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## HYPERALLERGIC

### Kehinde Wiley's Painted Elegies for Ferguson

The subjects of Wiley's Ferguson paintings launch a vibrant dialogue between the canvas of the painting and the canvas of the body.



Kehinde Wiley, "Portrait of a Florentine Nobleman" (2018), oil on linen, image: 96 x 72 inches, framed: 107 x 83 x 6 inches, Saint Louis Art Museum (all images courtesy the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles, California 2018.128, © Kehinde Wiley)

ST. LOUIS — "On any body, to wear a tattoo is an act of change. It is a will being imposed. And perhaps this is why folks everywhere ... have all, in some shape or form, found themselves attracted to the practice: its value is, ultimately, for the holder, not the beholder."

So argues Bryan Washington in his piece on tattoos and the Black body for *The Paris Review*, endowing the choice to embellish one's likeness with deep

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transformative power. But not all transformation has been treated with equal regard: The history of adornment is also a history of culture — of race, class, and climate — and that which has been coded “white” has been consistently lauded in the West as most aesthetically valuable.



*Kehinde Wiley, “Three Girls in a Wood” (2018), oil on linen, image: 108 x 144 inches, framed: 119 in. x 155 inches, Saint Louis Art Museum*

It is at the crosshairs of Black erasure and radical revisionism that portrait artist Kehinde Wiley has, for the past 20 years, pointed his careful brush. Swapping out the affluent white sitters depicted in canonical works of art for present day African Americans, Africans, and those of African descent, Wiley consciously disrupts hierarchies in the signification of status and power. For his current exhibition, *Kehinde Wiley: Saint Louis* (all works 2018), co-curated by Simon Kelly and Hannah Klemm, the artist visited the West Florissant convenient store where, as Wiley put it during his press conference, “Mike Brown was allegedly stealing.” Selecting 15 individuals hailing from Ferguson and its neighboring communities, the artist created 11 oil paintings reinterpreting eight works of art in the Museum’s collection, each at his signature massive style and scale. “The project became a kind of moment around celebrating Brown’s life,” the artist reflected. “A strange kind of elegy.”

All but one of Wiley’s portraits are titled after the portraits on which they are based. Commemorating Black sartorial expression and self-adornment long in

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tension with (white) Western aesthetics, the series consciously intertwines subjects' stylistic accouterments with pictorial space reminiscent of European antiquity. Wearing their own clothes and jewelry, but posed in keeping with works dating from the 1540s to 1920s, the Ferguson subjects launch a vibrant dialogue between the canvas of the painting and the canvas of the body. Tattoos, nail art, and other ornamentation do not clash with the grandeur of Victorian and rococo backdrops so much as mingle with their graphic properties — exalting expressions of urban Blackness as rich with meaning and historic value.



*Kehinde Wiley, "Portrait of Mahogany Jones and Marcus Stokes" (2018), oil on linen, image: 108 x 84 inches, framed: 119 x 95 x 6 inches, Saint Louis Art Museum*

“The way that the subjects self-aestheticize is something that can’t be ignored,” Wiley asserted in conversation. “In the end, one of the most fascinating things that I dealt with in the designing of these paintings is, ‘How do you pair color and the decorative with each one of the models?’ So I’d play with the placement of tattoos. You have to realize that I’m shooting a lot more images than I’m actually using. I’ll go out of my way to find these moments of self adornment.”

“Saint Jerome Hearing the Trumpet of the Last Judgment” replaces the Roman theologian with a young woman in a romper and tight black ponytail, projecting a

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come-hither gaze. The vines in the background overlap with the sinuous tats on her wrist, chest, and shimmering thigh; her long, lime-colored acrylics flirt with the extravagant foliage of the setting. “You’ll see a lot of tats because I wanted a lot of tats,” explained the artist. “There’s a lot of selective positioning of subjects here — because I think the narrative always with portraiture has to do with armor. Clothing as armor. Something that once that keeps something out and holds something in.”



*Kehinde Wiley, “Tired Mercury” (2018), oil on linen, image: 72 x 60 inches, framed: 83 x 71 x 6 inches, Saint Louis Art Museum*

In “Robert Hay Drummond, D. D., Archbishop of York and Chancellor of the Order of the Garter,” a cerulean stem arches over a matching Nike tee on a man in a trim goatee. Then there’s the epic “Three Girls in a Wood,” which stretches laterally 12 feet, its subjects arranged in the likeness of a 1920 Otto Müller painting. In place of nude, mouthless youths rendered in bold Expressionist lines, Wiley presents three women, fully grown and fully attired, floating in a forest of fuchsia on a red swathe of fabric. The swing of their door knocker hoop earrings echo the curve of green filigree swirling around them. On the thumb of the central figure, tattoo ink merges with decorative buds. Though clothed, this triad seems

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much more human and natural than Müller's angular underage girls — while no less mysterious for their pensive mien and calculated posture.

The elegiac motivation for this series is subtly in keeping with the fact that many tattoos on display pay tribute to a won or lost beloved — the “Leonard” tattoo peeking above the bust of a pink tank top in “Tired Mercury,” for instance, modeled after Robert Ingersoll Aitken's 1907 bronze statue; or the initials inked onto the right wrist of the seductress in “St. Jerome.” In “Portrait of a Florentine Nobleman,” a woman in a body-skimming violet ensemble dons the Japanese kanji for “beautiful” across her heart. “There's the desire to be beautiful and the desire to be self-expressive,” Wiley reflected. “These acts of self-autonomy, these acts of self-creation, are in direct relationship to what this project is about itself.”



*Kehinde Wiley, “Saint Jerome Hearing the Trumpet of the Last Judgment” (2018), oil on linen, image: 96 x 72 inches, framed: 107 x 83 x 6 inches, Saint Louis Art Museum*

Crucially, it isn't the European opulence that dignifies these sitters, but rather the integrity radiating from these Black subjects — as agents in their narratives, begetters of their images. These qualities, bestowed by the sitters, redeem the

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tradition of pomp and privilege endemic to the genre. “Historically portraiture was about the ability of the sitter to fight death,” Wiley explained. “It was about the idea that you could be young and beautiful and celebrated for eternity.” Five years after the tear gas, the die-ins, the tanks, each Ferguson cheekbone, bicep, and fist seems to say, “Look at me, in all my beauty and volition.” Only time will tell whether such acknowledgment will extend beyond the museum galleries.

*Kehinde Wiley: Saint Louis, co-curated by Simon Kelly and Hannah Klemm, continues at the Saint Louis Art Museum (One Fine Arts Drive, Forest Park, St. Louis, Missouri) through February 10.*