

SEANKELLY

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DEPARTURES

Kehinde Wiley's "A New Republic" at the Brooklyn Museum



Katherine Wetzel, © Virginia Museum of Fine Arts/ © Kehinde Wiley

In reaction to the Brooklyn Museum's retrospective, Artsy's curator at large Matthew Israel asks what's next for the New York-based artist, best known for his series of large-scale portraits of contemporary African American subjects.

Artist Kehinde Wiley's work disrupts art history. His presentation of black and brown American men in powerful poses mimicking the heroic portraiture of Titian, Ingres, and David has put African American faces in museums, where, historically, they have been absent and rejected. But does his art, focused more or less entirely around this strategy, do more than this?

In light of "A New Republic," Wiley's first major retrospective currently on view at the Brooklyn Museum, it doesn't have to—at least for now.

The show itself is stunning, ambitious, political, and historically significant. The display—a collection of 60 paintings and sculptures, as well as other artworks—confirms that, at 38 years old, Wiley is one of the most important artists of his generation. His monumental canvases—often as large as the grand European paintings they reinterpret—are bravura, filled with bright colors, patterns, and people rendered in photorealistic detail. Not only do his works fly in the face of art history's greats, but they also offer a welcome departure from the motifs *du jour*, largely dominated by conceptual, performance, and new media art.

On the basis of his current success—his work has been shown in institutions around the world and has been in high demand among international collectors for many years—Wiley could simply hit the repeat button and coast. After all, he's accomplished more in just 14 years (and before the age of 40) than most artists will in a lifetime.

He wouldn't be alone if he continued a long-term meditation on his popular motif, since many other great artists, once they achieved signature styles, did (and have done) little to substantially alter their work. With Chuck Close, Jasper Johns, or Donald Judd, it's the subtle variations they make within their mediums that provide a career's worth of innovation. But in the worst cases, artists cave to the market's desires and their own celebrity, like Andy Warhol did in the 1970s, when members of high society commissioned their own portraits in his coveted style.

Though Wiley is by no means in danger of falling into the same trap as Warhol, his portraits, which make up the bulk of the retrospective, have become slightly repetitive. Seen together at the museum, they start to become a sea of undifferentiated and unknown figures presented on similarly ornate grounds.

So, while the imagery Wiley has created might never get old for those of us who find endless amounts of details and conceptual twists to home in on, instead of hitting repeat, we can all hope that Wiley will also fast-forward in his practice—and maybe even rewind.



One of the show's earliest pieces, *Smile* (2001), a video, is also one of its best. The work shows the heads of four black men in a grid, smiling for as long as they can. When a man can't smile any longer, a new man undertaking the same challenge immediately replaces him.

Wiley's video surfaces the disconnect between facial expression and internal reality, between "fronting" on the street and what might be in the "back" of African American men's minds, as well as the physical struggle to maintain a face, a mood, an alpha-male pose. *Smile* is at times painful to watch, especially as the subjects' cheeks and lips start to quiver or seize. Inherent in the work is also the question of who these men are, and why they have to smile at all—who's forcing them? Their interchangeability and anonymity speak directly to a culture still struggling with its perception of young black men.

But even when it comes to his large-scale canvases, it's easy to imagine where else Wiley could go. The great European artists he wrangles with made portraits, but their history paintings were traditionally the ultimate genre. What might Wiley's *Raft of the Medusa* or *Execution of Maximilian* look like? What kind of painting would he make if he focused on current manifestations of power, rather than reacting to or revising historical images of it?

It's exciting to know that Wiley might be moving in this direction. When I spoke to him recently, he told me that, for the last two years, he's been working on a project focusing on African heads of state. Entitled *Mr. President*, Wiley is energized about this series because it will allow him to "look not only at power as it relates in an abstract way to paintings from the past, but actually to engage people who have consequential power on the ground."

This intriguing new direction, as well as Wiley's recent inclusion of women in his paintings and his exploration of the mediums of sculpture and stained glass, which are all on display in the exhibit, are promising signs that the future will be complex, differentiated, and ambitious for Wiley and his art. And even if he does stick to his signature aesthetic for the interim, we can all trust on the basis of his accomplishments thus far, that like every good disruptor, Wiley will know when the time is right to upset the status quo.



Kehinde Wiley's "A New Republic" is on view at the Brooklyn Museum from February 20–May 24, 2015. 200 Eastern Pkwy; 718-638-5000.