

SEAN KELLY

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Bold, provocative art that looks like money



A Virginia Museum of Fine Arts exhibition surveys the career of dynamic young African American artist Kehinde Wiley, whose work is some of the most sought after in today's art market.

There's really no point in standing up close to a painting by Kehinde Wiley, the young African American artist whose works are among the most sought-after contemporary art in the world today. His large-format paintings, full of bold colors and strong contrasts of background pattern and figuration, are arresting, but they tend to arrest you about 10 to 15 feet away. And putting your nose up to the surface of the canvas yields almost nothing interesting, other than the fact that Wiley isn't interested in the surface of his work, or the play of paint, or anything virtuosic one might do with a paintbrush. His art is strikingly visual but also coy and cerebral, and he is more interested in composing an image than executing it. Much of his work is, in any case, made by assistants in one of his industrious studios, though in interviews he has been reluctant to explain the production process in too much detail.

Wiley, the subject of a one-man retrospective at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, burst onto the scene a little more than a decade ago with a series of giant canvases in which African American men adopted iconic poses from classic paintings, mashing up contemporary dress and style with the markers of power and status from centuries past. Wiley devised an intriguing formula for these works, "street casting" young men from Harlem, inviting them to choose a classic painting or image as a starting point for the work, then using computers to insert the new into the old and create a template for finishing the image in paint. One of the classic results: An African American man with a bandana on his forehead, dressed in camouflage and boots, riding a horse that rears majestically on its back legs in an unmistakable reference to Jacques-Louis David's 1801 equestrian portrait of Napoleon crossing the Alps.

"Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic" began at the Brooklyn Museum of Art more than a year ago and has since been seen in Fort Worth and Seattle. It includes almost 60 works, from early pieces made shortly after Wiley graduated from Yale with an MFA in 2001 to newer works in media such as bronze and stained glass. But the core of the exhibition are the paintings, which are often distinctly homoerotic, with a dizzying blend of ornamental and figurative imagery reminiscent of both the line drawings of Aubrey

Beardsley and the paintings of Gustav Klimt. Art historical references abound, with Wiley borrowing poses and gestures from paintings by Dutch masters, Velázquez, Holbein, Manet, Landseer and Titian.

The floral and vine patterns that form the background of Wiley's work are often brought forward so that they cover part of his subject's bodies. Vines curl over the arms or chest, flowers that in one region of the painting suggest a busy wallpaper crop up on a shirt or skirt. These meticulously and seemingly mechanically rendered vines, leaves, flowers and sometimes animal designs amp up the wattage of his work, but they also create a sense of uneasiness, as if the vegetation that curls over the young men is meant to contain them, keep them fixed to the canvas. Boys look out languidly at the viewer and you may wonder what were the terms of the deal whereby they agreed to be depicted in such sexually available ways. But the tendrils of flowering vines suggest that no matter what they signed up for, they are thoroughly ensnared. Observers of the homoerotic canon may also detect a debt to Jean Genet's obsession with both flowers and hypertrophic masculinity.

The density of the background in Wiley's paintings functions in several ways. The profusion of detail heightens the sense that these are luxury objects, adding to the impression made by their often elaborate gold-painted frames. It also references musical metaphors of mixing and remixing that underscore the hip-hop culture articulated by many of his subjects. And it suggests a lively sense of noise, a background wall of sound and a persistent beat that make many of his works feel as confected and disposable as a good pop song. Wiley's paintings do one thing really well for about three minutes.

For this exhibition, the VMFA has created "trading cards" with his paintings reproduced on them, intended to show visitors the visual precedents of his work and invite them to connect with other works in the museum's collections. It's an endearingly sincere way to harvest some of the art historical references that abound in Wiley's work, without acknowledging that this play of reference is mostly a game of postmodern irony — it's never clear whether the past is being honored, criticized, remedied, emended or simply repurposed, and that ambiguity is essential to the work's intellectual sophistication.

But these cards also send the inadvertent message that Wiley's paintings are something that can be traded and exchanged, that like so much of contemporary art today, they function more like a bitcoin than a painting in the historical sense. Art is currency, and Wiley's work seems to acknowledge that — it cannily acknowledges so many things that it eludes serious criticism. With its density of background pattern, and self-consciously historicized portraiture, it even has some of the texture of well-engraved Technicolor money.

The best of Wiley's work is some of the smallest and quietest. In one of the smaller gallery spaces, one encounters four works from his "Memling" series, a reference to the 15th-century German painter Hans Memling, who worked in the Netherlands. In this series, Wiley paints young African American men in poses reminiscent of Memling's tightly composed, small-scale portraits, and encases these images in sturdy, wooden-framed boxes with panel doors.

Wiley doesn't use the busy background patterns in his Memling series, which hews closer to historical precedents in both tone and form than most of the other pieces on display. Unlike a similarly scaled series seen nearby, in which the patterns again take precedence and the frames are painted to a high gold sheen, there is no sense of winking bling to the Memling works. Rather, they depict real, sensitive and self-sufficient people in an entirely compelling way.

Perhaps there isn't enough irony in them, enough of the gamesmanship that makes contemporary art seem perpetually restless and intellectually evasive. They are simply fine portraits of beautiful people. But after so much of the rest of this exhibition, they also feel straightforward honest, and there's no sense that these particular young men have been in any way exploited or manipulated or put into service for the delectation of an elite, super-rich international art audience.

More of that won't necessarily help Wiley's career. But it would be good for his soul, and ours.

Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic is on view at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond through Sept. 5. For more information, visit vmfa.museum.



“Support the Rural Population and Serve 500 Million Peasants” (2007) is part of an exhibition that includes some 60 works, many of them large-format paintings that set African American figures against ornate backgrounds and recall the aristocratic traditions of European portraiture. Copyright Kehinde Wiley; Photo by Max Yawney, Courtesy of Roberts Tilton/21C Museum via Virginia Museum of Fine Arts



“The Two Sisters” (2012) is among several recent works that focus on women, a change from Wiley’s earlier portraiture in which he “street cast” African American men and depicted them in poses and gestures they chose from classic paintings or statues. Copyright Kehinde Wiley; Photo by Jason Wyche, Courtesy of Sean Kelly/Collection of Pamela K. and William A. Royall Jr./ Virginia Museum of Fine Arts



Wiley's "Arms of Nicolas Ruterius, Bishop of Arras" (2014) is fashioned in stained glass, a relatively recent medium for the artist. Copyright Kehinde Wiley/Courtesy of Galerie Daniel Templon/Virginia Museum of Fine Arts



"Two Heroic Sisters of the Grassland" (2011) is one of several works that use provocative titles and gender-bending poses to elide traditional boundaries and heighten irony. Copyright Kehinde Wiley; Photo by Max Yawney/Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Hort Family Collection



Wiley's "Saint Remi" is characteristic of his work, in which the subjects are dressed in contemporary clothing, but placed in stylized poses borrowed from historic precedents. Copyright Kehinde Wiley, Courtesy of Galerie Daniel Templon/Virginia Museum of Fine Arts



"Willem van Heythuysen" depicts its subject in the pose seen in a portrait by Frans Hals, a 17th-century Dutch painter. Wiley borrows the gestures of power and privilege from an earlier era to raise questions about power, race and marginality today. Copyright Kehinde Wiley; Photo by Katherine Wetzel/Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Fund.