

The residency itself is open to visual artists, writers, and filmmakers, with an emphasis on those whose work engages with Africa. On display at Doua Seck, for example, are two paintings inspired by Aline Sitoe Diatta, an Senegalese icon of anti-colonial protest; the artist Tyna Adebawale uses Diatta as a starting point to explore the role of matriarchs. Elsewhere, Tunji Adeniyi-Jones's richly colored oil paintings of interlocking figures draw on West African dance. Ytasha L. Womack's *Liquid*—a book of poetry, short stories, and reflections—was inspired by Dakar's proximity to the ocean.

Wiley sees Black Rock as a place where African American artists like Womack can reckon with their identities. "The history of American chattel slavery is one in which you've been essentially robbed of an authentic connection to a specific bloodline or location," he says. "I think we're able to use arts and culture as a means to connect."



Tajh Rust, Ytasha Womack, and Grace Haynes in the garden at Black Rock. Photo: Mamadou Gomis

The idea speaks to Wiley's mission to empower Black people through his work. He is best known for painting Barack Obama's presidential portrait, but his bread and butter are immense paintings reimagining Western art traditions through the use of contemporary Black sitters. In "The Prelude"—his recent exhibition at London's National Gallery—subjects plucked from the streets of Dakar, London, and Haiti are thrust into the vast oceans and mountain regions typically associated with European landscape art. An earlier show, "The World Stage: Jamaica," draws on 17th- and 18th-century British portraiture, with elaborate patterned backgrounds inspired by British textiles.

One work from that series, *Three Boys*, features in a limited-edition range of apparel, available at a pop-up in Douta Seck and online. The shop's first physical iteration appeared at this year's Venice Biennale, where Chance the Rapper was snapped wearing a Wiley-brand puffer. "There's a cool moment in culture where you can create these pop, high and low, art, fashion collaboration moments, without people considering it to be a stain on your serious art career," Wiley says of the capsule. The shop is ultimately a fundraising initiative—all proceeds go towards Black Rock—but Wiley also considers it an opportunity to make his art more accessible. The *Three Boys* silk scarf can be worn as an everyday accessory, or even framed if the price tag for a Wiley original is slightly over budget (in 2021, his painting *The Virgin Martyr St. Cecilia* sold at auction for a cool \$649,200).

Black Rock and the Biennale de Dakar are part of a thriving creative scene that has emerged in Senegal and across the African continent over the past decade. There is Thread, a residency program and cultural center that has invited artists to live and work in the Senegalese village of

Sinthia since 2015; Dakar's Museum of Black Civilizations, which opened in 2018 and was subsequently named one of Time Magazine's 100 Greatest Places; an outpost of the Goethe Institute, intended to facilitate cultural exchange, which broke ground this February; and Bët-bi, opening in 2025, which will act as a holding space for repatriated African objects. That's not to mention the thriving fashion weeks in cities like Lagos, Addis Ababa, and Kinshasa, or the world-renowned music festivals, from Malawi's Lake of Stars to Skepta's Homecoming, or the fact that Accra was just named the World Book Capital for 2023.

Referred to by some as the New African Renaissance, these projects have been incubated by a generation of emerging talent redefining what it means to be African in the global imagination. (Sixty percent of Africa's population is under the age of 25, making it the youngest continent in the world.) As one Black Rock artist, Abbesi Akhamie, tells me at the opening, "if you're not here now, you're too late." Fittingly, the theme of this year's Biennale, up through June 21, is *Ŋ Ndaŋŋa*, which means "to forge out of the fire" in the Serer language.

Black Rock epitomizes this, and plans to expand are currently underway in Nigeria. An exhibition space designed by Sir David Adjaye is in the pipeline for Lagos, while a second residency in the city of Calabar is currently under construction. The latter is set to open in 2023, and Wiley hopes to incorporate recording studios in order to capitalize on the country's thriving music scene. He wants artists to be inspired by Nigeria, just as he was by Senegal. "Creating outside of a Western context has proven that my anxieties about maintaining a career outside of the center of power were just an illusion," he says.