

# SEANKELLY

Lessa, Christina. "Kehinde Wiley: Breaking the Code," *Flatt*, October 2013.

FLATT

## KEHINDE WILEY

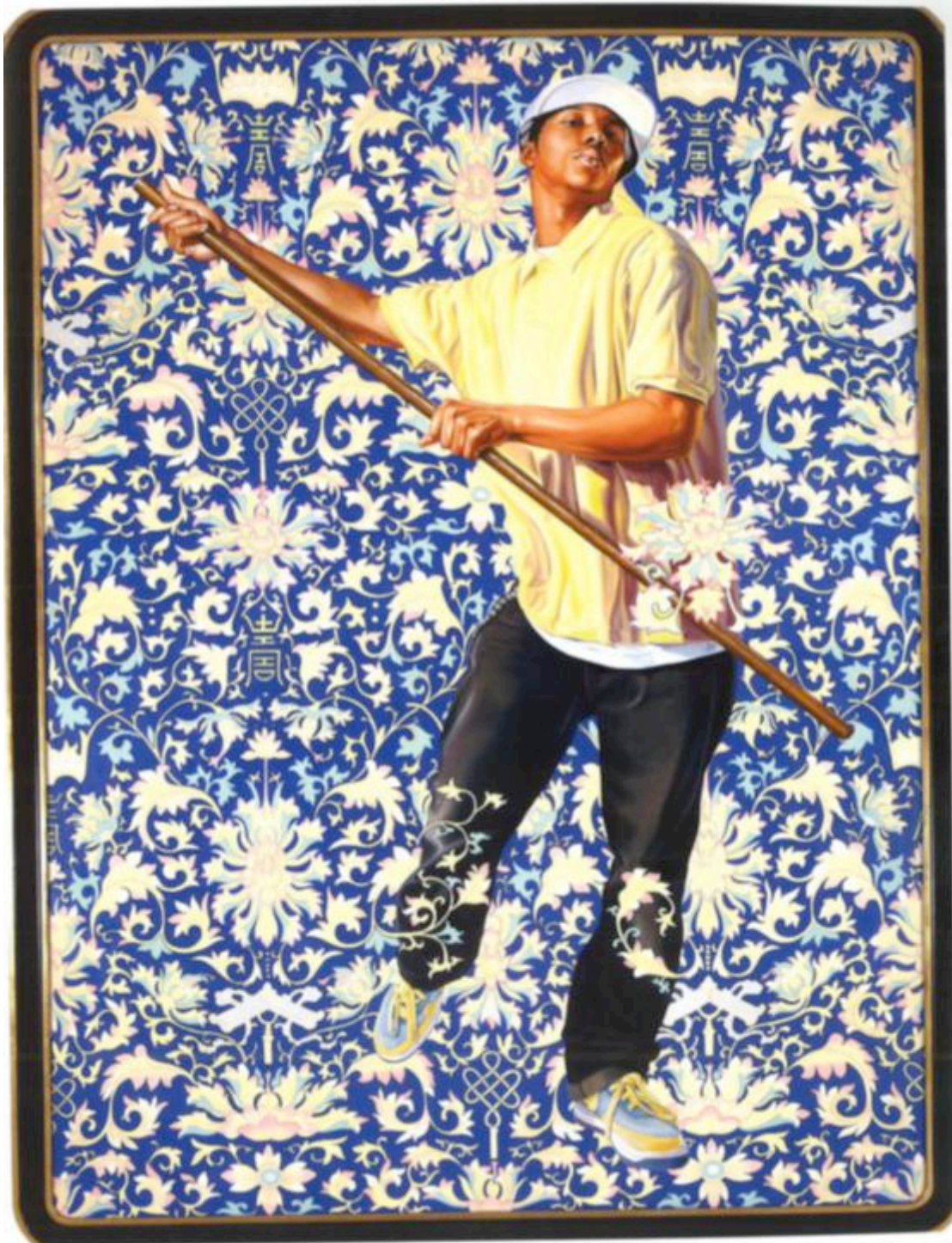
### *Breaking the Code*



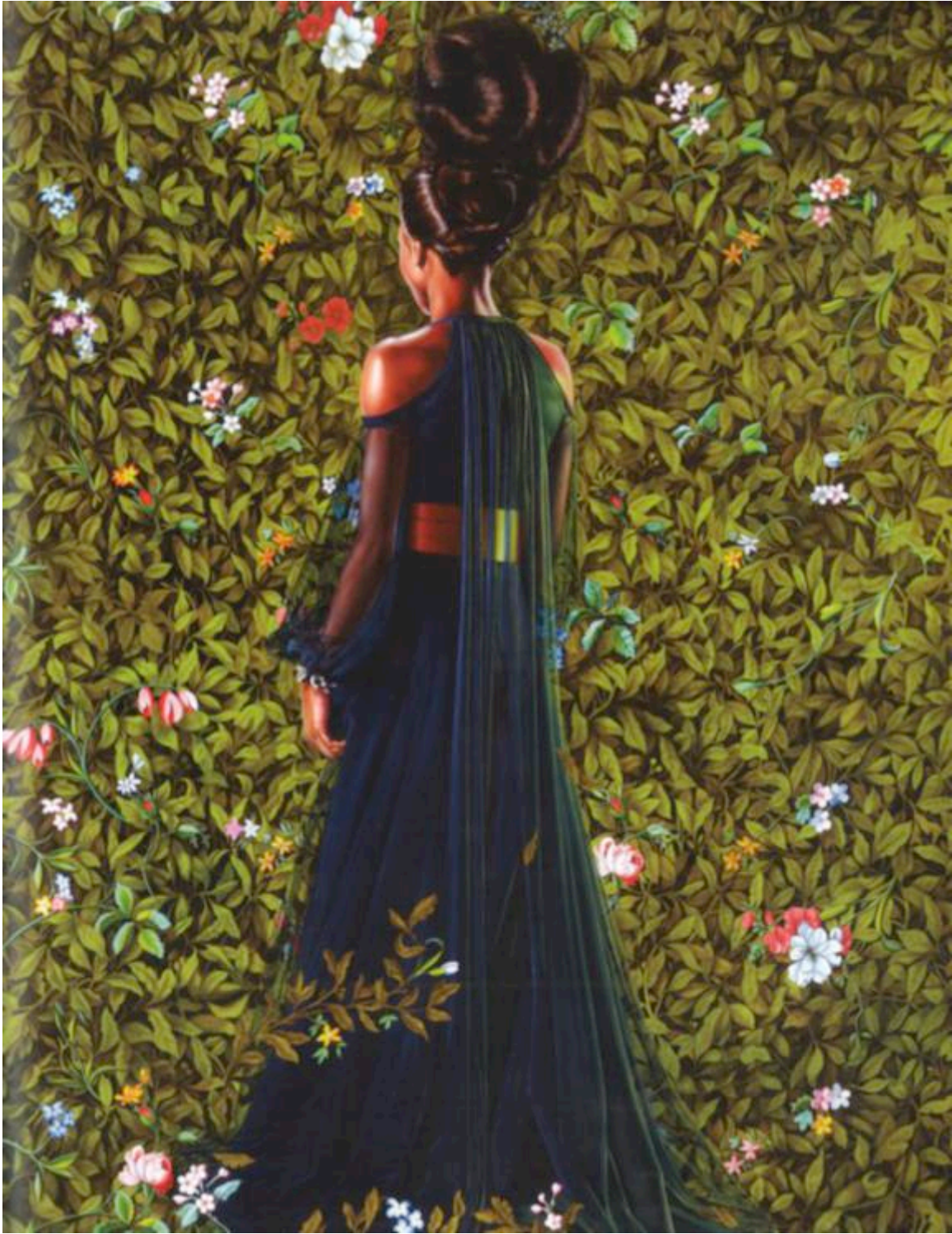
*artist portrait*  
JOSEPH MICHAEL LOPEZ

*Joining contemporary culture with old master stylings, Kehinde Wiley has constructed a unique visual language in his vividly colorful, large scale figurative paintings. The theatrical poses and objects in the portraits are based on well-known images of powerful figures drawn from seventeenth- through nineteenth-century Western art. Within this context, Wiley has given popular aestheticism a position that reaches beyond entertainment into an arena of cultural importance.*

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that each individual, has a very strong  
conceptual background,  
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in the streets. The opposite of oppression  
and classification.*







**CHRISTINA LESSA:** I am fascinated by the dichotomy of your background. Growing up in a brutal neighborhood in South Central Los Angeles, yet ensconced by your mother's highly intellectual field of linguistics, particularly Black American Vernacular and American Standard English. You have mentioned the conscious act of switching "the code" of language as a survival mechanism that occurs with black kids bussed to white schools. I actually had a similar experience as a child living in the Virgin Islands with a mother that was highly cultured and obsessed with proper language etiquette. My sister and I were the only white kids in all of our schools, so we had this funny period of life where we adapted West Indian vernacular just as kind of a passage to get by in school and, you know, these things play out later in life as an artist. I'm curious to know your feelings on how the history of your past, this duality, has come to play in your work.

**KEHINDE WILEY:** You bring up two very important things, which are key to any type of painting process: language and history. Figurative painting specifically, obviously occupies a very long tradition of boiling down symbols... I remember as a kid specifically being confused by a lot of the paintings I saw. My mother sent me to art school when I was eleven, and part of that thing was to create paintings, but the other half was looking at paintings in museums. This is where I started looking at figurative painting and 18th and 19th century British Portraiture. It seemed incredibly coded, sort of shut down in many ways. It seemed dead, as if it was something that was not a living language. It was in many ways confusing and boring and still, and at the same time strange. What drew me back into it was the figure, the idea that these people lived in a world and occupied its space that had so many signs that seem to be almost vacuum-sealed from the life that I had. The vocabulary of the pieces had to make sense in a special way. You could tell that there was a fluency in the vocabulary of signs in these paintings, and so, I would imagine that was one of the key reasons why I began making portraiture from a very early age.

Protocol and social status are something that are very fluid. You know, my mother studies African American vernacular speech as one of her core fields of study, and she did a lot of research on my cousins being bussed to white areas of Los Angeles in the 80s and coming home and speaking a black vernacular and then going to school and speaking American Standard English. Charting the ways that they negotiated, who they spoke with in a certain way, how often — and to chart the evolution of it and their development. I say all that to say, I lived that. I was also one of those kids who was growing up in the hood and South Central LA. My mother was certainly an academic, but also trying to raise six kids on her own. We were on welfare in South Central Los Angeles but being shipped off to some of the better schools in the area, changing code along the way and learning early on how language is embedded with a sense of

in language can be used as a tool. And so, all of that, you can't help but to see that in painting.

**CHRISTINA LESSA:** Roland Barthes said, "Language is legislation, speech is its code. We do not see the power which is in speech because we forget that all speech is a classification, and that all classifications are oppressive." How is the work able to happen without the subject feeling classified?

**KEHINDE WILEY:** One of the things, for me, that is important, is to try to stay as... well, to do a lot of painting and to have a very strong sense of direction without oppression: to be open. What am I doing? Why am I going there? What are the potential outcomes of the space and place? At the same time, when I'm there, one goal is to respond in a knee-jerk kind of way, so, "Oh my god, did you see that? That was hot." And it becomes less about, "How does that fit into..." What I want is a sense that each space, that each individual, has a very strong conceptual background, but I also want for each interaction and person to be as bright and shimmering as that moment that I found them in the streets. The opposite of oppression and classification.

My next show is going to be in London and it's sort of about the British connection to the Caribbean, and we spent months in British archives and portraiture searching for poses and then searched for young Jamaicans who were later asked to be put in these positions.

We were in Trench Town with full security and a camera crew with cultural leaders, and no one was having it. It was just not happening...and there was this moment where we broke loose with a young guy from the neighborhood and it was his sort of presence that allowed for us to have much more of a free flow, and then later the cameras and stuff came into play.

**CHRISTINA LESSA:** Yes, having lived in the Caribbean I understand that it's a very different social dynamic, especially with men.

**KEHINDE WILEY:** Yes. Who are you? What are you doing? People want to know how you're going to use their image and why you want it. What are you going to do with it? Are you going to make any money off of it? Am I going to look ridiculous?

**CHRISTINA LESSA:** Are you going to exploit us?

**KEHINDE WILEY:** Right. And all of those anxieties are part of the project. The way that someone will take poses: are they trying to please me? Is there competition from guy to guy? There are often times with women an interesting hetero-normative direction to it, and usually it's more homoerotic...

**CHRISTINA LESSA:** Do you think it's body language then that becomes your code

**KEHINDE WILEY:** I think the body language in the pieces is very important. It's hard for me to say what my code is, but the way that I use body language to my advantage is I go with the historically relevant way in which it was used and one in which I break from it. You know, back in Flemish Dutch painting, you would see someone like Franz Hals working within a particular context of body language. Poses like that are now re-contextualized...back then it was hyper-masculinity. This is how you beat your chest and flex. So what does it mean? It means that all of that is shifting territory.

**CHRISTINA LESSA:** How do you feel about critics calling the work formulaic?

**KEHINDE WILEY:** But you have to have that. They can't always write a love letter. I used to be very sensitive to those critics...I guess I am still. It's just that there's a volume of more opinions.

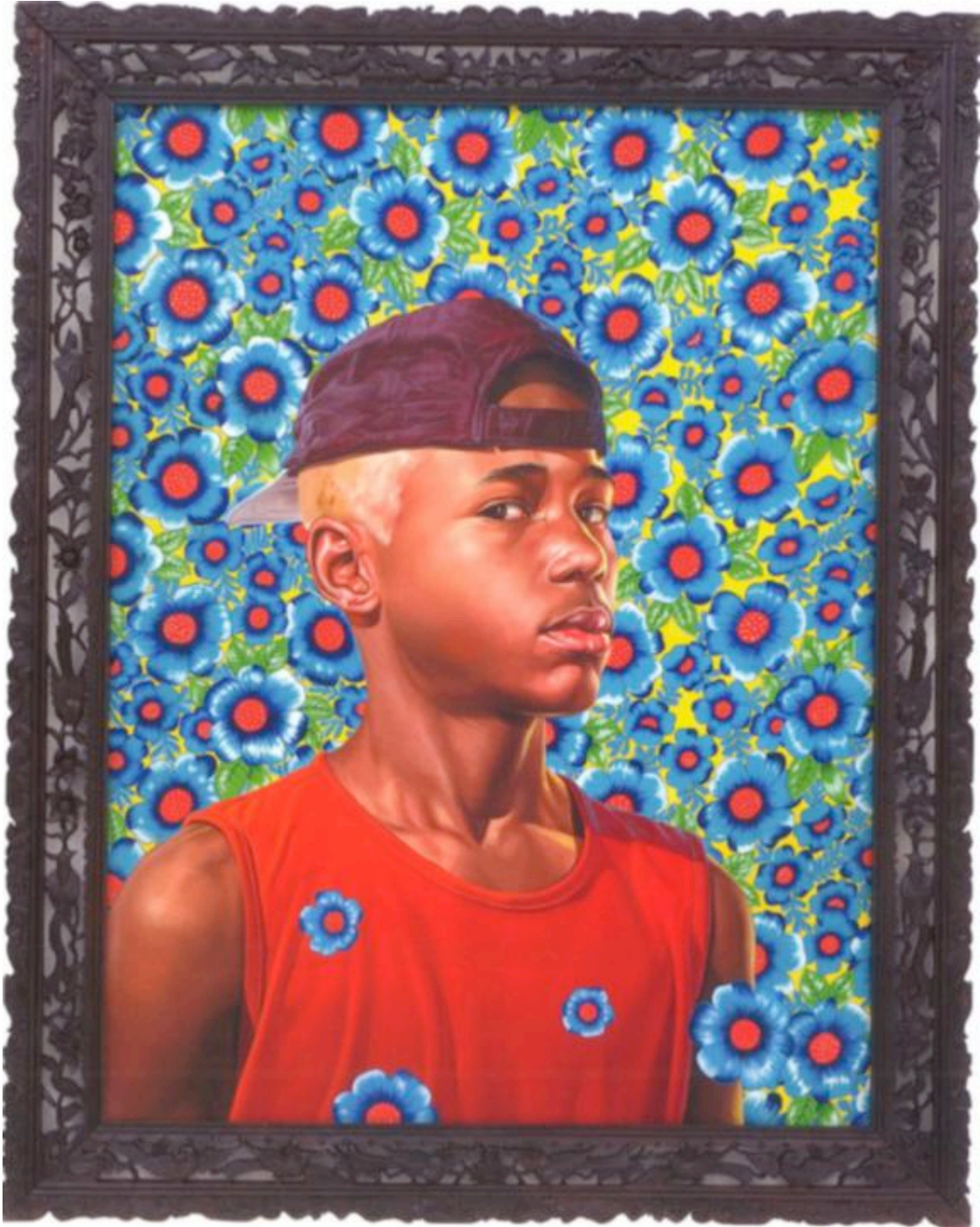
**CHRISTINA LESSA:** When I look at your work, I am drawn to — it's that one gesture. It's not about the stroke or other technical aspects that these critics linger on...I look for that simple thing that draws me in and connects me...it's the body language. It's subtle in a lot of the work but it can be haunting. How is it determined in each piece?

**KEHINDE WILEY:** Oftentimes, I'll have each person do my entire repertoire of poses. I went to London for example, and in my mind, everyone was exhausting every possibility because I knew that not everyone was going to resonate the same way with it.

**CHRISTINA LESSA:** So you have a library of gestures?

**KEHINDE WILEY:** There's a library of gestures, and in the past, for a number of reasons, I allowed the sitters to select what those poses were. I think a lot of that had to do with how the body takes control. I was obsessed with mugshots and having control over how your body is controlled...there is a very strong tie to that. In the Harlem studio, I found these mug shot photos, and that had me thinking about portraiture and how it's related to the mug shot and control. More recently, I've started a different conversation, which is more about how these historical poses read differently on different individuals. So what happens is that I'll find a different group of guys and women and I'll shoot them all in the same poses and then go back in digital form, and it will be like night and day from one pose to the next.

I belong to this generation of artists who came before the age of search, where you had wonder in the world and longed to see something and you'd go to the library for something and there was a surprise. You might discover a new artist as you were looking for something else. One of the great things about theater and painting and dance and about a lot of the arts of





of magic (and I hate to get into this sort of magic language where art has, cause I'm deeply cynical about art, but at the same time I do it everyday, and I know how important it is to take a stick and some paint and arrive at a sort of magic). What's easy and accessible, such as search, or beauty, many critics of beauty say it's too much sugar and maybe you should struggle a bit before full bloom. I take the other route and believe that we should excite the viewer and that excitement will lull you, and before you know it, you're looking at the world through my view.

I don't think you know this is going on – I certainly don't know this when I'm walking through a museum that has great works on display.

CHRISTINA LESSA: Yes, I think there has to be a sense of longing to some degree – your own personal journey to search for...

KEHINDE WILEY: But not knowing what it is and letting the sadness and failure be part of the project.

CHRISTINA LESSA: That is what can be so disappointing with digital photography.

KEHINDE WILEY: Taking digital photography and taking painting that is from digital photography...it creates conversation around image, and I think that drive for perfection, and the dissatisfaction when we see the airbrushed image, says a lot about what we want. Painting involves a lot of masks...some people wear the mask better than others and some masks flow with someone's nature. This is not always about racial or political issues, but that is often how it is perceived in my work.

CHRISTINA LESSA: Race, it is a big part of your work obviously, and it's something I think about a lot coming from my background and being in the positions I was placed in as a child living a life with one foot in both worlds of black and white. In my adult life, I've always sought to understand racism in a different way. And I've come to a point where I relate racism not to just skin color but basically all things that are rejected for no particular reason at all other than fear or greed.

So, I'm curious, your work is spoken of as a mix between "street culture" and classicism...is there something more...?

KEHINDE WILEY: Starting to get below the surface, specifically, the source: the paintings from academia, really kind of interrogating the myth of buying into whiteness as purity. Richard Dyer wrote this book called, "White," and the whiteness studies and why we can't look at the whiteness studies like we do Latin

American and black...and central to that is understanding how it is everywhere and nowhere at once. It completely defies everything around it, yet lacks description.

CHRISTINA LESSA: Yes, I know his work. The philosophy that he puts forth about white being equal to no race at all, therefore wielding great power, is fascinating. Saying that white people are not literally or symbolically white; nor are they uniquely virtuous and pure but perceived simply as the "human race" against which all other ethnicities are examined creates many strong arguments about stereotyping based on fear alone. My mother was older when she had me, from the depression generation...she was raised with specific ideals because of that. But at one point falling in love with a black jazz musician, it was all very taboo at the time, and having to endure the drama that came with a mixed couple and the ignorance behind the way that people divided black and white... Even as a small child I sensed that it was all based on fear.

KEHINDE WILEY: People inherit it... I'd go to my dad's in California and they would be calling me "white boy" (laughs) and it's just a response...it even happens in like Senegal...how is 'white-ness' constructed and is it symbolic? It turns out you're white because of where you have lived. In other circumstances, it has to do with your body type...you're bigger and have a better diet.

CHRISTINA LESSA: So, where are you heading to next?

KEHINDE WILEY: I have shows in London and a couple stops...to the Dominican Republic.

CHRISTINA LESSA: How do you decide where to go?

KEHINDE WILEY: Depending on what I'm working on. There's the mechanics of doing shows and going, and then there's the scheduling of the new exhibition places, and the other stuff is like, "We have this to do and that to do..." How do I choose? Generally, in the beginning there was a lot of strong conversation about where America was going, and really looking at China and Brazil and Nigeria and Israel and sort of these big global and political places, and then there was sort of a desire to make it more personal, and so I started thinking about Africa more. The problem is that if I painted a bowl of fruit, then it would be a black man painting a bowl of fruit. Places like Tel Aviv and Jerusalem really kind of throw open this conversation around what it means to be Jewish and also Israeli...all of that was a really great opportunity...I was able to marry a lot of interests...I began sort of building out

from that, going back in time. I love this idea that global travel not only gives you a chance to talk about American popular culture and how its been accepted and consumed. (Specifically hip hop as a cultural asset. Hip hop is the brand leader throughout the world with young people.) So what does that look like for a portraitist working in the 21st century? How do you respond to the world in that regard? So in many ways that is what I'm doing... sort of charting...I think also, at a much more personal level, what I'm doing is elaborating—in the sense of producing a substance from its elements. I'm producing and extending a painting that can affect my life to people and places... to be able to go to anywhere at the drop of a hat, and I want to meet people! What are they painting? What are they like? It's a really cool way of growing as a person.

CHRISTINA LESSA: It's such a unique study: to produce and exchange artistic references as a citizen of the world. We are entering an interesting time with a global marketplace of skills. I feel that the future will bring more specialized individuals with specific skill sets rather than a corporate sensibility...

KEHINDE WILEY: I think not specialized in the terms of thought process but in experience. I think this is much more about physical art and not the actual person's intellect, and you'll probably end up seeing people who do things with their hands as being more valuable. The ability to think creatively has value everywhere now... it's not only worth something in the Western World...let's just face it, middle to upper class Chinese families I know, they send their kids to the best schools in the U.S... all the best Chinese kids I know are not looking for jobs here, they're going back home. They're going back to their countries of origin with a sense of the American cultural DNA, especially if they came of age in these private schools. It's cultural logic and it's spreading. I think what we do have as specialists is the ability to tell our stories with our hands in the most basic way possible. People are becoming more and more fascinated simply with storytelling... the ways of telling these very complex stories... through words and artworks.

Farm to table... there is something about localizing creative efforts and making work that only speaks to a few small, limited amount of people. It's all about zooming in. You know, my work has for years been about Africa America, specifically a very gay, black America... and then all of a sudden I realized there was interest all around about identity and power, and all these basic human urges were found and have tremendous meaning on a global scale.