SEANKELLY

KEHINDE WILEY
Press Pack

2019

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Jackson, Brian Keith. “Kehinde Wiley’s Art Annex.” *The Cut*. April 14, 2019.

THE CUT

Wiley standing near the 20-foot-tall front doors of Black Rock Senegal Photo: Stefan Ruiz

Down a nondescript dirt road in the Yoff Virage village in Dakar, beyond a steel-and-wood gate and perched atop an ocher cliff overlooking Yoff Bay, is Black Rock Senegal. It’s the new home, studio space, and artist-in-residency program imagined and brought to life by New York–based painter Kehinde Wiley.

On a balmy day in February, Wiley is standing just outside the towering, 20-foot-tall, double front doors made of Amazakoue wood sourced from Cameroon. Construction workers and staff are moving in every direction, sorting the final details. Wiley closely follows, marking off a checklist that seems to exist only in his head. “People are flying in from around the world,” he says of the launch party he will host in late May, with the first residents arriving shortly thereafter.

Artist residencies have historically been considered ivory-tower enterprises held in long-inherited properties or estates, their hallowed halls guarded by mostly white, mostly male cultural gatekeepers. Black Rock Senegal is one of a slew of new residencies and creative centers now being spearheaded by African-Americans, who are making sure that access, above all, is the point.
Three multidisciplinary artists at a time will be invited to Black Rock Senegal to take part in one-to-three-month sessions. They will be provided with tutoring in English, French, and Wolof. Wiley's staff will assist in setting up studio visits with local and visiting artists and curators — including those in residence at the nearby Raw Material Company: Center for Art, Knowledge, and Society, which promotes artistic and intellectual creativity in Africa — as well as organizing trips to Gorée Island (from the 15th to the 19th century, the largest slave-trading center on the African coast) and the newly opened Musée des Civilisations Noires.

Wiley and I have known each other for some time. We met in 2001, when he was invited by a mutual friend to a gathering at my home when he was in the middle of a New York residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem. A direct inspiration for Black Rock, the program was started in 1968 for emerging artists of African and Latino heritage and has helped launch the careers of William Cordova, Njideka Akunyili Crosby, and Leslie Hewitt, among others. "I'd just graduated from Yale, I didn't have any money, and I'd sometimes sleep in my studio," says Wiley. "There was that feeling of destabilization and of fear, that sense of adventure, of not knowing what will come of it. I hope those who come here will feel all that."
Though Wiley has a demanding travel schedule, he plans to be hands-on and present at Black Rock. "For most of these artists, this will be their first time in Dakar," he says, "so having only three artists at a time will allow for a more immediate experience."

Designed by Senegalese architect Abib Djenne, the compound is composed of two slate-gray buildings separated by a tropical garden filled with colossal coconut palms, elephant ears, and Petra crotons, along with a stone-wall fountain that trickles down into a koi pond. "Whenever I'd ask around, Djenne's name kept popping up," Wiley says. "I wanted someone who would consider and highlight the natural surroundings: the light, the water, and of course the black volcanic rocks that line the shore." The main house, with its wall of windows, covers almost 4,000 square feet and contains Wiley's personal studio. Though residents will have access to its gym, infinity pool, steam room, and sauna during the day, they will be installed in a 2,000-square-foot building next door in three-story townhouses. The airy, art-filled interiors are a collaboration between Wiley, Fatiya Djenne (the architect's daughter), and Dakar- and Paris-based textile designer Aissa Dione.

A lot has changed for Wiley since he and I stood on this rock-and-litter-filled plot over five years ago, when the project was conceived and we were in Dakar celebrating his birthday. "Not even the thought of doing the official portrait of the

first black president existed back then," says Wiley. (He, of course, was commissioned to paint President Obama back in 2017.) As we move into one of the grand living-room areas, Wiley takes a seat in what has become his favorite comfortable chair and takes a sip of Macallan 12. "I was just living, taking what I knew, believed in at that moment, and wanting to move things forward. And here we are."

The Front Entrance: The double front doors, which were designed by Vintage NM Design. Photo: Stefan Ruiz

Vaughn, Kenya. " 'Charles I' to join contemporary collection: Saint Louis Art Museum purchases painting from 'Kehinde Wiley: Saint Louis'." *The St. Louis American.* February 21, 2019.

THE ST. LOUIS AMERICAN

'Charles I' to join contemporary collection

Saint Louis Art Museum purchases painting from 'Kehinde Wiley: Saint Louis

Artist Kehinde Wiley and Ashley Cooper pose in front of 'Charles I,' a painting from the 'Kehinde Wiley" Exhibition recently acquired by the Saint Louis Art Museum. The painting will become a part of the contemporary galleries this summer.

"I cried the first time I saw my picture – like a big baby," said Ashley Cooper, who was depicted in "Charles I," during a closing celebration panel discussion entitled "The Making of Kehinde Wiley: Saint Louis."

In the painting, Cooper recreates the dignified posture of Charles I in the original Dutch painting. " I couldn't remember what I had on. I hoped I did the pose right and I hoped it was the best picture that I ever took in my life. And it is. I love it."

The Saint Louis Art Museum announced this week that the institution recently purchased "Charles I." The large-scale painting by Kehinde Wiley was one of the works from the "Kehinde Wiley: Saint Louis" exhibition that closed February 10 after an immensely popular four-month run.

"'Kehinde Wiley: Saint Louis' was tied closely to our collection and to our city, and it encouraged each of us to examine artistic traditions, current events, and the power of art to unite our community," said Brent R. Benjamin, the Barbara B. Taylor Director of the Saint Louis Art Museum. "I'm pleased that generations of St. Louisans will be able to enjoy this vibrant painting."

"Charles I" is one of two works in the exhibition that Wiley based on a 1633 portrait of the English king by Daniel Martensz Mytens the Elder.

Wiley studied the museum's collection to identify works he would reference in "Kehinde Wiley: Saint Louis." He visited St. Louis in 2017 and scouted models from areas in North City and North County – including Ferguson. The style, scale and grandeur that have become a trademark of Wiley's paintings is epitomized by "Charles I" and the entire exhibition.

"Kehinde Wiley: Saint Louis" featured 11 paintings that were based on eight works from the Museum's collection and one print from a local collection.

"A lot of his work is about power," said Simon Kelly, Saint Louis Art Museum's curator of modern and contemporary art. "And a lot of his work is political – a critique of the absence of African-American portraits in the history of Western portraiture, and he's trying to address that in his work."

Kelly curated "Kehinde Wiley: Saint Louis" along with Hannah Klemm, the museum's assistant curator for modern and contemporary art. Research assistance was provided by Molly Moog.

"Kehinde Wiley plays a critical role in the contemporary renaissance of portrait painting as a genre," Kelly said. "By referencing historical depictions of the powerful and giving his modern sitters the same authority, Wiley creates portraits that are richly complex and visually stunning."

The free exhibition ended just under two weeks ago and included several sold-out programs, including a lecture by Wiley and "The Making of 'Kehinde Wiley: Saint Louis," a panel discussion with museum curators and sitters from the portraits.

More than 100 free guided tours of the exhibition to school, youth and community groups were offered by the museum. The impact of the “Kehinde Wiley: Saint Louis” was explicitly clear during the exhibition’s closing panel discussion.

The Q&A portion of the talk included a touching exchange between Cooper and her family when her brother William Hanks stepped to the microphone to offer commentary and pose a powerful question to those who were “immortalized” as part of “Kehinde Wiley: Saint Louis.”

“With my sister Shontay, she’s not the type to step out of her comfort zone and do something like this. So, it really makes me proud,” Hanks said as he fought back emotion.

Their sister Shontay Haynes, is depicted in Wiley’s “Portrait of a Florentine Nobleman” from the same exhibition.

“Through history we look at paintings and they tell stories of the people we don’t know,” Hanks continued. “And it fills my heart to know that somebody will see a picture of my sisters years from now and they will ask a simple question: ‘Who are they?’”

He asked all of the subjects how they felt knowing that they were “a part of history now.”

“Overwhelmed, bruh,” Cooper said.

Quiet and reserved, she was a woman of few words during the discussion – but was eager to respond to the impact the experience had on her brother.

“I love you – and I’m glad you feel that way about me,” She continued.

“I love you too, and I’m so proud,” Hanks responded.

The tender moment spoke to the intention of the exhibition – and the painting that Saint Louis Art Museum acquired from it.

“Wiley’s paintings welcome African Americans, Africans and people of the African diaspora into the space of the canvas and assert their right to occupy that space,” Klemm said. “For the Saint Louis Art Museum, ‘Charles I’ goes further – the painting not only expands who is represented in portraiture, it literally brings the local community into the collection.”

“Charles I” will be installed in the contemporary galleries this summer.

G'Sell, Eileen. "Kehinde Wiley's Painted Elegies for Ferguson". *Hyperallergic.* February 2, 2019.

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

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 × 144 inches, framed: 119 in. × 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

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 × 84 inches, framed: 119 × 95 × 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

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 × 60 inches, framed: 83 × 71 × 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

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 × 72 inches, framed: 107 × 83 × 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

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.*

Sayej, Nadja. "Kehinde Wiley: 'When I first started painting black women, it was a return home'." *The Guardian*. January 9, 2019.

The Guardian

Interview

Kehinde Wiley: 'When I first started painting black women, it was a return home'

Kehinde Wiley: 'When I first started painting black women, it was a return home.' Photograph: Dimitrios Kambouris/Getty Images

When the American artist Kehinde Wiley – known by many for his presidential portrait of Barack Obama – walked into a Little Caesars restaurant in St Louis, he didn't know he'd walk out with models for his next painting.

He saw a group of African American women sitting at a table and was inspired to paint them for Three Girls in A Wood, a painting on view at the St Louis Art Museum. It's part of Wiley's exhibition Saint Louis, which runs until 10 February, where 11 paintings of St Louis locals are painted in the style of old masters, a comment on the absence of black portraits in museums.

“The great heroic, often white, male hero dominates the picture plane and becomes larger than life, historic and significant,” said Wiley over the phone from his Brooklyn studio. “That great historic storytelling of myth-making or propaganda is something we inherit as artists. I wanted to be able to weaponize and translate it into a means of celebrating female presence.”

It all started last year when the museum invited Wiley to create an exhibition, which prompted Wiley to visit the museum’s sprawling collection. Noticing the lack of people of color on the walls, he ventured out into the suburbs for subjects to paint, including Ferguson, a hub of the Black Lives Matter movement since the police shooting of Mike Brown. (“There’s a very strong dissonance between this gilded museum on a hill and the communities in Ferguson,” Wiley recently said). He put out a public call and personally invited locals for a casting inside the museum.

“From the beginning, it was about a response to the museum as a strange metaphorical divide between the culture, not only in St Louis, but in America at large,” he said. “The kind of inside-outside nature of museum culture can be alienating and St Louis has one of the best American collections of classical works, so I wanted to use the poses from these paintings for potential sitters from the community.”

Kehinde Wiley – Three Girls in a Wood. Photograph: Kehinde Wiley

Wiley has painted St Louis natives as stately figures, wearing their day-to-day garb, even showing women in traditionally male poses. Shontay Hanes from Wellston is painted in the pose of Francesco Salviati's Portrait of a Florentine Nobleman, while her sister Ashley Cooper's pose is similar to that of Charles I in the portrait by Daniel Mytens the Elder.

As the models posed for him, Wiley took hundreds of photos, which he took back to his New York studio. He picked the photos that had the strongest presence and painted them. "My process is less about the original sitter, nor is it entirely about the individual," he said. "It's a strange middle space that is marked by a kind of anonymity, standing in for a history that is not your own. A pose that is not your own. There is a kind of complexity there that is not reducible to traditional painting."

There is also a painting in the exhibit which mimics Gerard ter Borch's portrait of Jacob de Graeff, which inspired Wiley's portrait of Brincel Kape'li Wiggins Jr, who is wearing a Ferguson hat as a way of showing the city in a positive light.

Kehinde Wiley – Jacob de Graeff.

Wiley, who grew up in South Central Los Angeles in the 1980s, had an a-ha moment when he first saw the works of Kerry James Marshall in a museum when he was young – it proved to him that African American figures belonged on museum walls, too. He studied painting in Russia at the tender age of 12, chased down his Nigerian father at 20, graduated from Yale in 2001 and has been painting African Americans – including a commissioned portrait of Michael Jackson – as old masters icons since the early 2000s.

"When you think of America itself and its own narratives, there are inspiring narratives and the notion of American exceptionalism," said Wiley. "It's the place where the world looks to for the best of human aspirations. That narrative is highly under question at this moment."

Despite becoming royalty in his own respect, as Wiley's star-studded lifestyle has him posing for selfies alongside Naomi Campbell and Prince Charles on Instagram, he sees his country differently now, compared with when he started

painting professionally. “By virtue of our strength, we’re at this point of weakness and inability to see a lot of the folly that is set in the country,” he said. “I think there is an overbuilt privilege that starts to come into play and inability to feel empathy for perceived outsiders.”
Since his leafy Obama portrait was unveiled last year, his life has drastically changed. “I don’t have to explain what I do any more,” he said. “It makes it a lot easier, ‘He’s the guy who did that.’ It’s going to be on my headstone.”

As for his painting of three women he found at a pizza parlor, it’s a departure from where he first began – which was classically trained painting of white women. “So much of my upbringing as an artist was painting white women often displayed nude,” he said. “When I first started painting black women, it was a return home.”

While Wiley is known for choosing models that stand out to him, he can never predict what will work in the studio. But he does know one thing. “I think the starting point of my work is decidedly empathy,” he said. “All of it is a self-portrait. I never paint myself but, in the end, why am I going out of my way to choose these types of stories and narratives?

“It’s about seeing yourself in other people,” he said. “People forget America itself is a stand-in for a sense of aspiration the world holds on to. It’s a really sad day when the source of light criticizes light itself.”

SEANKELLY

2018

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Artsy Editors. "The Most Influential Artists of 2018." *Artsy*. December 17, 2018.

The Most Influential Artists of 2018

Whether they were experimenting with floating sculptures, investigating war zones, or pushing painting forward in bold new directions, artists in 2018 made exciting and eclectic contributions to the world. There are so many creative accomplishments to celebrate this year that narrowing our focus to the year's 20 most influential artists was no easy task. The talents you'll find here have undeniably changed our culture and have touched and inspired countless others who have followed their examples. In many cases, they've caused us to reconsider the very definitions of what art can look like, and what it can achieve.

Kehinde Wiley

B. 1977, Los Angeles, California

Lives and works in New York

When the artists Kehinde Wiley and Amy Sherald unveiled official portraits of the Obamas earlier this year, they received a rapturous, emotional reception. Rarely, if ever, has a presidential portrait received quite so much fanfare. It was the first time African-American artists had been selected for the honor of representing the president and first lady, and both artists moved the dial. Breaking from the more stiff, dull convention of portraiture that typifies presidential portraits of old, Wiley rendered Barack Obama against a hyperreal, abundant backdrop of vines and flowers.

The artist has, for some 17 years, proudly placed ordinary black Americans into the history of art—often “street casting” subjects and placing them in what have been referred to as “power portraits” that evoke the lavish style and tradition of canonizing aristocrats and politicians in European portraiture. For this intensely high-profile commission, Wiley depicted Barack Obama leaning forward slightly in a wooden chair, arms crossed, and surrounded—almost consumed—by a thicket of encroaching vines. He is engaged and alert, as though ruminating on a brief or intently listening to the words of his advisors.

Kehinde Wiley, Three Girls in a Wood, 2018. © Kehinde Wiley. Courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects

This is the president not as a monument of poise and power, but one who is active, bringing all of his intellect and energy to the task of grappling with the country’s challenges. The flowers that emerge from the greenery are symbolic—

African blue lilies a nod to Barack's Kenyan roots, chrysanthemums for the Obamas' longtime home of Chicago, and jasmine to represent Hawaii, the former president's birthplace—but they also disrupt the masculine tropes of power, suggesting the softer model of leadership that President Obama often cultivated. The portraits received so much interest that they helped the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C., smash its attendance records this year, drawing in over 2 million visitors in the last fiscal year, a large proportion of them millennials and Gen Z-ers. And Wiley was bestowed with the W.E.B. Du Bois medal, one of Harvard University's most esteemed honors, alongside other black luminaries: comedian Dave Chappelle, art collector Pamela Joyner, and NFL player and activist Colin Kaepernick. Wiley also unveiled new, regal portraits of everyday black St. Louisans at the Saint Louis Art Museum later in the year. Now, he will leverage his considerable influence to place a spotlight on the Nigerian art scene; he has plans to open a studio in Lagos.

Editors. “Time 100: Kehinde Wiley by LL Cool J,” *Time,* April 2018.

TIME

KEHINDE WILEY

by LL Cool J

Micaiah Carter for TIME

Kehinde Wiley is a classically, formally trained artist who is transforming the way African Americans are seen—going against the grain of what the world is accustomed to. Some consider him irreverent; I see an iconoclast. Some of his subjects come from hip-hop culture, but he's not a hip-hop painter. To put it simply, he does dope sh-t.

Kehinde has an MFA from Yale, but instead of using his art to assimilate into mainstream society, he goes minorstream, creating major works that outpace that of the majority of his contemporaries. When you see a Kehinde Wiley painting, you recognize it. He has created a visual brand that remains artistically fresh. And his many paintings in the Smithsonian—including one of me and one of former President Obama—speak to his creative genius.

LL Cool J, an actor and Grammy-winning musician, recently received a Kennedy Center Honor

Borowitz, Andy. "Nation Cruelly Reminded That It Once Had A President." *The New Yorker.* February 12, 2018.

THE NEW YORKER

NATION CRUELLY REMINDED THAT IT ONCE HAD A PRESIDENT

By Andy Borowitz February 12, 2018

Photograph by Mark Wilson / Getty

WASHINGTON (The Borowitz Report)—In a televised event that many deemed unnecessarily cruel, millions of Americans were briefly reminded on Monday that they once had a President.

Unsuspecting Americans who turned on cable news Monday morning were suddenly assaulted with the memory of a time when the country's domestic affairs, international diplomacy, and nuclear codes were entrusted to an adult.

CNN, one of the networks that televised the event, immediately said that it regretted doing so, and acknowledged that reminding Americans that they recently had a President had caused widespread bereavement and distress. "CNN deeply apologizes for the error," a network statement read. "It will never happen again."

Compounding the cruelty of the televised event, the networks lingered unnecessarily on a speech that only served to remind viewers that the nation once had a President who rigorously obeyed rules of grammar and diction.

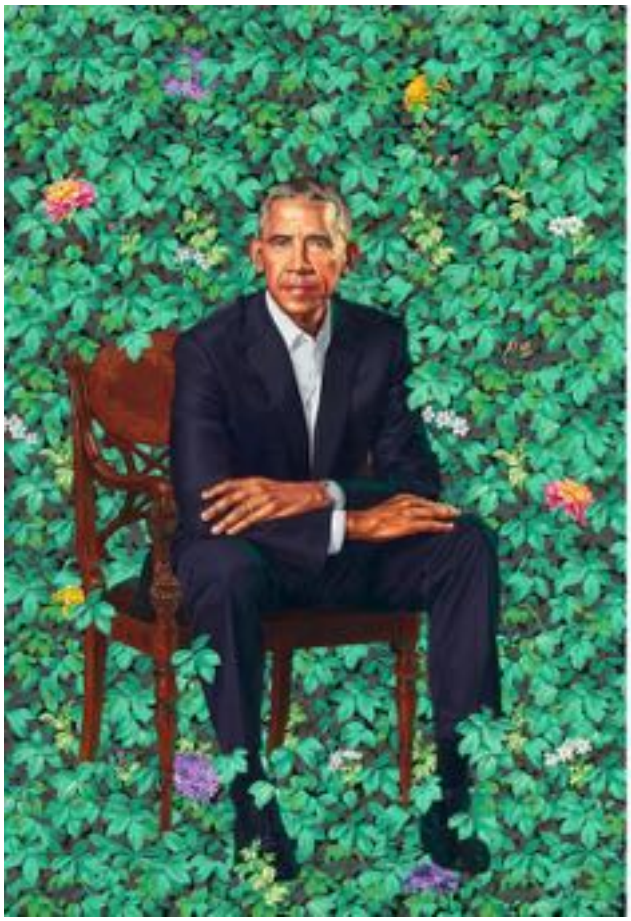
Finally, the reminder that the country recently had a chief executive who loved and respected his wife was deemed "too much" by many viewers, who felt compelled to change the channel.

"It was horrible," Carol Foyler, a viewer who was traumatized by the broadcast, said. "It's like when you stumble on a photo of an ex on Facebook and they unfortunately look amazing."

Cotter, Holland. “Obama Portraits Blend Paint and Politics, and Fact and Fiction,” *The New York Times,* February 12, 2018.

The New York Times

Obama Portraits Blend Paint and Politics, and Fact and Fiction



WASHINGTON — With the unveiling here Monday at the National Portrait Gallery of the official presidential likenesses of Barack Obama and the former first lady, Michelle Obama, this city of myriad monuments gets a couple of new ones, each radiating, in its different way, gravitas (his) and glam (hers).

Ordinarily, the event would pass barely noticed in the worlds of politics and art. Yes, the Portrait Gallery, part of the Smithsonian Institution, owns the only readily accessible complete collection of presidential likenesses. But recently commissioned additions to the collection have been so undistinguished that the tradition of installing a new portrait after a leader has left office is now little more than ceremonial routine.

The present debut is strikingly different. Not only are the Obamas the first African-American presidential couple to be enshrined in the collection. The painters they’ve picked to portray them — Kehinde Wiley, for Mr. Obama’s portrait; Amy Sherald, for Mrs. Obama — are African-American as well. Both artists have addressed the politics of race consistently in their past work, and both have done so in subtly savvy ways in these new commissions. Mr. Wiley

depicts Mr. Obama not as a self-assured, standard-issue bureaucrat, but as an alert and troubled thinker. Ms. Sherald's image of Mrs. Obama overemphasizes an element of couturial spectacle, but also projects a rock-solid cool.
It doesn't take #BlackLivesMatter consciousness to see the significance of this racial lineup within the national story as told by the Portrait Gallery. Some of the earliest presidents represented — George Washington, Thomas Jefferson — were slaveholders; Mrs. Obama's great-great grandparents were slaves. And today we're seeing more and more evidence that the social gains of the civil rights, and Black Power, and Obama eras are, with a vengeance, being rolled back.

On several levels, then, the Obama portraits stand out in this institutional context, though given the tone of bland propriety that prevails in the museum's long-term "America's Presidents" display — where Mr. Obama's (though not Mrs. Obama's) portrait hangs — standing out is not all that hard to do.

The National Portrait Gallery collection isn't old. It was created by an Act of Congress in 1962 and opened to the public in 1968. (The Obama unveiling is billed as part of its 50th birthday celebrations.) By the time it began collecting, many chief executive portraits of note were already housed elsewhere. (The collection of first lady portraits is still incomplete; commissioning new ones started only in 2006.)

There are, for sure, outstanding things, one being Gilbert Stuart's so-called "Lansdowne" Portrait" of George Washington from 1796, a full-length likeness packed with executive paraphernalia: papers to be signed, multiple quill pens, a sword, and an Imperial Roman-style chair. Even the clothes are an 18th-century version of current POTUS style: basic black suit and fat tie. As for Washington, he stands blank-faced, one arm extended, like a tenor taking a dignified bow.

Uninflected dignity was the attitude of choice for well over a century, with a few breaks. In an 1836 portrait, Andrew Jackson, a demonstrative bully, sports a floor-length, red-silk-lined Dracula cloak and a kind of topiary bouffant. (A picture of Jackson, one of President Trump's populist heroes, hangs in the Oval Office.) Abraham Lincoln, seen in several likenesses, is exceptional for looking as if he may actually have weighty matters on his mind. Most of the portraits that precede and follow his are pure P.R.

This continues well into the 20th century. In a 1980 painting Jimmy Carter trades a black suit for a beige one. How revolutionary is that? And there's a Casual Fridays vogue: Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush both go tieless for it. Under the circumstances, Elaine de Kooning's 1963 portrait of John F. Kennedy, a fanfare of green and blue strokes, hits like a boost of adrenaline. Rousing too, though not in a good way, is a big head shot image of Bill Clinton by the artist Chuck Close. Using his signature mosaic-like painting technique, Mr. Close turns the 42nd president into a pixelated clown.

Mr. Obama has much better luck with his similarly high-profile portraitist. Mr. Wiley, born in Los Angeles in 1977, gained a following in the early 2000s with his crisp, glossy, life-size paintings of young African-American men dressed in hip-hop styles, but depicted in the old-master manner of European royal portraits. More recently he has expanded his repertoire to include female subjects, as well as models from Brazil, India, Nigeria and Senegal, creating the collective image of a global black aristocracy.

In an imposingly scaled painting — just over seven feet tall — the artist presents Mr. Obama dressed in the regulation black suit and an open-necked white shirt, and seated on a vaguely thronelike chair not so different from the one seen in Stuart's Washington portrait. But art historical references stop there. So do tonal echoes of past portraits. Whereas Mr. Obama's predecessors are, to the man, shown expressionless and composed, Mr. Obama sits tensely forward, frowning, elbows on his knees, arms crossed, as if listening hard. No smiles, no Mr. Nice Guy. He's still troubleshooting, still in the game.

His engaged and assertive demeanor contradicts — and cosmetically corrects — the impression he often made in office of being philosophically detached from what was going on around him. At some level, all portraits are propaganda, political or personal. And what makes this one distinctive is the personal part. Mr. Wiley has set Mr. Obama against — really embedded him in — a bower of what looks like ground cover. From the greenery sprout flowers that have symbolic meaning for the sitter. African blue lilies represent Kenya, his father's birthplace; jasmine stands for Hawaii, where Mr. Obama himself was born; chrysanthemums, the official flower of Chicago, reference the city where his political career began, and where he met his wife.

Mrs. Obama's choice of Ms. Sherald as an artist was an enterprising one. Ms. Sherald, who was born in Columbus, Ga., in 1973 and lives in Baltimore, is just beginning to move into the national spotlight after putting her career on hold for some years to deal with a family health crisis, and one of her own. (She had a heart transplant at 39.) Production-wise, she and Mr. Wiley operate quite differently. He runs the equivalent of a multinational art factory, with assistants churning out work. Ms. Sherald, who until a few years ago made her living waiting tables, oversees a studio staff of one, herself.

At the same time, they have much in common. Both focused early on African-American portraiture precisely because it is so little represented in Western art history. And both tend to blend fact and fiction. Mr. Wiley, with photo-realistic precision, casts actual people in fantastically heroic roles. (He modifies his heroizing in the case of Mr. Obama, but it's still there.) Ms. Sherald also starts with realism, but softens and abstracts it. She gives all her figures gray-toned skin — a color with ambiguous racial associations — and reduces bodies to geometric forms silhouetted against single-color fields.

She shows Mrs. Obama sitting against a field of light blue, wearing a spreading gown. The dress design, by Michelle Smith, is eye-teasingly complicated: mostly white interrupted by black Op Art-ish blips and patches of striped color suggestive of African textiles. The shape of the dress, rising pyramidally upward, mountain-like, feels as if it were the real subject of the portrait. Mrs. Obama's face forms the composition's peak, but could be almost anyone's face, like a model's face in a fashion spread. To be honest, I was anticipating — hoping for — a bolder, more incisive image of the strong-voiced person I imagine this former first lady to be.

And while I'm wishing, let me mention something more. Mr. Obama's portrait will be installed, long-term, among those of his presidential peers, in a dedicated space on the second floor. Mrs. Obama's will hang in a corridor reserved for temporary displays of new acquisitions — on the first floor. It will stay there until November, after which there's no set-aside place for it to land.

If first men have an acknowledged showcase, first women — ladies or not — should too. Better, they should all be together, sharing space, offering a welcoming environment to, among others, a future first female president, and creating a lasting monument to #MeToo.

SEANKELLY

2017

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Adams, Saundra. “Exciting new piece added to the Philbrook Musuem of Art’s permanent collection.” *ABC Tulsa*, December 13, 2017.

8abc TULSA

Exciting new piece added to the Philbrook Museum of Art's permanent collection

The Philbrook Museum of Art unveiled the painting Wednesday created by Kehinde Wiley. (KTUL)
AA

TULSA, Okla. (KTUL) — A new never-before-seen piece of art is now on display right here in Tulsa. The Philbrook Museum of Art unveiled the painting Wednesday created by Kehinde Wiley.

He's one of the most important American artists working today.

The painting is a replica image of the Equestrian Portrait of Philip the Fourth, but instead of the king, it has a young black man wearing new-age fashion.

The President and Director of the Philbrook Museum of Art, Scott Stulen said Wiley takes a classic European history painting, takes people from the streets in Brooklyn, primarily African American men and women and talks about race, power, questioning how we represent those things in artwork.

"It's something that we think people are going to be drawn to, want to dig deeper in, come back and visit and for us, this is a teaching piece of work that we can teach from and also inspire," said Stulen.

An interesting fact about Wiley is that he also painted the official portrait of former President Barack Obama.

Frank, Priscilla. “Kehinde Wiley was Destined to Paint Barack Obama,” *Huffington Post,* November 9, 2017.

HUFFPOST

Kehinde Wiley Was Destined To Paint Barack Obama

The presidential portraits wing of the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery is lined with paintings of very powerful and equally pasty men. Its walls, filled with bowties, powder wigs and pursed lips, speak two well-known truths at once: Both the history of American politics and the history of Western art are blindingly white.

In 2018, however, the gallery will receive an addition unlike the rest. As was reported earlier this fall, a portrait of former President Barack Obama will join the Smithsonian ranks next year, painted by 44-year-old contemporary art star Kehinde Wiley. As a result, Obama will become the first black president featured in the gallery, and Wiley (along with Amy Sherald, commissioned to paint Michelle Obama), the first black artist to grace its halls.

The former president and first lady hand-picked the artists who will render their official portraits. And those decisions hold weight. Antwaun Sargent, a 29-year-old critic who’s covered Wiley extensively, felt personally affected by Obama’s historic choice. “I grew up in Chicago,” he told HuffPost. “I knocked on doors in the dead of winter when Obama was running for Senate. To see him choose an openly queer, black man who has devoted his career to depicting black folks, it’s really full circle for me.”

Wiley’s paintings are easy to discern. Their backgrounds typically involve a florid design quietly creeping toward the fore, its composition a melting pot of British Arts and Crafts textiles and Dutch-made African wax prints. Up front is usually a figure — young, attractive and black — dressed in contemporary streetwear and mimicking the stances of Old Master heroes like Napoleon Bonaparte or Charles V.

Wiley’s painted subjects are often categorized as “normal,” in that they’re not particularly rich or famous, as portrait sitters for Titian or Jacques-Louis David tended to be. Wiley scouts his subjects himself, either on the streets of New York or through open casting calls. Like many artists, Wiley has an appreciation for beauty, but he gravitates toward a lesser documented masculine allure that manifests in hip style, performative swagger, defined muscles, tattoos and radiant black skin.

“Sometimes I’d walk through the galleries just to look at the way the faces and the hands are painted, all the nuances of black,” Eugenie Tsai, the Brooklyn Museum curator who organized a 2015 exhibition of Wiley’s work, recalled.

Once immortalized in Wiley’s massive, gold-framed canvases (they can measure as large as nine feet tall), his subjects shift from regular people to mythic giants. They ride horses like Napoleon, wield swords like Willem van Heythuysen and pose flamboyantly like Andries Stilte II, all while wearing standard blue jeans and sneakers. Wiley imbues his sitters with a gravitas and glory historically reserved for patrons, nobles and saints. His works build upon the centuries-old relationship between portraiture and power, using the canonized language of art history to exalt a new kind of subject.

“He literally is the first person I know of, throughout the history of painting, who is appropriating the entire history of art — from cave painting on — and bending it to his will,” Sean Kelly, founder of Sean Kelly Gallery, the gallery that represents Wiley’s work, said. “The whole history of art becomes a narrative about black presence.”

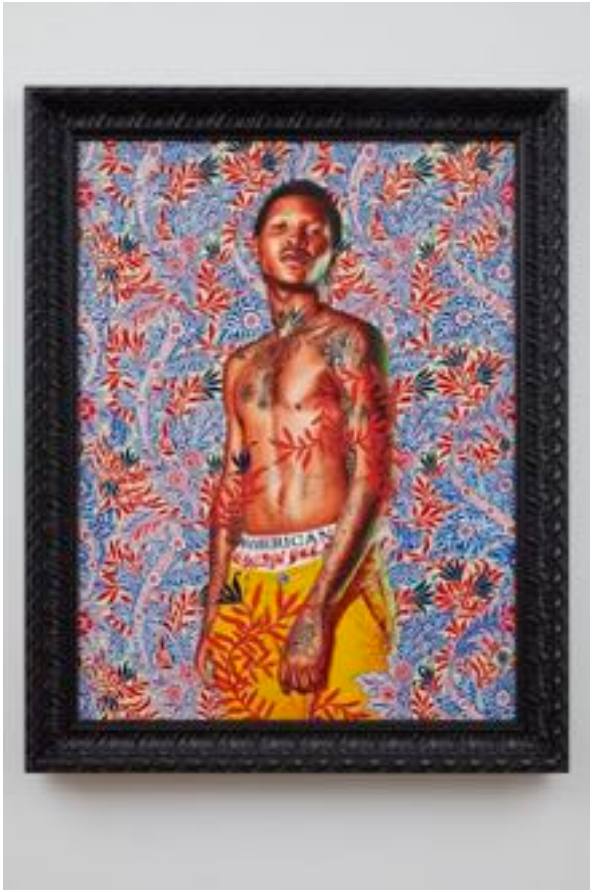
Conversations about Wiley’s work often revolve around this one specific aspect: the idea of injecting brown bodies into an all-white canon. As the artist’s straightforward and affecting statement reads: “Painting is about the world that we live in. Black men live in the world. My choice is to include them. This is my way of saying yes to us.” However, Wiley’s paintings are not simply exercises in corrective representation — making the invisible visible. They are intended to probe the mechanics of seeing and being seen.

“Many people see my early work simply as portraits of black and brown people,” Wiley told HuffPost in May. “Really, it’s an investigation of how we see those people and how they have been perceived over time. The performance of black American identity feels very different from actually living in a black body. There’s a dissonance between inside and outside.”

Sargent described a similar dissonance between a white mainstream perception of Wiley’s subjects and his subjects’ understandings of themselves. “Kehinde saw something in these people that the larger culture didn’t see,” he said. “He believed they were heroic, that they had power. He painted people the way they imagined themselves, the way society has always ignored.”

If conventional Western portraits calcify structural power, Wiley’s are vehicles for empowerment in and of themselves. They exist in the discordant space between assumption, reality and performance, where the self is as wrapped up in artifice as authenticity. There is, therefore, a parallel between how Wiley regards his subjects and how Obama, as a young man, imagined himself.

To fête an unlikely subject is “not unlike a black man saying ‘I’m going to run for president’ when everyone is saying ‘no you can’t,’” Sargent said.



Kehinde Wiley, “Mrs. Charles E. Inches,” 2013, oil on linen

For Tsai, another overlooked element of Wiley’s work is its queerness. Female beauty has remained a near constant source of inspiration for Western artists, but appreciation of male beauty, especially black male beauty by a black male artist, can still bring a jolt to the system.

“Instead of the male gaze — men looking at women — you have a sense that this is a man looking at men,” she said. “It’s no secret.”

Portraying his subjects with exuberance and a hint of kitsch, Wiley embraces queerness as a lens, challenging the shallow assumptions that often beset young black men. “Wiley doesn’t only challenge the white gaze, but also the cultural gaze and the role of masculinity,” Sargent said. “It’s about black men trying to negotiate gayness in the context of mainstream gay society which has its prejudices. ’If I don’t look this way, or if I don’t act this way, am I gay? Am I black? Can you still see me?’”

There is more to Wiley’s work than the goal of diversifying subjects and artists represented in the art world. Yet that initiative — also undertaken by artists including Kerry James Marshall, the late Barkley Hendricks, Mickalene Thomas, as well as rising artists like Jordan Casteel, Henry Taylor, Njideka Akunyili-Crosby, Toyin Ojih Odutola and many more — has tangible effects.

The Brooklyn Museum’s 2015 mid-career survey of Wiley’s work was wildly popular, drawing around 124,000 visitors over the course of three months. More than the numbers, curator Tsai was struck by the wide range of people entering the museum’s doors: art buffs and kids walking down Eastern Parkway, hip-hop aficionados and local families.

“For me, one of the most amazing things about the exhibition was eavesdropping on the conversations going on,” Tsai said. “It made me realize that everyone should have the experience of seeing someone who looks like you hanging on the walls of a cultural institution. You think of an exhibition as the work on the walls, but the interactions between the visitors and the works of art were crucial.”

Beyond expanding the scope of museum attendees, Wiley is also helping shape the next generation of collectors. “In the short term, he’s bringing a different audience to the work,” gallerist Kelly put it. “In the long term, he’s broadening the depth of collectors for the work. Kehinde’s work is capable of touching different audiences in different ways, so the collector base is much more diverse.”

Kelly speculated that these real-world effects drive Wiley as an artist. “I think after 4,000 years of being excluded from the narrative, he wants to make sure that the next generation of kids walking into a museum don’t have to experience what he did. I think he wants everybody to feel like what they’re looking at represents them and in some way speaks to them.”


Kehinde Wiley, “Duc d’Arenberg,” 2011, oil on linen

Wiley grew up in South Central, Los Angeles, with five siblings — including a twin brother — and his mother, who worked as a linguist before opening a junk shop in the neighborhood. Wiley was influenced by his mother’s linguistic work, which explored the friction between American Standard English and the black vernacular and code-switching black kids adopt as a method of survival.

As an adult, cast in the role of “contemporary black artist,” Wiley is cognizant of the multiple worlds he inhabits and the distinct languages each requires. “It’s about being able to play inside and outside of the race narrative at once,” the San Francisco Art Institute and Yale University School of Art alumnus said. “It’s difficult to get right.”

In a 2017 series, Wiley painted prominent black artists as “Tricksters,” fabled master code-switchers, to illustrate their dexterity in mythic terms. Rashid Johnson, an artist featured in the series and a friend of Wiley’s since 2001, described the experience of sitting for Wiley as very organized and comfortable. “I don’t think he changes personalities but he takes on a more directorial position,” he told HuffPost. “It’s Kehinde but a little more serious.”

Outside the studio, Wiley's peers describe him as brilliant, energetic and incredibly present. "He's one of those people who walks into the room and the temperature changes," Kelly said.

Wiley currently has two running studios — one in Brooklyn, one in Beijing — and is building a third in Senegal. The spaces operate like the traditional Renaissance studios of Leonardo or Michelangelo catapulted into a postmodern, 21st-century laboratory, with assistants ushering his large-scale ideas into being. The conceptual work is Wiley's alone, but the task of painting is divvied up among a number of assistants who've mastered his stroke.

This studio setup, despite its significant art historical precedent, interrupts the persistent fantasy of the monogamous relationship between artist and artwork. As Wiley explained to GQ's Wyatt Mason: "The sentiments about authenticity in the public eye, the discomfort with a large-scale art practice, comes from a myth in an artistic process that never existed."

Wiley romanticizes neither the creation of art nor its valuation. "Wiley acknowledges that he makes high-end products to sell," Tsai said. "It's partially tongue in cheek, but it's part of his practice." The understanding that art is not something precious and invaluable, but in fact, something very valuable, frees Wiley up to exhibit his work outside the typical art world-approved venues. In 2009, Wiley partnered with Puma on a collection of clothing, shoes and accessories incorporating the graphic patterns from his paintings' backdrops. His work also appears on the set of Fox drama "Empire," in the gilded apartment of Terrence Howard's character Lucious Lyon.

"We wanted the character to be like a Jay-Z," set decorator Caroline Perzan said. "So the question was: what would Jay-Z have at his penthouse in New York?" Wiley's portraits — flashy, epic, instantly recognizable and widely coveted — were a perfect choice. Because the selected paintings, including "Officer of the Hussars," were either hanging in museums or otherwise occupied, Perzan bought the rights to the images, then printed them onto high-quality canvases and framed them.

Kehinde Wiley, "The Archangel Gabriel," 2014/ 22 karat gold leaf and oil on wood panel

Some star painters might turn their noses up at the thought of their work appearing on the set of a soapy TV show, but Wiley consistently shows how arbitrary and confining the art world's conventions can be. "I think Kehinde has been really smart about making sure his work has multiple audiences and [isn't] just locked away in castles and museums where all people don't have access to it," Sargent said. "I think that is part of the genius of Kehinde Wiley."

Kelly agreed, recognizing Wiley's willingness to stir up categories both in his work and with his work. "He is part of a younger generation of artists who are very comfortable moving between high and low culture and across cultural boundaries," he said. "Take 'Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps,' which has a contemporary kid called Napoleon on a horse in a pair of Puma shoes and a hoodie. Kehinde is prepared to cross all those boundaries and deal with all of those high art transgressions."

Obama's official portrait, which won't be revealed until early 2018, will likely not adhere to Wiley's famed formula. Many of his critics and peers predict it will not feature a vibrant, textile backdrop nor a horse-riding Obama clad with sword or cane. But perhaps more important, Wiley need not adorn Obama with the traditional trappings of privilege and power to help white society grasp the authority he possesses. Obama has already transformed the way white America envisions mastery.

In fact, when Obama ran for president in 2008, his image was already iconic, thanks to a ubiquitous stencil portrait by street artist Shepard Fairey. The portrait featured the candidate's stylized face in patriotic colors, with the word "hope" written underneath.

Fairey's portrait may have defined Obama's candidacy, but Wiley's will define his presidency. The pairing is as bold as it is fitting: a young art star in conversation with the entire history of Western art, embracing its norms while broadening its scope. With profound self-awareness, Obama aligns himself with Wiley's mission of entering a historically white sphere and mastering it as the world takes notice. Nearly a year after a new president was elected, Obama reminds his followers of how he sees himself and how history will remember him.

Wiley has described his artistic practice as a "way of saying yes to us" — the black community, the queer community, all the individuals who aren't typically memorialized in golden frames. The sentiment echoes Obama's lyrical motto, "yes we can," which followed him from his senate campaign in 2004 to his final speech as president in 2017. With his official presidential portrait, Obama manages to convey this message even without words, exuding the radical optimism that he hopes will define his legacy: Yes we can. Yes we did. Yes to us. Yes.

Smith, Roberta. “Why the Obamas’ Portrait Choice Matters,” *The New York Times,* October 16, 2017.

The New York Times

Why the Obamas’ Portrait Choices Matter

The painter Kehinde Wiley, in 2015, depicts his subjects with flamboyance and historical sweep. Barack and Michelle Obama have chosen him to create Mr. Obama’s official portrait for the National Portrait Gallery. Chad Batka for The New York Times

Barack and Michelle Obama don’t like to waste an opportunity, in word or action, to make larger points about contemporary life and culture. In that vein, their choices of artists for their official portraits in the collection of the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery shine a spotlight on the state of American art. One is an established figurative painter, the other is relatively unknown and a possible rising art-world star. Both are African-American. In their selection of Kehinde Wiley, for Mr. Obama’s likeness, and Amy Sherald, for Mrs. Obama’s, announced Friday, the Obamas continue to highlight the work of contemporary and modern African-American artists, as they so often did with the artworks they chose to live with in the White House, by Glenn Ligon, Alma Thomas and William H. Johnson, among others. Their choices then and now reflect the Obamas’ instincts for balancing the expected and the surprising, and for being alert to painting’s pertinence to the moment.

Amy Sherald, the first woman to win the Outwin Boochever Portrait Competition, in 2016, is painting Michelle Obama's official likeness. She is shown with her prizewinning oil, "Miss Everything (Unsuppressed Deliverance)" from 2013.
Paul Morigi/Associated Press for National Portrait Gallery

Mr. Wiley, who is 40 and known for his art-historically savvy portraits of young black men and women, has been on collectors' must-have lists for more than a decade. His visibility expanded exponentially when his work was featured in 2015 on the Fox television series "Empire," in the art collection of Lucious Lyon, the record label founder played by Terrence Howard.

The choice of Ms. Sherald adds a tantalizing element of risk to the commissions by virtue of her relative obscurity. She was unknown to the National Portrait Gallery curators when the selection process began, Kim Sajet, the museum's director, said in an interview Sunday.

"A clear, unspoken, granted magic," by Amy Sherald, from 2017.CreditCourtesy of the Artist and Monique Meloche Gallery

The Obamas' choices come at a time when figurative painting and portraiture are growing in popularity among young painters interested in exploring race, gender and identity or in simply correcting the historic lack of nonwhites in Western painting.

The current landscape for figurative painting includes scores of talented artists — some established, like Kerry James Marshall, Mickalene Thomas and Henry Taylor, and others emerging, including Jordan Casteel, Aliza Nisenbaum and Louis Fratino, as well as Njideka Akunyili-Crosby, who was just awarded a MacArthur genius grant. The added prominence of Ms. Sherald and Mr. Wiley can only push this lively conversation forward.
The first step in the process began during the last year of Mr. Obama's presidency and was finalized before he left the White House, Ms. Sajet said. The Obamas saw the work of about 20 artists submitted by the Portrait Gallery, with each portfolio presented in a thick notebook.

The artworks will be unveiled in early 2018, when they will go on view at the Gallery. Since the presidency of George H.W. Bush, official portraits have been paid for with private funds, mostly from big donors who will be acknowledged in media materials and credited in labels, said Linda St. Thomas, a spokeswoman at the Smithsonian Institution. The Obama portraits will cost $500,000 (including the unveiling event and a reserve for future care). About $300,000 has been raised. Ms. Sajet declined to say whether the artists were paid the same for the commissions.

A woman has her picture taken in front of a diptych of President Barack Obama by Chuck Close at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, two days before Mr. Obama's second inauguration. It is a place holder until the official museum's portrait is installed in early 2018.CreditNicholas Kamm/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Mr. Wiley, who was born in Los Angeles in 1977, is adept at heroicizing his subjects — some of whom he found through open calls or simply by approaching people on the street. He endows them with the poses and gestures of kings and nobles borrowed from portraits by Velázquez, Holbein, Manet and Titian and also sets them against bold, sometimes jarring patterns of rich brocades, Dutch wax fabrics or Liberty's wallpaper. One of his most reproduced works is an equestrian portrait of Michael Jackson that recycles Velazquez's portrait of King Philip II mounted on a white charger while a battle rages in the distance.

Mr. Wiley's flamboyant portraits of men, in particular, give them a worldly power and often a gravitas that they don't necessarily possess in real life. That is part of his work's irreverent, perspective-altering force. It will be fascinating to see if Mr. Wiley rises to the occasion of painting a world leader like former President Obama, who already has a big place in history and plenty of dignity.


“After Memling’s Portrait of Man with a Coin of the Emperor Nero” (2013), by Kehinde Wiley.CreditByron Smith for The New York Times

If flamboyance is not the best way to go, Mr. Wiley certainly has alternatives, as exemplified by his more restrained half-portraits based on the work of the Northern Renaissance painter Hans Memling, including “After Memling’s Portrait of a Man With a Coin of the Emperor Nero,” now in the collection of the Phoenix Art Museum. Mr. Wiley has at times delegated painting to assistants in the manner of a Renaissance master. It seems safe to assume that this is one commission he will tackle himself.

Ms. Sherald is far less known. Born in Columbus, Ga., in 1973, she now lives in Baltimore, where she earned an M.F.A. from the Maryland Institute College of Art. She decided at an early age to become a painter. In a profile in The Washington Post last year, she cited as the beginning of that journey catching sight, on a sixth-grade museum trip, of “Object Permanence,” a family portrait by the painter Bo Bartlett (also Georgia-born, but now Maine-based) in which the artist, who is white, painted himself as a black man. Her career has been interrupted by three years spent nursing ailing family members and another year to recover from her own heart transplant, in her early 30s.


The artist Kadir Nelson, in 2014. His portrait of Shirley Chisholm, the first black woman elected to Congress, is in the collection of the House of Representatives.
David Walter Banks for The New York Times

In 2016 Ms. Sherald became the first woman to win the National Portrait Gallery’s Outwin Boochever Portrait Competition. Curators added Ms. Sherald to the list for the Obamas “at the very last minute,” Ms. Sajet said. Like Mr. Wiley, Ms. Sherald paints portraits of African-Americans by working both from photographs and live models, and feeding off painting’s traditions, if in a more straightforward way.

Her figures appear before solid fields of color reminiscent of Manet and also Barkley L. Hendricks (1945-2017), who silhouetted his tall, thin, stylishly dressed African-Americans against bright backgrounds.

Ms. Sherald's subjects, on the other hand, are mostly young and come in all shapes and sizes. Her images play black and white against color in different ways, most obviously in the skin tones, which are painted on the gray scale. This recalls old photographs but mainly gives the figures a slight remove from the rest of the painting, one that also signals their awareness of the obstacles to their full participation in American life. This simple device introduces the notion of double consciousness, the phrase coined by W.E.B. DuBois to describe the condition of anyone living with social and economic inequality.

Double consciousness may be inevitable in portraits of people outside the power structure. It is certainly present in Mr. Wiley's portraits and it is a likely bet that it will figure in official portraits of groundbreaking leaders like the Obamas.

A precedent for such portrayals can be found in the proud sardonic oil portrait of Shirley Chisholm, the first black woman elected to the United States Congress, from New York's 12th Congressional District. It is by the African-American artist and illustrator Kadir Nelson and is in the collection of the House of Representatives. Rest assured there will be more such official portraits in the years to come.

Crow, Kelly. “Obamas Choose Rising Stars to Paint Their Official Portraits,” *The Wall Street Journal,* October 13, 2017.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

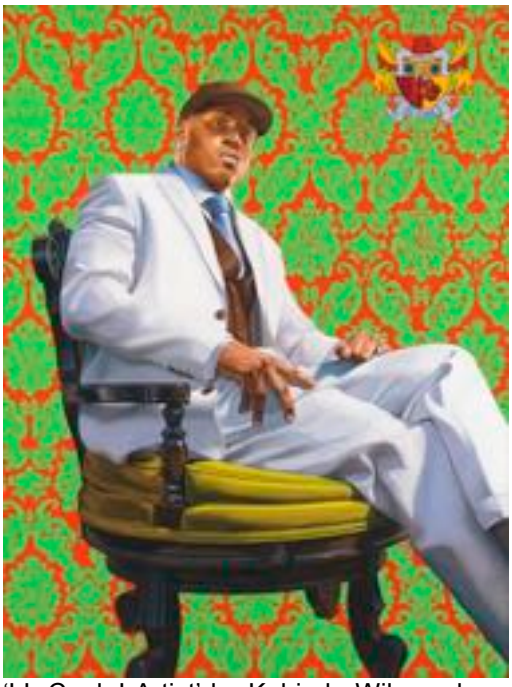
Obamas Choose Rising Stars to Paint Their Official Portraits

Two rising-star artists will paint the official portraits of President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama for the Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery. PHOTO:AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

The Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery has commissioned a pair of rising-star artists—New York’s Kehinde Wiley and Baltimore’s Amy Sherald—to paint its official portraits of the former president and first lady.

Both artists have exhibited widely, but this presidential assignmentamounts to a coup as they follow in the footsteps of artists like Gilbert Stuart, whose portraits of George Washington are considered masterpieces. The Obamas also made a point to champion the arts during their time in the White House, which has heightened art-world curiosity over which artists they would choose.

The Smithsonian confirmed Thursday that former President Barack Obama has asked to be painted by Mr. Wiley, a 40-year-old artist who has an art degree from Yale University and is best known for his vivid portraits of young, black men in imperious, Old-Master poses.



‘LL Cool J Artist’ by Kehinde Wiley, who will paint President Obama’s official portrait.PHOTO: KEHINDE WILEY

Mr. Wiley often depicts his subjects wearing hip-hop attire like hoodies and baggy, blue jeans and arranges them in postures once reserved for European aristocrats—a juxtaposition that helps the artist explore potent issues of race, class and power. Three years ago, Sotheby’s sold Mr. Wiley’s 2006 double portrait of a pair of men in tank tops, “Charles I and Henrietta Maria (after Anthony Van Dyck),” for $143,000. The Brooklyn Museum and other institutions have also shown and collected his work.

Ms. Sherald, a 44-year-old artist known for painting surreal portraits of elegant black women, will paint Ms. Obama. Ms. Sherald’s signature style is to use a palette of grays instead of skin tones to capture her subjects’ faces and hands. Her greyscale women are typically dressed in bright patterns and set against solid swaths of saturated color, a combination that looks like paper dolls or silhouettes from vintage photographs have been set atop children’s construction paper.

Ms. Sherald, who studied painting at Georgia’s Clark-Atlanta University, is newer to the international art scene and hasn’t seen her work head to auction yet. Last year she won a national painting competition at the Portrait Gallery. Her winning piece, “Miss Everything (Unsuppressed Deliverance),” showed a young woman in a navy, polka-dot dress and white gloves, sipping from an oversized tea cup and staring defiantly. She also has a piece in the Smithsonian’s new National Museum of African American History and Culture.

A work by Amy Sherald, who will paint the portrait of Michelle Obama, entitled ‘Miss Everything (Unsuppressed Deliverance).’ PHOTO: AMY SHERALD/MONIQUE MELOCHE GALLERY, CHICAGO

A spokeswoman for the National Portrait Gallery said she couldn’t disclose details about the Obama portraits until they are unveiled early next year, after which they’ll join the museum’s collection. Anticipation in art circles is high because the Obamas have chosen artists with major followings—unlike the relatively obscure artists Nelson Shanks and Ginny Stanford who were enlisted to paint former President Bill Clinton and his First Lady, Hillary Clinton. Currently, the museum has stored Mr. Shanks’ version and is exhibiting a loaned portrait of Mr. Clinton painted by better-known New York artist Chuck Close. Robert Anderson, another artist who is not that well known, painted his former college classmate, President George W. Bush. The portrait is hanging in the museum’s West Gallery.

The Smithsonian’s set of presidential and first-lady portraits remains distinct from the White House’s own collection of portraits, though. It was the White House that first enlisted an African-American artist to paint a presidential portrait when it hired Simmie Knox, a self-taught artist from Alabama, in 2000 to paint the Clintons.

Mr. Wiley and Ms. Sherald are the first black artists hired by the Smithsonian to paint a president and his first lady. The Smithsonian said it plans to pay for the works via private donations.

The artists, reached through their galleries, declined to speak about their respective portraits of the Obamas until they are unveiled.

Collector Joy Simmons, who is known for her collection of contemporary African-American artists, said the artist, who often hires painting assistants, told her he plans to handle all the brushwork this time around.

Ms. Simmons, who owns a watercolor by Mr. Wiley, said that Ms. Sherald’s profile should get a particular boost from the commission. “I’ve been coveting one of her works,” she added, “but I’m way down the waiting list. Now, that list will get even longer.”

Editors, “Object Lessons,” *The Art Newspaper*, June 2017.

INTERNATIONAL EDITION
THE ART NEWSPAPER

Art Market *Fairs & Auctions*

OBJECT LESSONS

From a rare double-bottle vase and a Sioux pictorial calendar to a Magritte-inspired side table, here is our pick of the sales at recent fairs and auctions

The Virgin and Child with Saints Thomas, John the Baptist, Jerome and Louis, attributed to Hugo van der Goes (15th century)

CHRISTIE'S, NEW YORK, 27 APRIL, OLD MASTER PAINTINGS

SOLD FOR $9M (EST $3M-$5M)

This 15th-century Flemish work is a rarity in almost every sense. Once owned by Horace Walpole, who kept it at his Strawberry Hill estate in Twickenham, near London, it was probably originally painted as an altarpiece for an English patron. At some point in the early 18th century, the Virgin and Child and Saint John were stripped away and painted over with a church's nave and apse, while the remaining saints were conscripted as characters in a new scene representing the marriage of Henry VII and Elizabeth of York, likely to carry political favour. It was not until the painting was conserved in the late 1970s that the original composition was revealed, including its preparatory underdrawing, and the tentative attribution to the master Hugo van der Goes has now been ratified by the scholar Peter van den Brink. Prior to the sale, the painting had been on loan to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York since 1998. J. P. H.

Tala Madani, The Landscape (2017)

DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY AT FRIEZE NEW YORK, 5-7 MAY

SOLD FOR $110,000

The Los Angeles dealer sold out his entire booth of new paintings by the Tehran-born artist to private collectors and international institutions within the first few hours of the VIP preview. Known for subtly lacerating paintings and animations of middle-aged men and other cartoonish figures, at Frieze the artist—who is also included in the latest iteration of the Whitney Biennial in New York (until 11 June)—premiered an all-new group of works that show "infantile characters managing anxious, existential crises, [as well as] the messier politics of the body and its extensions, both projected and real", according to a spokesperson of the gallery. Earlier this year, after Donald Trump issued a now-eventually overturned executive order that would bar citizens of seven Muslim-majority countries from entering the US, the Museum of Modern Art in New York protested by organising an exhibition of eight works by artists from those countries, which included a video installation by Madani. G. Al.

Murrine dish (around 1940)

CHRISTIE'S, NEW YORK, 4 MAY, CARLO SCARPA, VISIONS IN GLASS

SOLD FOR $216,000 WITH PREMIUM (EST $100,000-$150,000)

Between 1926 and 1962, the Italian architect produced pieces for the famed Venini glassworks in Venice, working with two glassmakers to push the medium forward with new treatments that drew on ancient Chinese, Roman and Byzantine techniques. This 8th, the top lot of this single-owner sale, is a pristine example of Scarpa's murrine opache ne brique—considered to be his greatest technical and stylistic achievement—which uses fractalled geometric shapes to create an optical illusion. Interest in Scarpa's glass works (and Italian glass in general) has spiked in recent years, with the French auction house Piasa hosting a dedicated sale of his work in 2014 and the Metropolitan Museum of Art organising an exhibition of nearly 300 of his glass works created between 1932 and 1941, when he was the artistic consultant for Venini. G. Al.

Ovoid celadon-glazed vase with ridged neck and a celadon-glazed double bottle vase with Yongzheng six-character mark to neck

FREEMAN'S, PHILADELPHIA, 25 APRIL, ASIAN ARTS

SOLD FOR $106,000 WITH PREMIUM (EST $1,200-$1,500)

This two-piece lot, featuring a small celadon-glazed vase and a double-bottle companion, was driven to a final price above ten times above its estimate—thanks to the latter object, specialists of the house believe. Although the house had estimated it conservatively, as the double bottle vase's Yongzheng mark (indicating production during the Qing dynasty under the emperor Yongzheng, who personally encouraged the production of new shapes and colours in ceramics) is not definitive, a buyer recognised the rarity of the form and its particularly rich glaze. Double-bottle vases (also known as shuangjian ping, or double-lotus flasks) are scarce on the market, though there is an example in the collection of the National Palace Museum in Taipei. "The double-bottle vase is an attractive and unusual example of celadon-glazed porcelain wares of this period and is in great condition, coming from a private Pennsylvanian collection", says Ben Farina, Freeman's vice-president and head of the department for Asian arts. G. Al.

Studio Job, Pipe Side Table (2015)

CARPENTERS WORKSHOP AT TEFAF NEW YORK SPRING, 4-6 MAY

SOLD FOR $75,000

The first sale of the inaugural edition of TEFAF's new Modern and contemporary art and design fair was a polished and patinated bronze side table by Studio Job, the Antwerp- and Amsterdam-based design duo founded by Job Smeets and Nynke Tynagel. The limited-edition table is supported by the form of a calabash pipe at the base, which billows 34 carat-gilded puffs of smoke. The gallery confirms it sold two editions during the fair, which featured several dealers playing on themes of Surrealism. The designers say that the work is an homage to René Magritte's painting, The Treachery of Images ("This Is Not a Pipe) (1929), as it deals with the same idea that "all visual representations are inherently abstract—it is neither a table nor a pipe". G. Al.

Sioux Winter Count Painted on Muslin (around 1870s)

SKINNER, BOSTON, 5 MAY, AMERICAN INDIAN AND ETHNOGRAPHIC ARTS

SOLD FOR $21,000 WITH PREMIUM (EST $8,000-$12,000)

As part of its annual auction of indigenous arts and crafts, Skinner offered a muslin winter count from the Dakota Sioux tribe, put up by the heirs of the US General Henry Martyn Lazelle, who fought against the Sioux during the American Indian Wars. In winter counts, once made on buffalo hides before the animals became scarce and the tribes were confined to reservations, pictograms serve to mark "the most memorable event that happened for that particular tribe", says Douglas Deihl, the director of the department. The example covers 1786 to 1877 and depicts the deaths of warriors among the key events. Although the particular winter count is "somewhat basic, with the drawings a bit on the crude side, it's exceptional quality wise, as it was collected in the 1870s—fairly early for this type of object", says Deihl. *C.Al.*

David Hockney, The Artist and the Model (1974)

SWANN AUCTION GALLERIES, NEW YORK, 9 MAY, CONTEMPORARY ART

SOLD FOR $52,500 (EST $20,000-$30,000)

The top lot of the house's contemporary art sale was this etching by the British artist, whose market has seen an increase of activity in the wake of his retrospective at Tate Britain this spring. Created not long after Hockney had expanded into etchings, and numbered 81 of 100, the print rose above its high estimate to set a record for the work at auction. It depicts a fictional scene where the artist, who was never personally acquainted with Picasso, casts himself in an intimate one-on-one with the Spanish Cubist—a long-time inspiration to whom he has paid homage in various works and identifiable here by his signature curlicue stripes. Hockney created the print with the Belgian printmaker Aldo Crommelynck, who collaborated with Picasso for more than 20 years, producing all the artist's prints after 1963. *C.Al.*

Rare Umayyad brass astrolabe (1020)

SOTHEBY'S, LONDON, 26 APRIL, ARTS OF THE ISLAMIC WORLD

SOLD FOR £625,000 WITH PREMIUM (EST £300,000-£500,000)

Sotheby's sold the earliest astrolabe from Moorish Spain known to exist, engraved by the Andalusian astrolabist Muhammad Ibn al-Saffar of Cordoba. In their most basic form, astrolabes—an instrument formerly used for astronomical measurements and marine navigation—consist of a disc with marked degrees and a rotating pointer. This more complex version comprises more than ten components, including six flat plates that each represent a celestial sphere—with Toledo, Cordoba, Damascus, Mecca and Medina named in correspondence to their latitude—as well as lines that represent the horizon, altitudes and the hours. The rete of the object fastening it all together has the shape of a star map and was likely added in the 16th or 17th century in the eastern Mediterranean, possibly Ottoman Turkey, suggesting that the astrolabe was well travelled. Having survived nearly intact for over 1,000 years, the object is "an important scientific discovery that stands out for its supreme rarity and reflects the vibrant scientific history of the region", says Benedict Cortier, the house's head of auction sales for the Middle East. *C.Al.*

Samuel John Peploe, The Terrace, Cassis (around 1913)

BONHAMS, EDINBURGH, 26 APRIL, THE SCOTTISH SALE

SOLD FOR £161,000 (EST £80,000-£80,000)

This oil on panel, which depicts a sun-drenched terrace overlooking the sprawling hills above a port, was painted during a working holiday in the fabled environs of Cassis, a resort in the south of France that was also a favourite of Francis Picabia. Peploe painted many views of the village during this visit, which are now sought after by collectors, for "that year was the last year that the artist was able to travel and take inspiration from the light and the landscape before the outbreak of the First World War", says Chris Brickley, the house's head of Scottish art. In separate sales last year, Bonhams sold two other works that Peploe created on this same visit: Cassis (Rooftops) (1913), which sold for £92,500 and Cassis Harbour (1913), which brought £79,300. *C.Al.*

Kehinde Wiley, Akilah Walker (2015)

SEAN KELLY AT TEFAF NEW YORK SPRING, 4-8 MAY

SOLD FOR $250,000

A contemporary work that nods to the historic role of 'fetish', the New York-based gallery sold this large bronze sculpture—the last available in an edition of five—in the first hour of the fair to undisclosed US collectors who "have a longstanding commitment to sculpture", says an associate of the gallery. The majestic work is the second of a series of bronze sculptures of black women—the first was titled Bound (2014) and featured three versions of Akilah Walker, all conjoined by their hair, which belongs to the Brooklyn Museum and was shown in Wiley's 2015 exhibition there. The gallery is currently hosting an exhibition of new paintings by the US artist titled 'Trickster' (until 17 June). *C.Al.*

Rosen, Miss. “View a Series of Portraits of Extraordinary Black Artists,” *Dazed,* June 6, 2017.

DAZED

View a series of portraits of extraordinary black artists

“Portrait of Rashid Johnson and Sanford Biggers, The Ambassadors”, 2017 oil on canvas painting: 120 5/16 x 85 5/8 inches (305.6 x 217.5 cm) framed: 131 5/16 x 96 11/16 x 4 1/2 inches (333.5 x 245.6 x 11.4 cm)© *Kehinde Wiley, courtesy Sean Kelly, New York*

The Trickster exists in different cultures around the globe: the wily shapeshifter with the power to transform the way we see the world. As an archetype, The Trickster can be found in any walk of life where people must operate according to more than one set of rules, moving seamlessly between the appearance of things and the underlying truth.

Artists know this realm well for they are consigned to delve deep below the surface and manifest what they find. Yet their discoveries are not necessarily in line with the status quo; more often than not, they will upset polite society and upend respectability politics by speaking truth to power – quite literally.

In the United States, African Americans know this well. Throughout the course of the nation’s history, they have been forced to deal with systemic oppression and abuse in a culture filled with double speak that began with the words “All men are created equal,” penned in the Declaration of Independence by Thomas Jefferson, a man who kept his own children as slaves until his death.

Throughout his career, artist Kehinde Wiley has moved smoothly between spheres of influence, using the canon of Western art as a tool of subversion, celebration, and recognition for those who have long been excluded from the narrative. “History is written by the victors,” Winston Churchill said, reminding us that now is the time to reclaim that which belongs to us.

In *Trickster*, a new exhibition of work currently on view at Sean Kelly, Gallery, through June 17, 2017, New York, Wiley honors his contemporaries who walk his same path, creating a series of portraits of extraordinary black artists including Derrick Adams, Sanford Biggers, Nick Cave, Rashid Johnson, Glenn Ligon, Kerry James Marshall, Wangechi Mutu, Yinka Shonibare, Mickalene Thomas, Hank Willis Thomas, Carrie Mae Weems, and Lynette Yiadom-Boakye.

Using Francisco Goya’s infamous *Black Paintings* as the departure point, Wiley puts blackness front and centre, operating on several levels simultaneously. Below, he speaks to us about this work, revealing the power and courage it takes to go beyond the known.

“What we haven’t done historically is make space for the ‘peripheral’ voices. We haven’t seen people who happen to look like me in many of the great museums around the world and I think it’s an exciting time to polish off a language that is to some extent stale” – Kehinde Wiley

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I love the title of the show. It’s both forthright and coy, like the Trickster themselves. What was the inspiration for this body of work?

Kehinde Wiley: The title refers to a lateral move within my own art making. So much of the people and the story about my painting has been about nameless individuals who I run into in the streets of America and developing countries all over the world. Here I am dealing with relatively known, celebrated individuals who belong to an art tradition that prizes shapeshifting, that prizes originality, and looking at the Trickster as the way we see contemporary black American artists.

The Trickster element points directly to the African-American tradition of using shapeshifting as a means of survival: in the ways that they speak, in the ways that they sing, this kind of coded language that begins in American chattel slavery like talking behind the master’s back and continues on into blues and jazz, and even arguably hip-hop culture, which is now being beamed out into the rest of the world.

The necessity of code switching in the art world is intense. There’s something very powerful and subversive there, especially because you’re speaking in the language that’s known but at the same time, you’re addressing something that you know that a lot of people aren’t even conscious of. How does the creation of art allow you to speak to different audiences simultaneously?

Kehinde Wiley: Code switching is directly on point. It’s a concern of mine that goes back to some of my earliest work, back to the first body of work that I created out of the Studio Museum in Harlem many years ago was entirely Passing/Posing. The idea in that body of work is that black masculinity is a kind of mask that is both fabricated and performed every day, that difference between what it feels like to be in a black American male body and that cognitive dissonance you feel when you’re looking at the caricature of it in popular culture and global media and how you both perform to it and fight against it as a thinker, as an artist, as a human being.

Much of the work that's in this exhibition is in direct defiance to some of those perceived fixed selves that I'm talking about, but it's also in celebration of the multiplicities of identities, all of those different characters, all of those different artists from Carrie Mae Weems to Wanegichi Mutu to Mickalene Thomas. These are both heroes and friends. They're both sparring partners and voices of adulation and confidence.

It's a very vulnerable show in the sense of that so much of what an artist tries to do is separate himself from his peers. What I've tried to do here is to draw a line of continuity and community around my peers and tried to use the language of heraldry and dignity to carve out a sacred space which functions as both sacred and profane.

Kehinde Wiley, "Portrait of Carrie Mae Weems, Eris", 2017 oil on canvas painting: 120 5/16 x 84 7/16 inches (305.6 x 214.5 cm) framed: 131 5/16 x 95 1/2 x 4 1/2 inches (333.5 x 242.6 x 11.4 cm)

How did the process of having them sit for you deepen your knowledge of them?
Kehinde Wiley: One of the great things about this show is that it's some of the purest portraiture that you rarely see in contemporary art. It comes from the traditional sitting process, it's painted in a way that's centuries old. I was really trying to find that language and make it alive, and live in the 21st century.

What we did was use 21st century tools such as digital photography and Photoshop, but it really does come back to having each of these artists come by my studio and spend an hour, two hours talking about how they want to be seen. I shot thousands of pictures. Once I shot the pictures, we would go in on Photoshop and find which head works with which body. It wasn't just one shot, it was often times a combination of different things.

One of the things that portraiture has in its history is this illusion that it tells you something about the sitter, that portraiture can elucidate something about the interior life of the individual and in modern times we are very suspicious of that. We are suspicious of that romantic notion of art being able to communicate anything deeper than the material surface and I disagree.

I think that there is some aspect of conversation going on in the work. There is a reality to the collaboration that happens on that day and you see it in the walls and in those paintings when you see the exhibition.

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“I don’t think it’s worthwhile to make the type of art that doesn’t turn you on, that doesn’t get you all wrapped up with fear and anxiety” – Kehinde Wiley

What is it about portraiture that resonates with you?

Kehinde Wiley: It’s the ultimate subject matter. We just don’t resonate to a bowl of fruit or a landscape the same way we do when we peer into the eyes of another.

I think what we haven’t done historically is make space for the “peripheral” voices. We haven’t seen people who happen to look like me in many of the great museums around the world and I think it’s an exciting time to polish off a language that is to some extent stale and discovered but to another extent has so many undiscovered features and contours by virtue of the absence of people who look like me within that narrative.

What do you find to be the most satisfying aspect of redefining these codified boundaries of Western art?

Kehinde Wiley: The most exciting part is being able to discover new things in the process of thinking about what the next show will be in terms of looking at art and having a lifestyle that enables me to constantly be in museum spaces and constantly look at the real world through the rubric of a creative process.

It’s a way of being. It’s not simply a studio practice or the physical act of painting. It is a lifestyle choice that allows you to see possibilities not only in painting and the histories and narratives that exist there, but in the grace that you see in an everyday basis allows you to heighten or diminish certain features of actuality and allows them to be re-presented in such a way that life feels much more bearable and beautiful, full of verve.
I don’t think it’s worthwhile to make the type of art that doesn’t turn you on, that doesn’t get you all wrapped up with fear and anxiety. This show was easily one of the hardest ones for me to create because of a lot of the issues that we were talking about, because of the anxieties of influence, a lot of the fears I had about how people would either understand or misunderstand this body of work. I think that’s the point. You’re really on to something when you don’t necessarily feel comfortable or confident with every move.

“Portrait of Yinka Shonibare, Reynard the Fox”, 2017 oil on canvas painting: 120 x 81 1/2 inches (304.8 x 207 cm) framed: 130 7/16 x 91 5/8 x 4 1/2 inches (331.3 x 232.7 x 11.4 cm)*© Kehinde Wiley, courtesy Sean Kelly, New York*

Frank, Priscilla. “Kehinde Wiley Paints The Formative Black Artists of Our Time,” *Huffington Post,* May 26, 2017.

HUFFPOST

Kehinde Wiley Paints The Formative Black Artists Of Our Time

KEHINDE WILEY COURTESY: SEAN KELLY NEW YORK
Kehinde Wiley, “Portrait of Mickalene Thomas, the Coyote,” 2017, oil on canvas

In mythology, the trickster is an archetypal character that takes many shapes — animal, human and divine — distinguished by intellect, cunning, a penchant for mischief, and an aversion to rules, lines and norms of all kinds. In African folklore, the trickster takes shape through Anansi the spider; in America, Brer Rabbit; in France, Reynard the Fox. In pop culture, you’ll recognize trickster tendencies in characters like Bugs Bunny, Felix the Cat and Bart Simpson.

In each case, the character uses questionably moral tactics and a generous helping of wit to subvert the natural order of things, tip-toeing over boundaries and shaking up power dynamics to turn the world topsy-turvy. They are clowns, jokers and provocateurs, able to outsmart traditional hero archetypes through their ability to camouflage, think on their toes and step outside traditional moral frameworks.

Outside the realm of myth, in contemporary life, artists often embody the trickster ethos, pushing buttons and testing limits in a world that, quite often, doesn't quite know what to make of them. This was, at least, painter Kehinde Wiley's understanding when he embarked upon his most recent painting series "Trickster."
"Artists are those people who sit at the intersection between the known and unknown, the rational and irrational, coming to terms with some of the confusing histories we as artists deal with," Wiley said in an interview with HuffPost. "The trickster position can serve quite well especially in times like this."

KEHINDE WILEY COURTESY: SEAN KELLY NEW YORK
Kehinde Wiley, "Portrait of Rashid Johnson and Sanford Biggers, The Ambassadors," 2017, oil on canvas

The series consists of 11 paintings, all depicting prominent black contemporary artists who, according to Wiley, embody this trickster mode of being. There's Mickalene Thomas, known for her bedazzled portraits of glamorous black women, as the Coyote, portrayed with feathers in her hair and a hand on her heart. And Nick Cave, whose boisterous "sound suit" sculptures are ecstatic cyclones of matter and sound, assumes the role of famous portrait subject Nadezhda Polovtseva, wearing a beanie and high-top sneakers while beckoning to the viewer with an umbrella.

Wiley described his subjects as his heroes and peers. "These are people I surround myself with in New York," he said. "Who come to my studio, who share my ideas. The people I looked up to as a student, as a budding artist many years ago." He savors that intersectionality, using his brush to peer into art's past, present and future.

Since 2001, Brooklyn-based Wiley has painted grandiose, large-scale portraits of black subjects, injecting them into the largely pasty halls of Western portraiture. Riffing off traditional Renaissance imagery canonizing kings, nobles and saints, Wiley gives his contemporary subjects a hybrid sense of regal aplomb and swagger, a nod to the performative gestures that communicate youth, blackness and contemporary, image-saturated life.

Wiley's painted figures are most often swallowed up by his sumptuous textile backdrops that creep meanderingly into the foreground. The serpentine vines and decorative flourishes usher Wiley's typical human subjects — whom he plucks from sidewalks and shopping malls — out of their previous existences into the

realm of paint, timeless and eternal. Over the past 15 years, Wiley's artistic style has become immediately recognizable, if not iconic. And yet the artist believes his much of his practice remains, to a degree, misinterpreted.

"So much of my work has not been fully investigated," he said. "Many people see my early work simply as portraits of black and brown people. Really, it's an investigation of how we see those people and how they have been perceived over time. The performance of black American identity feels very different from actually living in a black body. There's a dissonance between inside and outside."

KEHINDE WILEY COURTESY: SEAN KELLY NEW YORK
Kehinde Wiley, "Portrait of Yinka Shonibare, Reynard the Fox," 2017, oil on canvas

Wiley perceives his current series, too, as an exercise in careful looking. "It's about analyzing my position as an artist within a broader community," he said. "About an artist's relationship to history and time. It's a portrait of a group of people coming to terms with what it means to be an artist in the 21st century dealing with blackness, with individuality."

Those familiar with Wiley's work might do a double take upon seeing this new work, which does away with lavish, cloth-like backdrops in favor of phantasmagorical scenarios. "This show is about me being uncomfortable as an artist," he said. "When I'm at my best, I'm trying to destabilize myself and figure out new ways of approaching art as a provocation. I think I am at my best, when I push myself into a place where I don't have all the answers. Where I really rely on instinct."

While Wiley's earlier works have drawn comparisons to Barkley L. Hendricks, Jeff Koons and David Salle, this current series calls upon the spirit of Francisco de Goya, specifically, his "Black Paintings," made toward the end of the artist's life, between 1819 and 1823. The most famed work in the series, "Saturn Devouring His Son," depicts Saturn as a crazed old man — bearded, nude, eyes like black beads — biting into his child's body like a cut of meat.
"I'm interested in blackness as a space of the irrational," Wiley said. "I love the idea of starting with darkness but ending up with a show that is decidedly about light. There is a very self-conscious concentration on the

presence and absence of light — tying into these notions of good and evil, known and unknown. There is a delicate balance that comes out of such a simple set of metaphors."

The trickster, like Goya, alternates methodically between these notions of light and darkness. Yet the practice extends beyond the metaphorical and into all too real life when black artists navigate the hegemonic and largely white institutions of the art world. "The trickster is an expert at code switching, at passing and posing," Wiley said.
"In African-American folklore, the trickster stands in direct relation to secrecy," he continued. "How do you keep your home and humanity safe from the dominant culture? How do you talk about things and keep them away from the master? These were things talked about in slavery that morphed into the blues, then jazz, then hip-hop. It informs the way young people fashion their identities."

Just as a young man hanging out at the mall performs black masculinity through his look, walk and speech, artists like Kerry James Marshall, Wangechi Mutu and Yinka Shonibare are cast in the role of "black contemporary artist" — a role they pilot with dexterity and finesse. "It's about being able to play inside of it and outside of the race narrative at once," Wiley said. "It's difficult to get right."

KEHINDE WILEY COURTESY: SEAN KELLY NEW YORK
Kehinde Wiley, "Portrait of Kerry James Marshall, La Lectura," 2017, oil on canvas

Wiley's paintings are visual folktales littered with clues — a rifle, a leather-bound book, a slew of dead foxes — that, like Goya's 19th-century canvases, reject certain understanding. Instead, they place viewers in an indeterminate space of in-between: between past and present, dark and light, classical and contemporary, reality and myth.

"I am painting with this romantic idea that portraiture tells some kind of essential truth about the subject," Wiley said, "but also with this modern suspicion of any representation to tell the truth about an individual. It's about being in love with a tradition that is inclusive of so many possibilities, but still contains so much absence."

Indeed, portraiture has historically served aristocrats and elites, leading critics like Vinson Cunningham to question whether such a medium can ever transcend its chronicled prejudice. "How can Renaissance-descended portraiture, developed in order to magnify dynastic princes and the keepers of great fortunes, adequately convey twenty-first-century realities or work as an agent of political liberation?" he wrote earlier this year.

Yet what Cunningham views as painting's weakness, Wiley sees as its strength. "Any writer or artist or thinker must have a set of limitations from which to push off from," he said. "By virtue of its familiarity it can offer surprise." And it does. With each subsequent series and show, Wiley stretches the understanding of what shape a portrait can take, who the art establishment serves, what the next generation of great American artists has in store.

“When I have exhibitions, the people who don’t belong to the typical museum demographic show up,” Wiley said. “People view themselves within the rubric of possibility.” The artist himself had a similar experience back in the day, upon seeing Kerry James Marshall’s portraits flourishing, black American life at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The works left him “thunderstruck.”

Today, Wiley refers to Marshall as “a hero who has, in an improbable way, become a friend.” His smiling face appears three times over Wiley’s “Portrait of Kerry James Marshall, La Lectura.” Seated amidst a dim, rocky cave, Marshall assumes the roles of both student and teacher, directing the viewer’s attention to a large book in his lap, whose insides remain indecipherable. His grin is illuminated with wisdom, kindness and a glint of mischief, leaving the viewer to question what comes next.

KEHINDE WILEY COURTESY: SEAN KELLY NEW YORK
Kehinde Wiley, “Portrait of Wangechi Mutu, Mamiwata,” 2017, oil on canvas

Thomas, Mickalane. “Kehinde Wiley,” *Interview Magazine,* May 22, 2017.

Interview

KEHINDE WILEY

KEHINDE WILEY IN NEW YORK, MAY 2017. PORTRAITS: MYLES GOLDEN.

Kehinde Wiley's latest body of work is an ode to community, an embrace of insecurities, and an art historical declaration. Titled "Trickster" and currently on view at Sean Kelly gallery, it sees the painter depict fellow contemporary black artists, including Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Kerry James Marshall, and Carrie Mae Weems, in large-scale scenes full of historical citations (a portrait of Rashid Johnson and Sanford Biggers serves as a spare reference to Holbein's 16th-century work *The Ambassadors,* for example, while Hank Willis Thomas appears in a setting reminiscent of Goya's *La Romeria de San Isidro*). "One of the things that has inspired me so much is knowing that I felt like I could never measure up," admits Wiley of making his peers into subjects. "A big portion of the subject matter of this exhibition is about how you feel you measure up in relationship not only to your heroes, but the people who are around you," he continues. "The elephant in that room, in that exhibition, is this highly insecure guy who is trying to figure out his place in the world, and using art history and using the best of our tools, both logically and irrationally, to arrive at some sort of meaning."

Here Wiley speaks to one of his "Trickster" subjects: Brooklyn-based artist Mickalene Thomas. The friends discuss their shared alma mater, having an empathetic eye, their mothers, and more.

KEHINDE WILEY: My first question is this, and it takes us back, because as you know, you and I first met at Yale when we were both [MFA] students there. In fact, before you were a student there, I was a student helping

out with the admissions process. I remember meeting your mom and you. Your mom was incredibly helpful with the process and you were incredibly nervous about the process, and I saw your work and I knew immediately that you would become one of my fellow students. I remember sitting outside in the hallway while you were inside the interview room, and I felt in my mind that, "She not only walked into a room, but she walked into a new chapter in her life. Her life is about to change in this moment." How do you feel that the experience at Yale has either, for bad or worse, made you the person you are today?

MICKALENE THOMAS: Once I got to Yale, my experience was more about the friendships that we had. Forget all of what happened and what didn't happen to each of us individually; it was more the formative years, our bond that we developed, that space of love and expression and growth and creativity, that support system, that "we're all here together" and this is an extremely exciting moment in time that we're all experiencing, and we will all be making or doing something great. [*laughs*] That was an exciting time because also, that same year, once I got in, I met Titus Kaphar. I know, without going into detail, your experience was extremely different than mine. You were by yourself as an African American student for a long time, and [there was] all of that weight and the prescribed condition of how you were treated, and the response and criticism of your work. And there were some instructors, without naming them, who were unwarrantedly saying things that they shouldn't say. I don't know if my growth as an artist would have shifted in the direction it had had I not been there with you and Iona [Rozeal Brown], because we had an intense dialogue—we did everything together. You know the conversations we had.

WILEY: Right, which brings me, I suppose, to the crux of this exhibition, which is about community, and it's about hero worship in as much as it is about recognizing your peers and the people that you rely on and the people you grew up with. So much of my work has to do with this difference between the way that the outside world sees a black body and the way that you inhabit it yourself, that cognitive distance between two-dimensional stereotypes versus the flavor in my mouth, the feel in my skin, the way that someone looks at me, the shock or the surprise or the welcome that appears in another human being's body. It's a very corporeal thing, it's a very ideational thing, and I think at its best it's something that we have to come to terms with as viewers, as Americans, as art consumers. It's not abstract and it all starts with the families that we have as creative people.

THOMAS: Also recognizing that with each other, within that community, and allowing that space. The exciting part is knowing that there's room for all of us at the table. What I like about this show is how you have taken each of us and put us in these lights, as you will, and allowed an essence of ourselves to come through painting, through the formalities of painting but also through the history of painting. It's interesting because as I was walking through it just now, I can understand while we're each in those positions. [*laughs*] And a lot of them, you hit the nail on the head, thinking of the Goya paintings with Derrick [Adams] and Hank [Willis Thomas]. It starts to make sense when you start thinking about those particular artists, and who they are, and not only their trajectories, but their practices and how they navigate the world within their own communities. You see it in the work, and I think that's a really beautiful thing, to start to align and build that conversation within each painting.

WILEY: Well, I think the pairing of your material practice with your subject is something that is the constant concern of every artist for time immemorial. One of the things that I really particularly love about your work has to do with that sense in which the subject or the person in the painting exists in direct relationship to paint or canvas or jewels or the televisual or the photographic. Some of the early work that I remember, back when we were both students at Yale, had to do with you, yourself the subject of the work, and those works became much more about shape-shifting, and about exploring the contours of the self by virtue of certain types that exist in the culture.

THOMAS: And performativity in those spaces, trying to understand that, those stereotypical notions that are put on you, like, "What is that really? What does it really mean? They're saying this, but I don't really know what that means." To understand that, I felt like I had to put myself in these positions to really comprehend what those definitions were.

WILEY: That's something I think you and I have in common in many ways, is that sense that we need a sharp white wall to throw ourselves up against in order to know what the full impact or the full content of the identity is. It's almost like the way that you see small children testing who they are, how strong their legs are, how they can dance out in the world, and slowly getting a sense of self-confidence. Undergirding so much of the heroism

many people see in your work, and I suspect mine, has to do with a deep insecurity about who I am and how I'm seen and, "Am I doing it right?" and "Do they really see me?" One of the things I wanted to talk to you about was not necessarily the chest-beating, the opulence of it, but sometimes I know I'm doing something really good and impactful when it scares me, when I don't feel secure, when I don't feel like, "I've got this."

THOMAS: I always talk about that when I teach students. They always ask, "How do you know?" It's always the underlying question: "How do I know when it's good?" I say, "Because it scares you." [*both laugh*] It's not just this overwhelming physical and spiritual thing; it's almost to the level of embarrassing yourself.

WILEY: Is there a limit?

THOMAS: No, there's no limit, because where you're at that position, where you're at that crossroad, you want to put it out in the world, but you're afraid to. It's insatiable but it's frightening. It's always these polar opposites and it's this visceral feeling of, "I may fail, but I'm going to do it anyway." That's the point where you know you're doing something great without knowing. You're taking that chance and the risk to push it forward even though it's challenging and mystical, because you don't know, and that's the place when the ingenious or the power or something shifts. We're always looking for an answer, and unfortunately the reason why we need creativity and theories and thoughts and all these isms is because we don't know. It's the search, the discovery, and as an artist, that's what excites me. As I shift through the practices of my work and ideas and concepts, I'm always searching for my own answers, because I don't know and it's frightening. I'm like, "I'm going to do it anyway. I'm going put it out there and I'm going to have these challenges presented, so that hopefully the answers can come from the viewer," because I don't always want to complete the sentence, and nor should we as artists.

I think that shift in your work, for me, of when you decided to work with women, was that. It was, "You know what, I'm going to do something that is completely unexpected, and allow myself this new realm of seeing and a new sense of power for a particular platform of people that may not be expected of me." That's what was exciting for me with you working with women, because there was this expectability of a sense of the black male, and I think when you enter into that realm of using the black female, it's like, "Okay, now there's this play that's happening."

WILEY: Right. For me, it was always that I number one, was dealing with my own sexual orientation and my own set of desires about what I wanted to see in a painting. The erotic and the art historical imagination is something that gets very little play when people talk about my work, and when they rarely do, they try to problematize it. I think that's one of the most interesting things about the work, that it's been sort of constructed from a point of view of the non-heterosexual, black male, American gaze. Then to move out into either the depiction of other genders or other nationalities or other spaces requires a type of empathy. The empathetic gaze is something that can at once be really exciting, because it throws you off of your balance and allows you to shake things up and see things from other perspectives, but it also institutes a kind of doubt from not having this be your own personal experience. I'll project that out into experiences such as going into the state of Israel, and I started to create these bodies of work that really investigated cultures where I don't have uncontested access to their cultural and aesthetic tradition. By doing so I was pointing very much to who they are, but also pointing back to a very American tradition of going out world.

THOMAS: And how we see them.

WILEY: That's right. And then who was it really about? It's a hall of mirrors in the end. This type of looking, this type of voyage, this type of empathy that one needs to have when looking at others and expecting some sort of art object to be coming out of it, is something that I see very strongly in the work that you did with women, but strangely enough I see it with your mother. There's this type of intimacy and distance at once. Much of the writing about that body of work has a lot to do with the intimacy between you and your mother. But I think I see a type of artifice, I see a type of performance there and the trappings of the wigs and the makeup. It's like, "Where is she? Where are you?" The question I always wanted to ask was, is that the point? Is it a dance about how you come to terms with intimacy and the mother-daughter relationship? Is it about her at all? Is it about the material practice of painting and her as a type of muse? What is it?

THOMAS: I think it is all of those things, but more importantly, it is about me. It's about a discovery and search of who I am and who I am to become, and looking at my mother, that sense of validation, and gaining that sense of agency, of self.

WILEY: That's fascinating. So you're using your mother as a rubric through which you create a kind of self-portraiture.

THOMAS: Absolutely, and thinking of notions of Lacan philosophy. The mirror, the sense of validation of who you are, is through how others see you. Therefore if I'm looking at my mother, and I'm supposed to be, I'm from this cloth, and so how do I become the person that I am if I don't look at where I came from? I think it had to do with, going back to what you were talking about in reference to sexuality, really trying to understand my own sexuality through how I see her. Because as a woman in the world, who am I supposed to be? What sort of foundations or footsteps am I supposed to walk within from her to become the person she perceives me to be, I want to be, I'm supposed to be? All of these things in the world that are put upon you.

WILEY: Which brings me to [W. E. B.] Du Bois. You were talking about Lacan, the Story of the Eye draws a strong analogy there as well, but I think this sense of the double consciousness, the idea that the Negro self, the then-Negro self, can never access itself authentically, it has to go through, "Well, what do white people or the dominant society think of me?" Then you translate it into the way I think, the way I dress, the way I make love, the way I self-analyze.

THOMAS: I think you did that early in your career. You tapped into that, the notions of who you are, how you are perceived. I had a conversation with a friend before about Du Bois, and the notion of double consciousness as performativity within blackness, of how we're always performing.

WILEY: Black people get this without any degrees. Black people get this sense of code-switching, this sense of being one way in this room and one way in another. My mother introduced to me as a child the world of language, the way in which translation can be a system by which you can understand others. She was studying linguistics back in the 1970s, late '60s, when Ebonics was being constructed, and so she was very familiar with Western African language systems and trying to figure out how black people in America spoke as opposed to Western Standard English. What she found was that you can communicate some of the highest aspects astrophysics in Ebonics, but at the same time there are certain features within each of these language systems that are so unique to their experiences that they give you the contour or essence of something within their cultural understanding. Time, for example. The signature for time in Black American English is very unique, and it's an active sense of time, it's being within time. It's almost the way that people create jazz write music and perform music at once. The way that she said it, back then in American Standard English, was, "You've had that dress for a very long time," and black people would say, "You been had that dress," to have and to be at once. It's a major revolution in terms of language structure. In art there has to be something there, that crossroads at which people deal with the known and the unknown world, being and thinking about it, and again it comes back to that type of knowledge, that bedrock knowledge, that all black people—and I hate to create these broad sweeping categories, but it's something I feel on a very gut level—the music we listen to, the food we cook, the movement and sway of a mother's hips when she carries her child, which then gets imparted into the way she or he moves in the world, improvisation is in there. And improvisation is the moment that inspired this body of work.

THOMAS: What's next for you after this? And I remember after you brought this to each of us, I wondered why you felt very strongly, one, to use your artist friends, and two, how did you begin to select the specific artists friends that are in each painting?

WILEY: A lot of them are friends, and a lot of them are heroes, and a lot of them are both. What happens is you try to figure out who's in town, and so what you're looking at is a sort of indexical diary of my New York life, but then you also try to figure out what's impossible. There were certain artists that are known recluses who you want to go to anyway, and I had this idea of creating a type of wish list of possibilities. I thought to myself, "If you really take this project seriously, you should try to move in there for the jugular, and try to get the artists that make the most sense of a grouping. Does the group speak to itself?" Much like when you organize an exhibition of paintings, trying to figure out which painting hangs next to the other. It's not about one individual artist in the show; it's about how they all shine and gleam together. The group of artists that you see in this exhibition is not the entire list of artists that were asked or photographed. I consider this to be an ongoing process that necessarily must exist in an institution, one much larger than this gallery under its first iteration. But it's a provocation, it's the first spark of a fire that I think is going to be quite profound.

You know how each idea leads to another? This exhibition has been incredibly fruitful and fertile, and I can't tell you what my next step is, to answer your first question, because my job is to surprise myself and, to get back to one of our earlier conversation points, to make myself uncomfortable, to push myself into unknown territory, to give myself a moment to pull it together, have my little breakdowns behind closed doors, me and my boo telling me, "It's going be okay."

Fortin, Hugo. “Our picks from the 2017 AIPAD show,” *L’Oeil de La Photographie,* May 4, 2017.

Wall Street International

Kehinde Wiley

Sean Kelly is delighted to present Trickster, an exhibition of monumental new paintings by Kehinde Wiley. A departure from Wiley’s practice of painting anonymous sitters, these portraits include a select group of extraordinary contemporary artists—Derrick Adams, Sanford Biggers, Nick Cave, Rashid Johnson, Glenn Ligon, Kerry James Marshall, Wangechi Mutu, Yinka Shonibare, Mickalene Thomas, Hank Willis Thomas, Carrie Mae Weems, and Lynette Yiadom-Boakye. This will be Wiley’s second exhibition with the gallery and his first in the gallery’s new space. An opening reception will take place on Friday, May 5 from 6-8 pm. The artist will be present.

In Trickster, Wiley explores the range of ways that artists engage with and draw from the world around them. He employs the mythological trickster trope—existent in nearly every culture’s folklore—to not only examine how artists disrupt the status quo and change the way in which we think, but as a signifier of how people of color navigate both real and symbolic social boundaries inherent to their blackness. As Lewis Hyde wrote in the book Trickster Makes This World, “…boundary creation and boundary crossing are related to one another, and the best way to describe trickster is to say simply that the boundary is where he will be found—sometimes drawing the line, sometimes crossing it, sometimes erasing or moving it, but always there, the god of the threshold in all its forms.” Wiley views the artists portrayed—amongst the most important and influential of their generation—as having navigated, pushed and redefined boundaries to establish a new canon within the history of Western art.

Wiley, as is central to his practice, draws on the historically Eurocentric Western art canon as a point of departure for Trickster. Influenced by Goya’s infamous Black Paintings, a series of fourteen powerfully haunting murals, striking in both their dark subject matter and palette, Wiley has restricted his use of color and incorporated barren landscapes into these new canvases. Here, the field becomes a sepia shadow mirroring the subjects’ flesh and enveloping them in a darkness that could be interpreted as either menacing or embracing. The result is a dance between light and dark, perfection and imperfection, hero worship and human frailty.

Kehinde Wiley’s work has been the subject of numerous exhibitions worldwide and is in the permanent

collections of many museums including: the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the Studio Museum in Harlem; the Denver Art Museum; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; The Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; the High Museum, Atlanta; the Columbus Museum of Art; the Phoenix Art Museum; the Milwaukee Art Museum; the Jewish Museum, New York; and the Brooklyn Museum, New York. In 2015, Wiley was awarded the US State Department Medal of Arts from then Secretary of State John Kerry. That same year he was the subject of a mid-career survey exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum in New York, entitled A New Republic, which continues to travel the country and is currently on view at the Toledo Museum of Art in Toledo, Ohio.

Penman- Lomeli, Andrea. “Keehinde Wiley Exhibit Comes to Toledo,” *The Blade,* Februrary 15, 2017.

DETROIT METRO TIMES

Kehinde Wiley exhibit comes to Toledo

Courtesy photo.
Kehinde Wiley, "Shantavia Beale II."

Detroiters may likely already be familiar with fine artist Kehinde Wiley's work. His painting "Officer of the Hussars" hangs prominently in the hallway of the Contemporary Art section at the Detroit Institute of Arts. It features a young black man wearing jeans and Timbs, heroically holding a sword on the back of a galloping horse, all set against a backdrop that resembles an ornate rug. Wiley, who has quickly become one of our generation's most important contemporary artists, is known for portraits like that, placing black protagonists within settings that mimic the classic European paintings of the Old Masters.

A New Republic, a traveling exhibition of Wiley's work, opened Friday at the Toledo Museum of Art. The traveling exhibition includes 60 paintings, sculptures, and stained glass paintings drawn from Wiley's past 15 years of work.

The show is curated by Eugenie Tsai, the John and Barbara Vogelstein Curator of Contemporary Art at the Brooklyn Museum in New York, where it originally opened. Tsai tells *Metro Times* that the images show the sitters as empowered individuals, and gives them agency in their depiction.

"The mashup of cultural and art historical traditions in his work, the fluidity of gender, the exuberance of the colors and patterns suggests the possibility of an open and inclusive future," she says.

Wiley's work takes classic European forms — oil paintings, stained glass, and sculpture from the Renaissance, Baroque, and Romantic periods — and replaces the European noblemen and barons with black individuals he meets and recruits from the street in a process he calls "street casting." He has described his work as an "intervention," where once the wealthiest European men were depicted sitting on their thrones, Wiley places contemporary black individuals dressed in their everyday wear.

After graduating from Yale with a Master of Arts in 2000, Wiley moved to New York, where he became the artist-in-residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem. In New York, he re-examined his academic instruction, which for him meant both questioning the values he learned in the academy and going back to the basics — portraiture. His classically trained skills remained central to his practice, but he moved to different processes and subject matter, unlearning the Eurocentric aesthetic he had been inundated with in the academy, and in doing so, developing a collaborative relationship with his surroundings.

Central to his paintings is the experience of his models. He mines his urban landscape — both in the U.S. and, lately, internationally — for charismatic models and invites them into his studio to scour art books and choose poses. In asking strangers to participate, Wiley allows for a black public to be seen in these erstwhile exclusionary art forms and makes the paintings a reflection of their desires in representation.

Wiley challenges Eurocentrism while exploring modern notions of wealth, power, and status, pointing to a harrowing lack of black bodies in historical and cultural narratives. In an interview with NPR he says he wanted to better understand "this dissonance between the world that you know [as a black individual], and then what you mean as a symbol in public, that strange, uncanny feeling of having to adjust for ... this double consciousness."

Courtesy photo.
Kehinde Wiley, "Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps."

While the black identity is central to his critique of the art canon, he also challenges the spectacle of contemporary black masculinity. In fact, most of his earlier paintings exclusively feature men. He uses an urban visual vernacular to articulate masculinity in such a way as to present gender as fluid and moving, often feminizing men in his paintings with elaborate flower patterns and vivid colors.

The images unabashedly evoke glamour, excess, and wealth. High-contrast colors glimmering over lush, intricate patterns are the backgrounds for ornate gold furniture and individuals in languid poses. With many of the paintings measuring an overwhelming 9 feet tall, the scale also adds drama to the paintings. Always juxtaposing the regal with the quotidian, Wiley uses the visual vocabulary of a pre-1800 European aristocracy with signs and symbols of contemporary black America to create a new, visually compelling aesthetic language.

The exhibit moves from his earliest oil painting portraits of male figures, into his Old Master portraiture and then his later explorations of sculpture — bronze portrait busts and stained glass "painting" and iconography — yet always affirming his firm focus on the black and brown bodies he depicts.

This show marks somewhat of a halfway point in his career, beginning with Wiley's work at the Studio Museum, but perhaps comes at a decisive moment. Tsai believes "his work offers a bit of hope at this moment of political change."

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“The Portraits of Kehinde Wiley.” *Boat,* August 2, 2016.

boat

The Portraits of Kehinde Wiley

We had the pleasure of speaking with Los Angeles-native, Brooklyn-based artist Kehinde Wiley. We talk about the portraits he’s become famous for of black men and women from around the world painted in the visual language of classic European portraiture. We talk about race and identity, when art feels uncomfortable, and escaping to his Beijing studio on a lake.

It’s been a difficult year to enjoy art or reading or anything else that stands simply for beauty without our social and cultural filters on. A painting isn’t just a painting, a novel just a story, or a song simply a good tune. Not this year. Our filters go everywhere we go. They can’t be checked at the door, or left out of a conversation. When we feel confronted, and damn 2016 has confrontation on lock, our emotions are heightened and our heels dig in. We’ve been forced to define our position on that, our thoughts on this, who gets our vote, what gets our tears, where to direct our white-hot anger. There’s a lot on the line right now, and it can feel scary as hell.

Kehinde Wiley is an artist whose paintings meet us right where we’re at, right now. His portraits blur boundaries between traditional and contemporary, opulence and street, heroic and everyday, the powerful and the powerless. His subjects – black and brown men and women from around the world – are not dignitaries or heirs to great fortunes, but regular people he finds on the street. Starting with Harlem, then reaching abroad to Lagos, Haiti, Jamaica, China and beyond, Wiley takes his subjects from the street and paints them into palaces – still wearing their Timberlands, track pants and tank tops. The results are provocative, jarring and confrontational. Here, your filters are welcome, necessary even, because Wiley’s work speaks directly to them.

Kehinde Wiley was born and raised in South Central Los Angeles and throughout his childhood, his strong-willed mother stayed focused on getting him and his siblings “out of the hood.” Enrolling Wiley in weekend art classes, she set off his lifelong love of art, his exploration into identity and race and their representation in our culture, and eventually his career as a painter. Wiley talks about being his own first muse – that as a kid he’d wanted to go into a museum and identify with the subjects in the paintings on the walls, but was never able to. Revering the masters and their technical ability, something was always missing in his personal connection to the work: Apart from Kerry James Marshall’s grand barbershop painting at LACMA, the subjects were always white. Now, the larger than life portraits he’s become famous for these days not only fill that gap, but comment on it, too.

It takes courage and audacity to challenge, through art, our cultural fabric that was woven for us so long ago. Wiley’s art not only challenges the notion of who we celebrate and who gets immortalized on our museum walls, but he paints those who have been left out right into the picture.

At what point did you know art was going to be your life?

I would say that I came into this with no choice. I really began studying and practicing it at such a young age that it became quickly one of the few things that I could do better than anything else. I think it inspired a level of self worth and a sense of adventure and identity that allowed for it to become the most important thing in my life. There is a key tipping point. There's the place at which it becomes more than just a hobby and I think that had to do with once I began formally studying outside of just the weekend classes that my mom sent me to, but actually going to the Los Angeles County High School for the Arts and really taking it on as an identity.

You are meticulous with skin tones, it's obvious how much work you put into perfecting them. You're also very careful to say "black and brown" when speaking of your subjects. I wondered if you could expand on that a little? I know it's partly the technicality of your work, but it also has a really important message for us right now.

So much of what my work is is an investigation around the myths of race and the invention of race, and race as a figure in so much of our everyday lives. I'm pointing to something that exists and that has very strong consequences for someone like myself growing up in a highly racialized environment, but I'm also pointing to a lot of the broader, global looking and searching and seeing that goes on in my work. I began the work by investigating the construction of the type of black masculinity in the streets of Harlem in the early 2000's, but quickly began working internationally, recognizing that what functions as a type of marker for social and economic truth has no real legitimate claim to actuality. What's the difference between a young man in the streets of Dakar and a young man in the streets of Durban, South Africa? Those senses of identity are so radically vast yet we somehow seem to boil everything down to a sense of black or white or brown. I think that, in the end, what we have is a multifaceted reality that we all have to come to terms with.

I have found that to be true through all of my travels with Boat Magazine as well. The categories are so broad: "American" or "Asian" or whatever. But even just within the city of Los Angeles, experiences are so vastly different. Is your project "The World Stage" ongoing? Are you still working on that?

It's such a key part of my practice and how I have evolved as an artist. I'm tempted to say that it's bearing witness to the evolution of culture globally and is something that I'm hopefully going to be doing for many years. Whether or not it will be under the heading of The World Stage, perhaps not. I do think that once you've been bitten by the ability to see in so many different perspectives and be able to learn from your work as much as I have, you can't help but to want to go back out there.

Which of the places that you've worked in has really stood out to you personally?

I currently have studios in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, and Beijing, and most recently in Dakar, Senegal. I think as a work environment, New York is easily one of the most dynamic places. I think often what you need as an artist is to conversely get away from activity, to disappear into places where you're simply allowed to paint without having a lot of social obligations that New York is known for. In that sense, I really look forward to my time in Beijing. It's a very different pace. It's a small studio on the outskirts of town, on a small lake where we can pull away and become something else.

I think of all of your portraits from The World Stage project, the ones from China might be my favorite collection.

What really resonates for me about that has to do with the propaganda posters that came out during the cultural revolution and that strange juxtaposition between all of these Black American bodies and all of this very uncomfortable and inaccurate creation of a type of optimism that served the government at the time. I think what is revealed are cracks in the identity of both of those two stories. Both the unreality that came out of the cultural revolution and of course the forced type of masculinity that's being undermined by those sort of ridiculous smiles.

Working in different places around the world and working within the story of race, how much do you feel like we should protect and preserve the borders around what makes us different? How important is individual identity when yours is the lesser-protected and lesser-celebrated one?

My work doesn't answer any questions. I think at its best what it does is it points to a lot of the conflict that you're pointing to. I think that at its best it elucidates the complexity of identity and the constant need for labeling and the constant ridiculous notion that labeling puts forth. The freedom that artists point to or the freedom that I want to discuss in my work is a type of impossibility. The sense in which you go to art school … Let's say my own experience, being at Yale, being one of those kids who wants to be able to create a new vocabulary in paint as every young artist wants to. Then of course the very real sense in which you as a creator exists within a historical narrative. A fixed sense in which whatever it is that you're doing is always going to be the product of an American artist, the product of a male artist, a product of a black artist. You're fixed in terms of identity that is impossible to shed.

What my work tends to do is to try to paint outside of those lines knowing exactly that it is impossible to do so. What you arrive at is a type of sadness that surrounds the work, but also a type of optimism and warmth.

In many of your portraits, it feels like your subjects are unsure of what their next step is going to be. There's sort of like, "I'm here. I'm out front. Right now I'm strong, but I'm not quite sure what's going to happen next."

Oh sure. There's something wildly uncomfortable about the work in a sense that what you're borrowing from is a type of body language and posturing from privilege that existed hundreds of years ago. Privilege whose use and exchange value doesn't carry the same currency as it once had. It's vacuum-sealed into an impossibly-far and distant path, but what we're pointing to and its consequences is very real and lived everyday. The consequences that you see in the streets of Congo and in the streets of Nigeria, all of those very powerful, proud, erect male figures that you're seeing in those paintings. Sure, they don't exist any longer, but the consequences to colonial action is alive and well.
Are the models becoming that powerful? Of course not. There is no redemption in those terms in the paintings. I don't think that was ever the design or the desire of these projects. I think the desire was to point to a need for a radical shift. Point to a desire to see people in an appropriate or accurate context, and yet conversely, the feeling of how daunting it is to imagine an actuality or a vocabulary that exists in the 21st century that can exist on its own without pointing towards the past. I think that's where the rub is.

And where in that does your stained glass work come in?

Well, the stained glass is, first and foremost, pure light. Figurative painting or representational painting at its best is always been about the capturing of light as it bounces off of the world and into our optic nerves. If you can really distill paintings down to it's most essential pursuits, it's about the mastery of light. To that extent, I began really looking at stained glass as the ultimate depiction of the mastery of figure making. It doesn't hurt also that it's tied quite tightly to the language of the sacred, and so much of my work is that intersection between the sacred and the profane. The language of the street and the language of the ivory tower. Just in terms of the physical example, the stained glass embodies in one fell swoop so many of my concerns.
It's really tough to find very many artists who've actually moved in this direction. Part of it is the material challenges of working in stained glass. But also it's sort of not cool. There's something very throwback about it. Because of its kitsch nature, I was actually drawn to it for that reason.

Three Boys, 2013, Oil on Canvas 92 x 92in

Two Heroic Sisters of the Grassland, 2011, Oil on canvas 96 x 84in

Terence Nance III, 2011, Oil on canvas 28 x 21.5in

Princess Victoire of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, 2012, Oil on linen 96 x 72in

The Tribute Money, 2011, Oil on canvas 78 x 72in

Support the Rural Population and Serve 500 Million Peasants, 2007, oil and enamel on canvas 72 x 60in

Carry out the Four Modernisations of the Fatherland, 2007 oil on canvas 96 x 72in

The Two Sisters, 2012, Oil on linen 96 x 72in

Duc d’Arenberg (Duke of Arenberg), 2011, Oil on canvas 108.25 x 90.5in

Portrait of Dyouany Beretie Verly, 2014, Oil on linen 36 x 28in

Stained Glass works: (Left) Arms of Nicolaas Ruterius, Bishop of Arras, 2014 Stained glass 54 x 36.5in. (Right) Saint Remi, 2014, Stained glass 96 x 43.5in

“Kehinde Wiley and His Subjects.” *Antiques and the Arts Weekly*, August 2, 2016.

ANTIQUES
And The Arts Weekly

Kehinde Wiley And His Subjects

RICHMOND, VA. — Kehinde Wiley has endeared the art world with his modern interpretations of old master portraits using contemporary African American subjects. Watch Wiley as he talks about his method for “street casting,” or the process of choosing subjects for his paintings from public spaces. “Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic” is a 60-work retrospective at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. The exhibition is on through September 5. For more information, www.vmfa.museum.

Noor, Tausif. “Hymn of the Republic: The Measure of Kehinde Wiley in the American South.” July 13, 2016.

MOMUS

Battle Hymn of the Republic: The Measure of Kehinde Wiley in the American South

Kehinde Wiley, "Two Heroic Sisters of the Grassland," 2011.

Though history is said to have been written by the victors, one might be forgiven for casting doubt on this particular adage in Richmond, Virginia. The former capital of the Confederate States of America and the current capital of its state, Richmond is littered with monuments that lionize the usual suspects – Robert E. Lee, Jefferson Davis, Stonewall Jackson – alongside lesser-known local heroes, such as Confederate J.E.B. Stuart. It’s on this palimpsest that the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts rests, with a collection that boasts the likes of Matisse and Modigliani. Prior to the opening of the museum in 1936, the grounds housed a residential complex, complete with a chapel, for destitute Confederate veterans of the Civil War. Amidst this backdrop of Southern gentility and patriotism, contemporary black art takes on a unique verve that sheds light on the narrative of history and its traces in American life today.

Four-score and a few months after its inaugural opening, the VMFA is hosting one of the most celebrated black artists of our time. Kehinde Wiley’s mid-career survey (grandly titled a “retrospective” for the 39-year-old), A New Republic, whose previous iteration at the Brooklyn Museum in 2015 sparked controversy (even its criticism received criticism), claims its hold in the South. The exhibition is slated to travel to four more museums in America, and each one comes with its attendant challenges. For the VMFA, the issue arrives in a question of how race, narrative, and history coalesce and collapse within its particular exhibition space. Wiley’s show presents the opportunity to consider how institutions must juggle their own pasts alongside increasing attempts toward diverse representation.

Wiley is, of course, no stranger to history. The Yale MFA-educated artist rose to dizzying acclaim for massive portraits of black male youth standing in for the subjects of Old Master paintings. Cast from the streets of Harlem during Wiley's residency at the Studio Museum in 2001, the men were asked to select a historical painting, largely Baroque and Renaissance, to mimic or "inhabit." The result is a shifting of the canon, a postcolonial nod to the absence of black figures in the long history of portraiture. The transparency and straightforward legibility of Wiley's methodology, however, often flattens the complexity of his subjects, resulting in paintings that limit critical imagination, rather than extend it. Wiley's revisionist history is, as Eugenie Tsai, curator of contemporary art at the Brooklyn Museum, notes in her introduction to the catalogue, "corrective, even utopian," insofar that he critiques a Eurocentric approach to art history and centers, instead, on its outskirts. These peripheries take on a global scale in his series The World Stage, for which Wiley took his street-casting practice from Harlem to more far-flung locales including China, Brazil, Senegal, Nigeria, Israel, India, and most recently, Haiti and Cuba. Though he extends the scope of the project, Wiley maintains the signature style of his previous series: large canvases, ornate frames, and mostly black male subjects.

Truly, it's difficult to fully commit to the idea that Wiley's grand historical paintings are indeed corrective in themselves. The intricate backgrounds offset the subjects to flatly echo grandeur, power, wealth – but the disparity between the subjects and their staged settings prevents our ability to suspend disbelief. As Chloe Wyma notes, the source paintings into which Wiley inserts his urban subjects are too far in the past to convincingly comment on the subjectivity of black males in contemporary America – and even less so of those in the various nations that inspired The World Stage. His subjects are simply figures ensconced in fictive spaces that are republics unto themselves, stripped of context and history, distanced from the viewer in their frames. This is Wiley's ultimate shortcoming: by leaning on the trappings of historical portraiture and contemporary pastiche, he traps his subjects into flattened visual shorthand for urbanism. Their subjectivities are defined by negation, to their opposition to the luxurious backgrounds and the historical context of their source paintings, stripping them of the very power and autonomy which he claims to imbue them with.

Wiley's consideration for power and history, however, does lend itself to curatorial experimentation. In an effort to encourage visitors to view the museum's larger collection in addition to Wiley's spectacle-laden oeuvre, Sarah Eckhardt, curator of contemporary art at the VMFA, provides visitors with references to works in the museum's collection that are of the same time period and style as the source paintings from Wiley's portraits. For the ordinary visitor, Eckhardt notes, it is "difficult to understand that conversation he's having not only in the exhibition but in just one work, and this gave us a chance to help people understand." Walking through the collection, it's easy to see where the historical quotations can make sense; the museum boasts African cloths from Ghana, large Rococo and Baroque portraits, and Indian miniatures – all germane to Wiley's machinations.

More difficult to draw from the museum's collection is the connection to black representation in Virginia's Confederate past – and perhaps, this is the point. The disconnect between the references to grand European portraiture and the more humble portraits of antebellum America sets in place a basis for contemplating the historical context of Richmond as it pertains to contemporary black art. Jefferson Gauntt's portrait of Violet Anthony from 1832 is the most direct and relevant comparison. Violet, known colloquially as "Miss Turner's old slave Violet," was one of the last slaves in Philadelphia, a northern city in which slavery was legal until 1847. Identifiable as West Indian by her coral necklace, Anthony's face is lined and wrinkled, her features and comportment given an attention to detail that is comparable to the sculptural quality of many of Wiley's subjects. The museum's contemporary collection, however, holds a more confrontational address to its provenance: Sonya Clark's 2010 work Black Hair Flag weaves thread in the form of Bantu knots and cornrows through a Confederate flag, tying together the complex histories of a black subjectivity and a nation that would flatly deny its presence. Clark's work, much like the work of her contemporaries Kara Walker and Sanford Biggers, engages the history of black subjects as the history of America, drawing upon the history of slavery to indicate that American nationhood itself is contingent upon the remembrance of black lives.

Wiley's parallel to Clark can be found in his early work, before he fell to the pomp and grandeur of his more commercially viable painting. Conspicuous Fraud #1 (2001) presents the viewer with a black man in a business suit, set against an aqua background, whose thick, knotted hair springs from his head and

billows across the canvas like clouds in a gesture that suggests a boundlessness betraying the limits of a body. These earlier works tap into a nuanced understanding of black life in contemporary America, and none does so more poignantly than Mugshot Study (2006). Taken directly from a crumpled mug shot that Wiley found littered in Harlem, the painting is an exercise in precision and more importantly, in compassion. Much commentary has been passed on Wiley's subversion of hyper-masculine stereotypes of the black male, particularly regarding their depictions against flowery, effeminate floral patterns. But the subject of Mugshot Study achieves a softness that the historical pastiches do not because they are stripped of the gaudy ephemera to reveal, plainly and quietly, what his more recent portraits seem to lack: an empathic speculation of an inner life.

In 1993, the Commonwealth of Virginia agreed to lease the chapel on the grounds of the VMFA to the Sons of Confederate Veterans, who proudly flew the southern cross atop its cupola. When the lease was renewed in 2010, the museum stipulated that the flag be removed from the chapel, prompting a group of zealous Confederate sympathizers to protest on the sidewalk along the museum (they are forbidden from doing so on the actual grounds) with astonishing regularity, every Saturday since at least 2011.

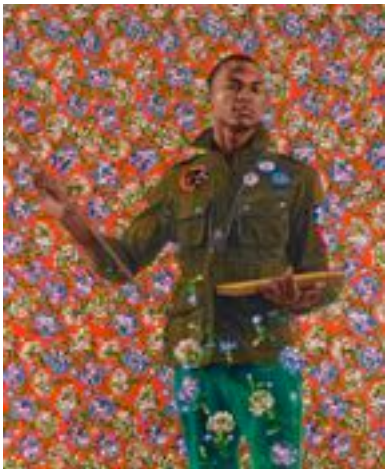
It was on a warm Saturday afternoon that I saw these protesters – aptly dubbed the Virginia Flaggers – while I stood inside the second floor of the museum, having just exited the Wiley exhibition. It was at once jarring and eerily familiar, which is the way history usually functions, in this republic, and in those to come.

Kehinde Wiley, "Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps," 2005.

Kehinde Wiley, "Saint Remi," 2014. Courtesy of Galerie Daniel Templon. © Kehinde Wiley.

Kehinde Wiley. "The Sisters Zénaïde and Charlotte Bonaparte," 2014. © Kehinde Wiley. Photo: Robert Wedemeyer, courtesy of Roberts & Tilton.

Kehinde Wiley, "Shantavia Beale II," 2012. Photo: Jason Wyche. Courtesy of Sean Kelly.



Kehinde Wiley, "Anthony of Padua," 2013. © Kehinde Wiley. Photo: Max Yawney, courtesy of Roberts & Tilton.

Kehinde Wiley, "Willem van Heythuysen," 2005. Photo: Katherine Wetzel.

Erickson, Mark St. John. “Hip-hop collides with Old Masters in Virginia Museum of Fine Arts exhibit.” *Daily Press*, July 2, 2016.

Daily Press

Hip-hop collides with Old Masters in Virginia Museum of Fine Arts exhibit

When the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts purchased Kehinde Wiley's provocative portrait of a young black man posing with a sword in 2006, he was already attracting attention.

Though only five years removed from receiving his master's degree at Yale, his large and arresting mashups of hip-hop culture and the centuries-old tradition of Old Master portraiture triggered national praise when the Brooklyn Museum staged his first solo museum exhibit in 2004.

A year later, he pushed his unlikely fusion of visual sources to spectacular new heights, filling a New York gallery with monumental paintings that appropriated equestrian icons from such renowned Baroque artists as Velazquez and Rubens, then swapped their subjects for young, streetwise African-American men who sported imperious gazes and such archetypal urban fashion wear as hoodies and warm-up pants.

So arresting was the VMFA's portrait — which depicted a handsome, even princely young black man with an imposing blade and the commanding, if nearly 400-year-old, pose of a wealthy Dutch merchant — that viewers stopped in their tracks.

Kehinde Wiley's monumental 2005 canvas "Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps" is one of 55 works on view at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in "Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic." It meshes the traditions of Old Master portraiture with contemporary urban street culture.
Courtesy of the Collection of Suzi and Andrew B. Cohen

Kehinde Wiley, "Morpheus," 2008
Courtesy of Roberts & Tilton, Culver City, California; Sean Kelly, New York; Galerie Daniel Templon, Paris; and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London

Kehinde Wiley, "Two Heroic Sisters of the Grassland," 2011
Courtesy of the Hort Family Collection

Kehinde Wiley, "The Sisters Zénaïde and Charlotte Bonaparte," 2014
Courtesy of Roberts & Tilton, Culver City, California

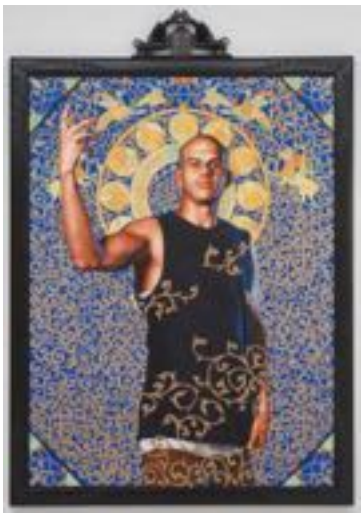
Kehinde Wiley, "Saint Remi," 2014
Courtesy of Courtesy of Galerie Daniel Templon, Paris

Kehinde Wiley, "Arms of Nicolas Ruterius, Bishop of Arras," 2014
Courtesy of Galerie Daniel Templon, Paris

Kehinde Wiley, "Anthony of Padua," 2013
Courtesy of the Seattle Art Museum

Kehinde Wiley, "Shantavia Beale II," 2012
Courtesy of the Collection of Ana and Lenny Gravier

Kehinde Wiley, "The Two Sisters," 2012
Courtesy of Sean Kelly, New York



Kehinde Wiley, "Leviathan Zodiac," 2011
Courtesy of the Collection of Blake Byrne, Los Angeles

Kehinde Wiley, "Colonel Platoff on His Charger," 2007-8
Courtesy of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth

Three small portraits modeled after the paintings of 15th-century Flemish master Hans Memling are among the 55 works on view at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in "Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic."
Mark St. John Erickson / Daily Press

Kehinde Wiley, "Houdon Paul-Louis," 2011
Courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum

Kehinde Wiley, "Willem van Heythuysen," 2006
Copyright Kehinde Wiley/Courtesy of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

Kehinde Wiley, "Support the Rural Population and Serve 500 Million Peasants," 2007
Courtesy of 21C Museum, Louisville, Kentucky

Noe-Payne, Mallory and Chioke L'Anson. "Virginia's Fine Arts Museum Puts 'Blackness' Center-Stage, with Kehinde Wiley." *WWTF Public Radio*, June 12, 2016.

Virginia's Fine Arts Museum Puts 'Blackness' Center-Stage, with Kehinde Wiley

Kehinde Wiley's "Napolean Leading the Army over the Alps" at the Virginia Museum of Fine Art's newest special exhibit.

Virginia's Museum of Fine Arts unveiled its newest exhibit this weekend. It's a big get for the VMFA. The museum is one of only 7 stops for this particular collection, and the only in the southeast.

But it's special for another reason. The display is a mid-career retrospective from artist Kehinde Wiley, a young black man who's a pop star of the art world. The exhibit represents an effort by the museum to diversify both its collection, and its audience.

Standing with Sarah Eckhardt, a curator at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, we crane our heads to look up at a monumentally scaled painting. While we stare, Eckhardt describes not the painting we're looking at, but one originally done by a French artist in the early 1800's.

"So you had Napoleon in his French military uniform on a large rearing horse, on some rocks and they're literally crossing the Alps, going over the Alps," says Eckhardt.

The painting we're standing in front of, in its 15-foot gilded frame, is similar -- but with some important differences. First, this painting's background is bold, vibrant and red, covered in an ornate gold stencil.

Second, it wasn't painted by a European Old Master, but by Kehinde Wiley, a 38-year-old artist from Los Angeles.

Most importantly, though, Napoleon isn't riding the horse in this painting. A black man is.

"And that brings up all kinds of questions about who in history is represented, how they get represented," Eckhardt says. "And who makes the images? And how they make it."

Wiley takes paintings that you'd find on the walls of Versailles or in Roman museums and replaces the subjects with his own models. He finds his models on the street. People he just likes the look of.

“Then he asks them to come back to his studio and to wear what they want to wear to represent themselves,” Eckhardt says. “Then, in a very collaborative process, they look through art history paintings and pick a painting as a source. And typically a number of them are really masterpiece paintings, well known paintings.”

Wiley aims for his pieces to be provocative, challenging people’s assumptions about what belongs in a fine arts museum.

“For many viewers it’s kind of uncanny to see blackness on walls like this, it’s shocking,” says Wiley. “Whereas for others, it’s not the blackness that’s shocking, it’s the context.”

Around the country, the average patron of a fine arts museum is middle-aged, white and female. The membership at Virginia’s Museum of Fine Arts is no different. But administrators here are trying to change that, beginning with the artwork.

“We have one of the very best collections of African Art in the country, but also African-American art,” says Alex Nyerges, Director of the VMFA. “It’s an area where I’d say we are pretty respectable, but we’re going to do so much better.”

During a press preview of the Wiley exhibit, Nyerges restated the museum’s commitment to attracting a broader audience, pointing to events like African-American family day.

“It’s all about relating to our audience, which is all of us and all of the other folks in central Virginia, and for that matter across the Commonwealth,” Nyerges says. “And it’s the ability for us to be able to connect, everyday.”

The VMFA is hoping that for many Virginians, connecting can be as simple as seeing themselves in the art.

The Kehinde Wiley exhibit will be up at the VMFA in Richmond through September.

Baxter, Paige. “Kehinde Wiley Exhibit ‘Wows’ at the VMFA.” *Boomer*, June 9, 2016.

BOOMER

Kehinde Wiley Exhibit 'Wows' at the VMFA

You might just be wowed at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts’ (VMFA) newest exhibit.

That’s what VMFA Director Alex Nyerges told dozens of media representatives at a sneak peak of the “Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic” exhibit June 8.

“No matter what you have imagined or thought about, I can promise you one thing –you will be wowed,” Nyerges said.

This impressive exhibit, with approximately 60 pieces, features paintings, sculptures and stained glass. New York-based artist Wiley uses his art to raise questions about race and gender by conveying those important topics, using African-American men and women in the forefront of traditional European artworks – instead of the usual Caucasian suspects – thus pointing out the lack of blacks in many art forms.

Wiley began exploring the juxtaposition of blacks and traditional European art by bringing young African-American males to his studio, taking photos of the young men and chosen classical art, replacing the aristocrats – such as Napoleon leading his army over the Alps – with everyday subjects. He later expanded his works to include a more worldwide scope as well as adding African-American women.

The Brooklyn Museum created and shared the exhibit, which runs from June 11 until Sept. 5 at the VMFA. Prior to the exhibit coming to Richmond, it was also shown in Fort Worth and Seattle. Richmond’s VMFA is the only location south of New York and east of Texas where people can see the exhibit.

“For folks that are going miss it, are going to miss something really important,” he added.

Everyone will have a chance to be "wowed" June 11 at the VMFA's family day from 11 a.m.-3 p.m. All attendees can get into the exhibit for free that day.

After visitors witness the Wiley’s art, they’ll end up at an interactive “art lounge,” where they can learn more about the artist. VMFA staff also hope it’ll extend the visitor’s experience past the art on the walls.

After all, art is meant to change lives, not just to provide a pleasurable but fleeting experience.

“Kehinde Wiley show at Seattle Art Museum,” *Examiner,* March 31, 2016.

examiner.com

Kehinde Wiley show at Seattle Art Museum

The first thing to say about the Seattle Art Museum's current show, "Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic," is that the work is monumental with paintings on a giant, much larger than life scale. The second thing to note is that Wiley has taken an original and politically/socially significant approach by placing African American models in the poses and sometimes the actual backdrops of historical paintings that traditionally featured white upper-class figures or saints, paintings that celebrated their status. Then he has surrounded this reconfiguration with "wallpaper" backdrops of repetitive flowers and swirls.

Male models are presented in the clothes they chose for their portraits, everything from camouflage khakis to sports jerseys, outfits that contrast sharply with their roles in the historical paintings, for example, a general on his rearing horse. For the female models, Wiley hired a designer to create elegant Grecian style gowns, plus a hair dresser to design wigs that tower into intricate chandeliers.

Two of the most interesting rooms place these men in the poses of saints in gold leaf frames or stained glass. Here, the faces take on more individuality than in some of the giant paintings where the expressions hold a similar haughty aloofness.

Visitors should be sure to allow enough time to view the accompanying film (approximately 30 minutes long) before viewing the actual exhibit, as they will learn much about Wiley's intent and his mode of soliciting models off the street, as well as enjoying the reaction of the women to their finished portraits. The film may also raise some questions in the viewers' minds. For example, why are those intricate and tedious "wallpaper" backgrounds all painted by young Chinese artists in a warehouse studio in Beijing instead of by Wiley? And why, when his intent is to call attention to and elevate the status of African Americans, does it appear that almost all his professional staff, except his barber and tailor, are white?

Clemans, Gayle. “The stunning and subversive pageantry of artist Kehinde Wiley,” *The Seattle Times*, February 17, 2016.

The Seattle Times

The stunning and subversive pageantry of artist Kehinde Wiley

Kehinde Wiley by his work “Morpheus,” 2008, at Seattle Art Museum (Ken Lambert/The Seattle Times)

Seattle Art Museum says “A New Republic” by artist Kehinde Wiley — who substitutes people of color in paintings styled after European saints and aristocrats — drew a record-breaking 2,800 people to its opening-day celebration.

A young man stares out of a painting, as if assessing us assessing him. Kehinde Wiley, one of the most significant living American artists, paid careful attention to his baseball cap, dyed blonde hair and glowing brown skin — all of which practically vibrate against a stylized background of tropical flowers.

Like most of Wiley’s subjects, the young man (Randerson Romualdo Cordeiro, a favela-dweller in Brazil) was “street cast” — approached by the artist and his assistants to ask if he would pose for photographs which might be transformed into one of Wiley’s wildly popular, beautifully crafted paintings.

Of course, Wiley doesn’t portray just anybody. For more than 10 years, Wiley has selected attractive people of color — mostly young men and, more recently, women — in a critical maneuver to explore, in his words, “how black identity is constructed, consumed and manufactured.”

Footage of these street-casting encounters, and the resulting oil paintings and sculptures, are now on view in a stunning exhibition at Seattle Art Museum, the show’s only stop on the West Coast.

Organized by the Brooklyn Museum, the grand and celebratory exhibition carries the hallmarks of a retrospective, despite the fact that Wiley isn’t even 40.

Wiley is prolific and widely collected, and there are pieces I wish were included here. “Sleep,” for example, a large horizontal painting of a sheet-draped, reclining man, would have bolstered the theme of the martyred, eroticized male body.

But “A New Republic” is spectacular, in every sense of the word. SAM spokesperson Rachel Eggers reported record-breaking attendance during the opening-day celebration, with more than 2,800 people streaming through the doors.

As you wander through the galleries, pulled from huge painting to huge painting, the faces of people of color gaze at you, larger than life and embedded in overtly artificial, brightly patterned backgrounds. And therein lies Wiley’s genius. These paintings — and the more recent sculptures — invite us to forge relationships with the figures while forcing us to contemplate artifice, posturing and cultural constructs.

And that’s not all.

Wiley asks us to think about biases in the art-historical canon and pop culture, as well as issues of race, class, gender and sexual orientation. He fuses awkwardness with elegance, intimacy with spectacle.

Wiley’s work resonates within the current resurgence of black activism, and themes of sacrifice and sainthood can be traced through Wiley’s jewel-like altarpieces and backlit, stained-glass windows. Visitors to the exhibition have posted to social media with the hashtag “#BlackArtMatters.”

In his best-known works, such as “Saint George and the Dragon,” Wiley deftly toys with European masterpieces, replacing the white men who commissioned portraits of themselves with the black men Wiley approaches on the street. It’s not so much a reversal of art history as a strategic appropriation.

Wiley has his critics. In a 2015 New York Times review, critic Roberta Smith wrote, “his often thin, indifferently worked surfaces can leave something to be desired as paintings.” But this misses the mark.

Wiley renders realistically familiar portraits while highlighting the artificiality of image-making. Yes, his forms are often flatter, the colors more high-keyed than the originals. They’re meant to be.

“A New Republic” shows Wiley increasingly playing with his own art. His recent paintings and sculptures of women circle back to his early interest in hair as a marker of black identity.

In an effort to disrupt the disaster narrative in Haiti, Wiley broadcast open calls on posters and the radio, asking women if they thought they represented “the face of Haiti.” Hundreds lined up for his contrived beauty pageants, complete with prizes.

Pageantry is integral to Wiley’s work, from the pageant of the sidewalk to the grand, historicizing display of paintings. Wiley invites us all, with people of color as the guests of honor.

Wiley’s bronze sculpture “Bound,” 2014 (Ken Lambert/The Seattle Times)

Artist Kehinde Wiley at Seattle Art Museum (Ken Lambert/The Seattle Times)

Wiley in front of some of his backlit, stained-glass windows at Seattle Art Museum for his show “A New Republic” (Ken Lambert/The Seattle Times)

Kehinde Wiley discusses becoming an artist, learning how to paint black skin and representing people of color in a stereo-typically white institution. (Ken Lambert & Katie G. Cotterill / The Seattle Times)

Lansroth, Bob. “A New Republic by Celebrated Kehinde Wiley Now at Seattle Museum of Art,” *Widewalls*, January 2016.

WIDEWALLS

A NEW REPUBLIC BY CELEBRATED KEHINDE WILEY NOW AT SEATTLE MUSEUM OF ART

A New Republic may sound like a name of a Star Wars sequel, but it is actually the title of Kehinde Wiley’s latest exhibition coming to the Seattle Art Museum. Approximately 60 works of one of the most leading contemporary artists of America are to be shown as an overview of the artist’s prolific 14-year career. Paintings, sculptures, videos, and stained glass windows comprise the show which will display Wiley’s powerful and poignant art. His signature work features urban black and brown men displayed in a visual rhetoric of a heroic, powerful, majestic and sublime context. Wiley’s painting style is often compared to that of the traditional portraitists, making him a contemporary descendant of great artists such as Gainsborough, Reynolds, Titian, Ingres and others…

Recasting Photographic Studies in the Style of Traditional History Painting

Even though Kehinde Wiley’s name is often mentioned in the context of the traditional portraitists, make no mistake, his larger-than-life figures disturb and interrupt tropes of portrait painting. The ambiguity and provocative narrative perplex the viewer and instantly call for attention. It was in the early 2000s, during a residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem, when Wiley found inspiration in the assertive and self-empowered young men of the neighborhood. By allowing the subjects to dress themselves and giving them the liberty to strike a pose and in a way they would like to be seen, the artist only accompanies their original notion and further broadens the idea. In a process of recasting the photographic studies in the style of traditional history painting, the images enter a completely different sphere of perception and gain an abrupt effect which shocks and bemuses. The juxtaposed notions between the subjects and the traditional style clash and intertwine as the viewer tries to comprehend the unorthodox image. Later on, as Wiley’s practice grew, he began including models found in urban landscapes throughout the world, including people from Dakar, Senegal, Haiti, Rio de Janeiro and other

locations. Maintaining his original approach, the artist continues to explore the discourse that is at once visceral and cerebral in scope.

Juxtaposed Notions of Contemporary and Modern Subjects with Traditional Themes

A New Republic shows the artist's progression as he developed his work in various mediums and further broadened his explorations of race, gender, sexual innuendo and the politics of representation. A selection of works from Wiley's ongoing World Stage project will be featured in the exhibition. The interesting series explores the commonalities found across nations and cultures with a history of colonialism and diverse populations. Kehinde Wiley also explored the questions of who owns the symbolic imagery of power, as seen in his works from the Memling series. These paintings are smaller in scale, depicting young black men in contemporary street styles, reflecting the works of 15th-century Flemish painter Hans Memling who portrayed influential men from the merchant class. An Economy of Grace is another series on display at the show, where Wiley turned his attention to black women, using the same process of street casting and photographic studies. However, this time the subjects were not able to select their own clothes, but were instead adorned in gowns inspired by Old Master paintings, reimagined by Givenchy's Ricardo Tisci who collaborated closely with the artist.

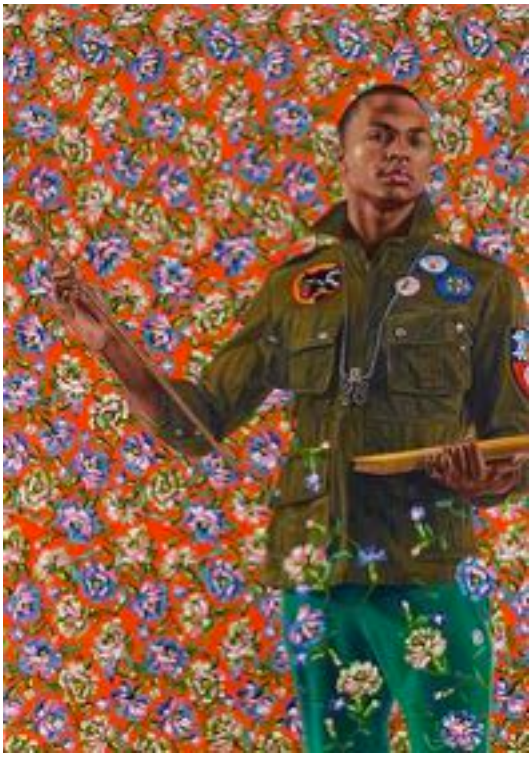
A New Republic Exhibition by Kehinde Wiley at Seattle Museum of Art

Stained glass pieces will be displayed as an installation part of the show. The atmospheric visual of the medium evokes contemplation and reverence, reminding the viewer of the church's power. Kehinde Wiley does not shy away from the complicated socio-political histories relevant to the world, instead, his art tackles these subjects in a completely fresh, engaging and inspiring way. With the ever-going discourse of racial issues in our society, the American artist provides a modern approach to the controversial themes, awakening complex issues that many would prefer remain mute. A New Republic exhibition by Kehinde Wiley is on view February 11 – May 8, 2016, at the Seattle Art Museum. Grab a chance to see the artist as he will travel to Seattle for the grand opening celebration on Thursday, February 11, 2016.

All images as credited.

Featured images: Kehinde Wiley – Morpheus, 2008, Courtesy of Roberts & Tilton, Culver City, California; Sean Kelly, New York; Galerie Daniel Templon, Paris; and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. © Kehinde Wiley; Kehinde Wiley – Saint George and the Dragon, 2015, © Kehinde Wiley. Used by permission. Photo by Max Yawney; Kehinde Wiley – Colonel Platoff on His Charger, 2007–8, Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth; Gift of the Director's Council and Museum purchase, 2008. © Kehinde Wiley.

Kehinde Wiley – Arms of Nicolas Ruterius, Bishop of Arras, 2014, Courtesy of Galerie Daniel Templon, Paris.



Kehinde Wiley – Anthony of Padua, 2013, Seattle Art Museum, gift of the Contemporary Collectors Forum

Kehinde Wiley – Saint Gregory Palamas, 2014, Collection of Edward Tyler Nahem, New York, courtesy of Sean Kelly

Kehinde Wiley – Houdon Paul-Louis, 2011, Brooklyn Museum

Kehinde Wiley – Shantavia Beale II, 2012, Collection of Ana and Lenny Gravier. Courtesy Sean Kelly, New York

Kehinde Wiley – The Two Sisters, 2012, Collection of Pamela K. and William A. Royall

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Mack, Jordan. “Kehinde Wiley + Paper Mag That Black Lives Always Matter,” *Milk*, November 4, 2015.

Milk

KEHINDE WILEY + PAPER MAG SHOW THAT BLACK LIVES ALWAYS MATTER

Renowned artist Kehinde Wiley is at it again, collaborating with Paper to create a photo series for Black Lives Matter, titled ‘Black Lives Have Mattered for Thousands of Years.’ The gorgeous pictures, styled by the talented Shiona Turini, feature an entire cast of black models, stand out looks, and some wise words by Wiley himself.

“I stand on the shoulders of many great artists whose work emphasizes the importance of diversity in American society,” he wrote. “Black lives matter because it’s a prescient thing to highlight in this moment of cultural evolution. But black lives have mattered for thousands of years. My interest is in the now — what does it feel like to be black in 2015?”

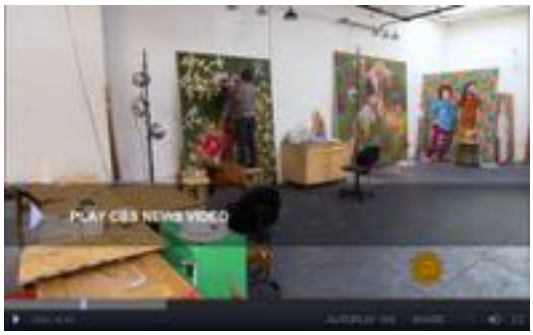
In both his writing and pictures, Wiley evokes the ‘art-historical’ aesthetic that he’s become known for. Trying to mitigate history with current culture, the models are found, in a lush landscape with trees and grass and Gothic-esque triptychs, but are also dressed in boldly modern clothing from MADE designers and alums like HBA, Harbison, Pyer Moss, Cushnie Et Ochs, Telfar, and pieces from YEEZY Season 1.

Wiley successfully takes us through the past to the present in this beautiful photo story that understands that black lives mattered yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

“Kehinde Wiley’s echoes of masterworks,” *CBS News*, November 1, 2015.

CBS SUNDAY MORNING

Kehinde Wiley's echoes of masterworks



For a different perspective on the proverbial Man in the Street ... you need only look at the works of painter Kehinde Wiley, as our Rita Braver has been doing:

"If you look at the paintings that I love in art history, these are the paintings where great, powerful men are being celebrated on the big walls of museums throughout the world," said Kehinde Wiley. "What feels really strange is not to be able to see a reflection of myself in that world."

So the New York-based Kehinde Wiley set out to create a new paradigm. Men of color in street dress painted in classical styles, often echoing masterworks. The images are considered so hip they've even been used as a backdrop in the Fox series, "Empire."

And with paintings selling for as much as $400,000, the work is considered important enough that, though he is only 38, a survey of his career is now on view at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, after opening at the Brooklyn Museum.

"His work has a broad appeal, to high art culture mavens as well as to people who don't know anything about art but [who] are taken by his references to hip hop and to street culture," said Eugenie Tsai of the Brooklyn Museum, who curated the exhibit.

She says that beyond their social statements, the paintings have undeniable artistic merit, as in Wiley's version of the frequently-painted martyr, St. Andrew.

"I think one of the hallmarks of great art is a little bit of ambiguity, where things aren't spelled out for you," said Tsai. "There's room for interpretation on the part of the viewer."

With his over-the-top persona, Wiley has been compared to Andy Warhol -- and like Warhol, he's a celebrity magnet. Michael Jackson commissioned a portrait. VH1 ordered up a whole series featuring rap stars.

But it's been a hard road to fame. He was raised in Los Angeles where his mom ran a second-hand goods store to support the family.

"My mother sent me to art classes at the age of 11," Wiley said. "I began to have kids around me say, 'Will you make drawings for me? Will you make a paining for me?' And it really clicked."

He was good enough to earn a Masters of Fine Arts from Yale, and in 2002 a prestigious Artist-in-Residence slot at the Studio Museum in Harlem.

It was in Harlem that he found a mug shot on the street:

"It crystallized something that I'd been thinking about for a very long time, which is that black men have been given very little in this world, and that I as an artist have the power and the potential and the will to do something about it."

So he and a team of helpers began pounding the pavements of New York asking young black men if they'd like to be photographed and painted in classical style.

Wiley reinterpreted Jacques-Louis David's 1801 painting, "Napoleon Bonaparte Crossing the Alps at Great St. Bernard Pass," with a black warrior. CBS NEWS/© KEHINDE WILEY

Rosen, Miss. “Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic,” *Crave*, October 13, 2015.

CRAVE

Exhibit | Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic

Colonel Platoff on His Charger by Kehinde Wiley (American, b. 1977). Colonel Platoff on His Charger, 2007–8. Oil on canvas, 122 x 122 in. (309.9 x 309.9 cm). Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth; Gift of the Director’s Council and Museum purchase, 2008. © Kehinde Wiley

The art of Kehinde Wiley perfectly describes the times: it is bold, beautiful, and beguiling, taking us to the point of no return like a classic 1980s song. It is the pure pleasure of the painted surface taken to new heights, situating it amongst the masterpieces of European art and giving it a distinctive twist that reflects Wiley’s contemporary California roots.

Born in Los Angles in 1977, Wiley earned his BFA from the San Francisco Art Institute in 1999 and his MFA from Yale in 2001, immediately followed by a residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem, which launched him on the New York stage and introducing him to the world.

Wiley was immediately embraced, and his career soared to stratospheric heights, all with the world cheering by his side. In January of this year, Wiley was presented with the US State Department Medal of the Arts. With a prolific career that spans 14 years, Wiley has produced a mid-career retrospective, “Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic” showing at the Modern Art Museum of Fort worth September 20, 2015–January 10, 2016.

Comprising approximately 60 works, the exhibition begins with early examples of paintings inspired by Wiley’s observations of street life in Harlem; these images of African-American men mark the beginning of his exploration of the male figure in Western art, and offering a new way in which to view the heroic, romantic figures of art history.

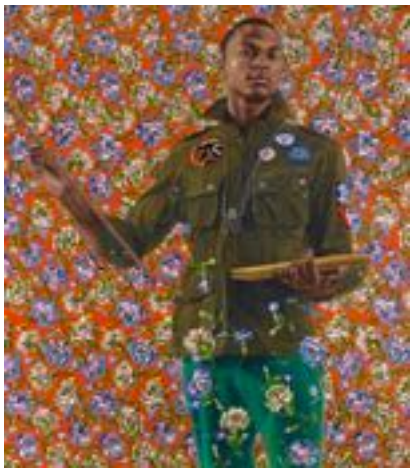
The grandeur of a Wiley painting rivals that of all whom have ever held the brush, undertaking large-scale canvases to transformative effect. Over the past fourteen years, Wiley has taken the art world by storm with his fresh, fly, and fearless style that redefines the iconography of power and prestige, casting black men and women in the works of masters including Titian, Anthony Van Dyck, Edouard Manet, Hans Memling, Jacques-Louis David, and Peter Paul Rubens. The result is a mélange of references that spans several centuries, creating a cohesive vocabulary of poses that Wiley’s subjects assume with a naturalness that flatters subjects and the viewers alike.

Through the process of “street casting,” Wiley invites individuals, often strangers he encounters on the street, to sit for portraits. In this collaborative process, the model chooses a reproduction of a painting from a book and reenacts the pose of the painting’s figure. By inviting the subjects to select a work of art, Wiley gives them a measure of control over the way they’re portrayed.

The exhibition also includes a selection from Wiley's ongoing World Stage project in which he takes his casting process to other countries, featuring s selection of bronze busts, and a chapel-like structure showcasing his stained-glass "paintings."

By casting young black men and women across a spectrum of styles in European art, Wiley creates a powerful global sensibility, one that captures the imagination and takes hold with its drama, glamour, and prestige. Wiley understands the relationship between iconography and power, and the responsibility the artist bears when wielding the paintbrush in hand. For fourteen years, Wiley has given the people what they want and never fails to disappoint. "A New Republic" will inspire, surprise, and delight.

"Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic" is showing at the Modern Art Museum of Fort worth September 20, 2015–January 10, 2016.



Kehinde Wiley (American, b. 1977). Anthony of Padua, 2013. Oil on canvas, 72 x 60 in. (182.9 x 152.4 cm). Seattle Art Museum; gift of the Contemporary Collectors Forum, 2013.8. © Kehinde Wiley. (Photo: Max Yawney, courtesy of Roberts & Tilton, Culver City, California)

Kehinde Wiley (American, b. 1977). Shantavia Beale II, 2012. Oil on canvas, 60 x 48 in. (152.4 x 121.9 cm). Collection of Ana and Lenny Gravier, courtesy Sean Kelly, New York. © Kehinde Wiley. (Photo: Jason Wyche)

Kehinde Wiley (American, b. 1977). Shantavia Beale II, 2012. Oil on canvas, 60 x 48 in. (152.4 x 121.9 cm). Collection of Ana and Lenny Gravier, courtesy Sean Kelly, New York. © Kehinde Wiley. (Photo: Jason Wyche)

Robinson, Gaile. “Exhibit review: Kehinde Wiley’s spectacular mid-career retrospective at the Modern,” *Star-Telegram*, September 23, 2015.

Star-Telegram

Exhibit review: Kehinde Wiley's spectacular mid-career retrospective at the Modern

Artist Kehinde Wiley stands in front of Santos Dumont — The Father of Aviation II, 2009. Joyce Marshall Star-Telegram

The last time Kehinde Wiley was at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, it was 2008 and he was here for a Focus show, one of those small three-gallery installations introducing artists who are tracking to be the next big noise.

Wiley proved to be a symphonic crescendo, as can be seen seven short years later at his mid-career retrospective — where approximately 60 paintings, sculptures, videos and stained-glass works take up the entire second floor of the museum.

Simply put, “Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic” is spectacular.

The exhibition includes the paintings that brought him to national attention, where he inserted young African-American men dressed in their own clothes into historical portraits. The men mimic the pose of emperors, kings and saints, right down to the haughty stare of the privileged.

These paintings immediately highlighted the lack of black subjects in the canon of art history — and most certainly, their absence from depictions of heroes and persons of power — and the works were quickly bought by museums and savvy collectors. The Modern was fortunate to be one of the earlier acquirers. The piece, Colonel Platoff on His Charger, 2007-8, in the first gallery, is among several of the huge portraits of men mounted on horses, including a commissioned portrait of Michael Jackson.

Some of the first paintings used the same backgrounds as the historic originals. But Wiley found that the figure and background spoke of a timeline, with the figure representing the present and the background the past — often depicting conquered lands or ownership.

“The background was always the forgotten character,” Wiley says.

In his work, he wanted something more present-tense. He began using the decorative floral patterns and filigree of the fabrics of the time — such as baroque brocades and Rococo fleurs-de-lis as backgrounds to his portraits. Tendrils of vines will release from the background and cross the figure. Breaking the traditional plane of foreground and background renders the figure and the pattern equals, and this has become a signature of Wiley’s.

The twining branches also act as a caress. They reach out and gently wrap around the chest, thigh or leg — accentuating the tenderness and beauty with which Wiley paints these young men.

It is a form of the male gaze, but in this case, the gay gaze. Wiley objectifies the male model as a thing of beauty. He recognizes that there is a sexual component to all portraiture, and when a male artist solicits the participation of a male model, it is a form of hyper-homoerotic exchange.

“Within art history there is a type of sexuality that exists when people talk about portraiture,” he says. “The idea of female beauty is a facile notion. The idea of male beauty in painting is represented by strength, and domination with ease.”

In his series titled “Down,” he paints the young men on the ground as if they are fallen soldiers or dead religious figures. These, too, are tropes of the art canon, but Wiley’s series proved to be prescient. As shooting incidents such as the Trayvon Martin murder began mounting, Wiley found that these paintings became misconstrued. They were very much of their time, but as current events overrode the historical narratives, he moved on.

He has taken his team of assistants, videographers and translators to other countries for the “World Stage” series. He has been to Nigeria, Israel, China, India, Jamaica, Brazil and Sri Lanka. The “World Stage” paintings are similar to his early ones. The young men are wearing merchandise with American logos, with only the backgrounds or the carved frames indicating the subjects’ national identities.

He uses patterns from Judaica for backgrounds, or places a Torah on the top of the frame in the series from Israel. From Nigeria he used the traditional fabric designs for his background, or he placed his models in poses particular to their folk art practices.

“What you see in the show are paintings from all over the world,” Wiley says. “My subject matter becomes the way the world sees America. It’s a mirror image. These are portraits of individuals and portraits of society … and the ways they communicate being young, alive and in the world. One of our biggest exports is our culture. Hip-hop and its look is a huge export. Much of this is the globalization of the American hip-hop aesthetic.”

Real models

Wiley casts his characters by scouring the streets, looking for people who have an attitude or a way of dress that he thinks will translate as the immediate present. He admits he is turned down more often than he is accepted. But if passersby are willing, he takes them to his studio and lets them look through art history books to find a pose or a person they want to emulate.

In the early years it was a hard sell.

It wasn’t until 2012 that Wiley began painting women. He had, of course, reason to paint them during his studies at the San Francisco Art Institute and Yale University, but now, in the series “An Economy of Grace,” he was using them in his signature themes of African-American bodies and riotous backgrounds.

The women are often in evening dresses designed by Riccardo Tisci, currently the creative director for Givenchy. The evening gowns should look like red-carpet wear, but as they are diaphanous and white, they look more like the slips and lingerie little girls use to play dress-up as brides.

There is something not quite right — the dresses don’t fit as well as they should and there are no stiletto ankle-breakers on their feet. Without the complete package of accessories, the contemporary fashion message is misread.

Better are the women painted in their own clothes. For instance, in Portrait of Mary Hill, Lady Killigrew, the pierced and tattooed model wearing a sheer black bodysuit with snagged and patterned fishnet hosiery looks far more authentic.

All the women have a similar look, though, and one that is more challenging than the men’s. They look fierce.

Wiley is very attuned to the fashion dateline and he seeks out models who seem equally aware. He marvels that the sell-by date on fashion expires so quickly, citing the velour tracksuits by Sean John he painted in 2006 that look so dated today.

In-demand artist

This exhibition includes sculptural portrait busts along with pieces he calls stained-glass paintings. The latter are not paintings at all. Instead, they are traditional stained glass, made by stained-glass workshops in central Europe that have been making them for generations. These glass window portraits are in a black chapellike gallery, and his black and brown men are depicted as saints, heroes and martyrs.

“Society portraits don’t give you the oomph that religious ones do,” Wiley muses.

The glass portraits glow, as is the nature of stained glass, but they are not as luminescent as his painted men.

With all of his new mediums and world travels, Wiley is stretching himself thin. His popularity has created an enormous demand for his work, both from institutions and the very wealthy who want commissioned portraits. His travels have exposed him to more demand, and he tries to give back by opening studios in the poorest countries.

Wiley has a huge phalanx of assistants who paint his labor-intensive backgrounds. Lately, however, it looks as if he is expecting them to paint the bodies, too, and the results are obvious in one of the very last paintings, one that features two young girls. Their arms look like those of mannequins — plastic and unyielding.

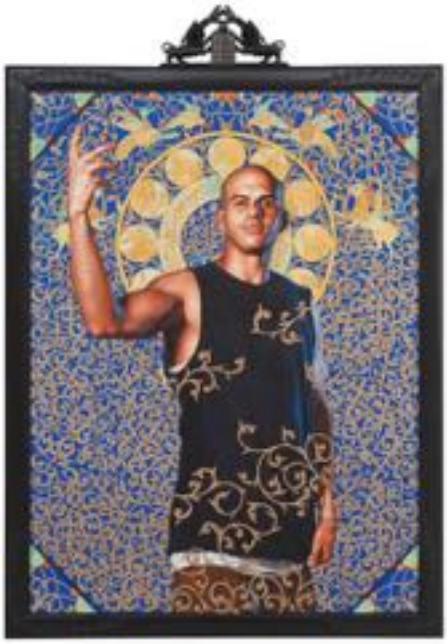
The assistants can’t imitate his touch. His inimitable style has created a problem. Even with assistants, he cannot keep up with the demand.

Now a national treasure, Wiley has a definitive style and a singular touch. The amount of work he has created in just 14 years, the breadth of this exhibition, is astonishing. At this rate, the 37- or 38-year-old (he won’t admit to either, although he was born in 1977) should be able to have several mid-career retrospectives.

Colonel Platoff on His Charger, by Kehinde Wiley 2007–8, oil on canvas, owned by the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth Courtesy of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth

“Anthony of Padua,” a 2013 oil on canvas by Kehinde Wiley.From the Seattle Art Museum. Photo by Max Yawney Courtesy of Roberts & Tilton, Culver City, California

“The Two Sisters,” a 2012 oil on linen by Kehinde Wiley. From the collection of Pamela K. and William A. Royall, Jr. Photo by Jason Wyche Courtesy of Sean Kelly, New York



Leviathan Zodiac is in the “World Stage” series. Robert Wedemeyer Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth

Houdon Paul-Louis, by Kehinde Wiley, 2011. Bronze with polished stone base Courtesy of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth

Morpheus, by Kehinde Wiley, at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth. Joyce Marshall Star-Telegram

Camaroon Study, by Kehinde Wiley, bronze, 2010. Joyce Marshall Star-Telegram

Kehinde Wiley's series "Iconic" on the left and on the right, one from the "Down' series, at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth. Joyce Marshall Star-Telegram

In Wiley's more attention-getting portraits, the subjects are dressed in modern clothing. Joyce Marshall Star-Telegram

“REVIEW: Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic,” *Examiner*, September 16, 2015.

examiner.com

REVIEW: Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic

Curator Eugenie Tsai explains some of Wiley's works. (D. Aguilera/Fort Worth Theater Examiner)

This exhibition is organized by the Brooklyn Museum together with Curator Eugenie Tsai. Tuesday Evenings at the Modern included conversations with Kehinde Wiley and Eugenie Tsai. Not only was it a sold-out crowd in the auditorium but the Modern Café was also filled. This is just one example of the great programing provided to the community by the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth.

Kehinde Wiley was born in Los Angeles and earned his BFA from San Francisco Art Institute in 1999. In 2001 he went on to earn his MFA from Yale University. His work is featured in more than 40 museums across the United States. One of his pieces, Colonel Platoff on his Charger, from FOCUS: Kehinde Wiley is part of the permanent collection at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth.

This collection is one of those that you will need to plan a good amount of time to truly enjoy. Each piece is so intricate that it entices you to examine it further. The exhibit begins with early examples of Wiley’s observations of street life in Harlem. Being raised by a single mother it is interesting that his first works focused on images of African-American male figures.

Another group of paintings are based on renowned masters such as Titian, Van Dyck and others. Wiley has taken these iconic paintings and replaced the well-known historical subjects with contemporary, young black men sporting fashionable urban gear, including some inspired by Dee & Ricky. These works are set on very large canvas with ornate frames. The frames are as unique as the portraits themselves. They do not take away from the portrait but actually serve to enhance it. The frames tie well into the painting keeping in line with the same genre or style. The pieces featuring women portray strength and courage. One thing you will notice is the hair is always “done”. All of these women have plenty of hair and it is not just styled but commanding. Even in his sculpture “Bound”, a tribute to the women in his life, hair plays a major role. The colors he uses and each detail is well thought out and serve to contribute to the piece not just for show.

This exhibit is grand in that it include numerous mediums of painting, styles and formats. It contains large portraits, sculptures, stained glass and even video. One thing is for certain, each piece speaks to you if you are willing to listen. Wiley's works are impressive. Through his portraits, he conveys that he is a director of art, lover of people, story teller, fashionable among many other things. I would venture to ask, what do you hear?

Please note museum hours:
Tuesday 10:00 AM – 7:00 PM (Sept – Nov, Feb- April)
Tuesday – Sunday 10:00 AM – 5:00 PM
Friday 10:00 AM – 8:00 PM

Please check the website for holiday closings and pricing. Also note that the Museum is free on Sundays and half-price on Wednesdays.

Pereira, Lorenzo. “Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic Opening At The Modern Art Museum of Fortworth,” *Widewalls*, September 2015.

WIDEWALLS

Kehinde Wiley – Shantavia Beale II, 2012. Oil on canvas.Collection of Ana and Lenny Gravier. Courtesy Sean Kelly, New York. © Kehinde Wiley. (Photo Jason Wyche)

The art of Kehinde Wiley is truly unique, particularly when it comes to subjects of his paintings. Best known for his highly naturalistic paintings of people with brown skin in heroic poses, Wiley always has a clear political statement behind his works. By representing African American women and men using the conventions of traditional European portraiture, the artist actually deals with the politics of representation and the position of African Americans in contemporary American society, as well as with the position of African Americans in cultural and historical narratives. Following the artist’s exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum in New York in spring 2015, the Modern Art Museum of Forth Worth organizes a show entitled Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic.

Kehinde Wiley and the Politics of Representation

Born in Los Angeles, Kehinde Wiley’s works are in the collections of over 40 museums, including the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and others. Wiley usually creates portraits, and his painting style has been compared to that of such traditional portraitists as Reynolds, Gainsborough, Titian and Ingres (be sure to check out our article about the magic of portraiture). However, he is also interested in politics of representation. Many of his works raise questions about race, gender, and the politics of representation by portraying contemporary African American men and women. Wiley goes quite deep in deconstructing the image of African Americans in historical and cultural narratives. His desire is to represent the absence of African Americans from these narratives, letting the viewers to reflect on what the reasons for that might be. So, when he is dealing with the race and politics of representation, Wiley actually examines the reasons for absence of representation of African American people, and the politics standing behind this representation.

A New Republic

Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic exhibition at the Modern Art Museum of Forth Worth will present an overview highlighting the range of the artist’s prolific 14-year career and comprising approximately 60 works. The exhibition begins with early examples of paintings inspired by Wiley’s observations of street life in Harlem; these images of African-American men mark the onset of his focused exploration of the male figure. In subsequent work, Wiley further examines the European tradition of portraiture, taking specific paintings by renowned masters such as Titian, Van Dyck, and Manet and replacing the historical subjects with contemporary, young black men sporting fashionable urban gear. A New Republic also includes a selection from the artist’s ongoing World Stage project, examples of his bronze busts, and a chapel-like structure that showcases his new stained-glass “paintings”.

Kehinde Wiley at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth

The exhibition is organized by the Brooklyn Museum and Eugenie Tsai, the John and Barbara Vogelstein Curator of Contemporary Art at the Brooklyn Museum. Special exhibitions are included in general Museum admission: $10 for adults; $4 for seniors (60+) and students with identification; free for children 12 and under; free for Modern members. Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic exhibition will be on view from September 20, 2015 until January 10, 2016 at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, in Fort Worth, Texas.

Cunningham, Vinson. “The Flies in Kehinde Wiley’s Milk,” *The Awl*, June 24, 2015.

THE AWL

The Flies in Kehinde Wiley's Milk

The jokes black artists tell.

Equestrian Portrait of King Philip II, perhaps the most famous work by the artist Kehinde Wiley, is a portrait of Michael Jackson that was commissioned not long before the megastar’s death and unveiled not long after. The painting is a beat-by-beat paraphrase of Rubens’ portrait of King Philip: Wiley’s MJ sits atop a whitish, curly-maned horse and wears black and gold armor, duly ornate, reminiscent of his trademark late-eighties betasslement. Cherubs fly overhead, offering a wreath. Some countryside unfolds toward the horizon.

King Philip is as representative a specimen as any of Wiley’s signature style, which is easy enough to grasp, and then to recognize again and again as it makes the pop-culture rounds, on *Empire* and beyond: He poses hyper-contemporary figures—mostly black, mostly male, clad mostly in sweatsuits and bubble jackets and Timberland boots—in brazen imitation of the old masters. His subjects are set against intricate patterns of flowers and tapestries, or, as in Philip, against skillful approximations of the landscapes and cloakrooms that background the old portraits from which Wiley draws inspiration.

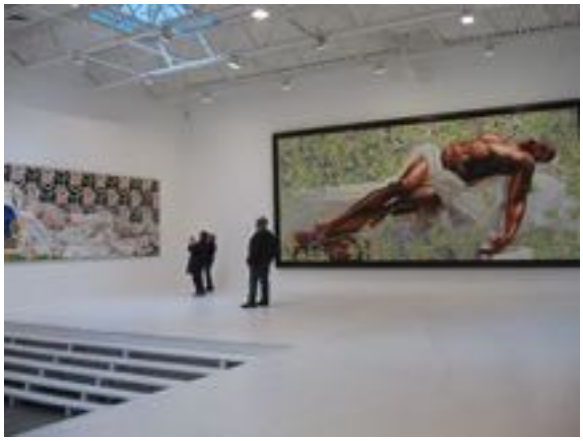
Wiley’s first career survey, *Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic*, which went up at the Brooklyn Museum earlier this year, traced the evolution of this hybrid style, beginning with its prehistory; early efforts like Conspicuous Fraud Series #1 (Eminence), a sketch-like portrait of a businessman whose Afro has exploded into smoky tentacles, gave way to the bright, glossy numbers that have become Wiley’s stock-in-trade. Perhaps in answer to the increasingly loud—and somewhat fair—accusations of what a recent *Village Voice* review called a “deadening sameness” in Wiley’s work, there were hints, too, of a way forward: A series of bronze busts and stained glass windows pointed toward the potential for future applications of the artist’s core preoccupations, while a set of mini-portraits, after Memling, were the most uncluttered, intriguing items on display.

Accompanying many of the pieces were quick snippets of praise and analysis from curators, art-historians, and other Wiley-watchers. Largely, they echoed what has become at least half of the standard critical patter on the portraitist. Catherina Machada, the Seattle Art Museum’s contemporary art curator, says that the Ingres-inspired *St. Anthony of Padua* “prompts a conversation about portraiture as a vehicle for representations of power.” *Morpheus*, a flower-strewn reworking of Houdon’s sculpture, points, according to Yale’s Kobena Mercer, to “the

potential for human identities to morph out of history and into new future possibilities." Wiley's own words also stick fairly closely to the script:

"[T]hat's partly the success of my work—the ability to straddle both of those worlds, the ability to have a young black girl walk into the Brooklyn Museum and see paintings she recognizes not because of their art or historical influence but because of their inflection, in terms of colors, their specificity and presence."
If reflection, recognition, representation—so often identified with Wiley's work—comprised its entire attraction, I'd be grateful for its existence, in the same way that I'm grateful for the existence of, say, Tyler Perry. Mere existence is a real and valuable politics, one whose importance shouldn't be underestimated. But this, for me, is where the difficulty starts with Wiley: If his paintings have any value as art qua art, that value lies in something else—his best paintings read as jokes.

A good joke is a kind of control, exerted backwards: The bit isn't understood until the listener can see how punchline proceeds from premise, how premise, perhaps, proceeds from something small and hurt in the mind of the comic on the stage. There's linearity, a narrative; despite its best efforts, visual art can't really be said to narrate anything, not in the truest sense. But with Wiley's work—maybe because it's so surreal, so obviously from some plastic-coated alternate universe—you sense a kind of disoriented story structure. His funniest paintings almost ask for a caption.



The joke extends beyond any single portrait: This is where the other half of the rap on Wiley—that his oft-repeated style amounts to little more than a formula—comes in. His repetitiveness operates in a way not dissimilar from Chris Rock's rhythmic punchlines—something like the chorus to a song, eventually revealing something that the Brooklyn Museum show bears out: Wiley has joined a long line of artists preoccupied with how being a black person among white people is not only difficult or isolating or a *problem*, but is also, more often than not, fucking hilarious.

Others have had their fun with the idea: In his semi-autobiographical summer-novel, *Sag Harbor*, Colson Whitehead has his young narrator remember bar mitzvah season:

I was used to being the only black kid in the room — I was only there because I had met these assorted Abes and Sarahs and Dannys in a Manhattan private school, after all — but there was something instructive about being the only black kid at a bar mitzvah. Every bar or bat mitzvah should have at least one black kid with a yarmulke hovering on his Afro — it's a nice visual joke, let's just get that out of the way, but more important it trains the kid in question to determine when people in the corner of his eye are talking about him and when they are not…

…"Who's that?" "Whisper whisper a friend of Andy's from school." "So regal and composed — he looks like a young Sidney Poitier." "Whisper whisper or the son of an African Diplomat!"

That yarmulke, the crucial half of Whitehead's "visual joke," is like MJ's steed in "King Philip" (or perhaps like the brocaded outfit, or like the angels trailing overhead, or like the countryside behind, or even like the deadpan museum wall from which the frame hangs, enabling everything). It is a piece of otherwise unremarkable context,

suddenly sharpened and used to lead us through the stations of comedy's cross: interest, recognition, surprise, release, repeat.

Once your eye lifts its way past hooves and muscle, spurs and gloves, spread across the enormous canvas of *King Philip*, it alights on Michael's face, so absurdly and somehow perfectly out of place. Then you laugh.

There's something funny about Kanye West, let's admit it. It's not just his long history of ill-timed socio-political and pop-cultural commentary; not just items like that recent gif of him at the Bulls game, forcing his face down the swatch-scale from delight to diffidence. No, there's something else, something more fundamental, born from his vast, naked, unquenchable desire to fit in. This seat-at-the-table fixation lurks behind many of his most emotional (and often perversely justifiable) fits of pique: He is miffed about never having won a Grammy against a white artist, even though he possesses more than twenty of the things, and, having sold uncountable pairs of Nikes—then auto-tuned a good-bye letter to the company, gone for Adidas—he stands pounding at the gates of whichever European fashion house will have him, even for an internship. Thus Kanye's anguished response when, during an appearance on the radio show Sway in the Morning, the show's eponymous host suggested that he go it alone, Fendis and Pradas be damned:

Sway: But why don't you empower yourself…and do it yourself?

Kanye: How, Sway?

Sway: Take a few steps back, and—

Kanye: You ain't got the answers man! You ain't got the answers! You ain't got the answers, Sway! I been doing this more than you! You ain't got the answers! You ain't been doing the education! You ain't spend 13 million dollars of your own money trying to empower yourself!

West, like Wiley's smirking figures, knows that the game is played within the borders of foreign frames.

It is in this way, through a loud and unashamed—and, yes, sometimes comic—insistence on his own *belonging*, dissonances be damned, that Kanye West remains America's lone true rock star, if by "rock star" we mean the raw and awkward forerunner of what eventually becomes normal: His odd theme, so loudly pronounced, has cleared the way for infinite variation. His person and positioning, somewhat like his music, have given others the cover to create something startling and new, but also so organically arrived at that it's already all but taken for granted: namely, the weird fact that, here in the mid-twenty-teens, the iconography of black musical production has completed a five-hundred-year life cycle, from field holler to *Fader*. The oft-cited borrowing, or theft, or sublimation, or whatever, of properties ranging from the twelve-bar blues to the sixteen-bar rap verse has finally, and somewhat miraculously, culminated in a pop landscape lorded over by black artists. Not just artists, either, but, in the popular imagination, *auteurs*. Musical Negroes have at long last joined prestige TV show-runners on the list of fortunates whose output is regarded with the kind of reverence and patient befuddlement once reserved for heavy books and quiet movies.

The music-critical media just months ago devoted itself, in an impressively sustained few moments of collective focus, to the long awaited return of the R&B singer-songwriter D'Angelo, who hadn't released an album since Hillary Clinton last occupied the White House. His light-headed, lyrically incomprehensible *Black Messiah*, released on what seemed like a whim in the wake of the troubles in Ferguson and beyond, was treated like a particularly important snippet of Talmud, combed and re-combed for whatever insights—music-theoretical or hyper-contemporary—it might offer.

A few months later, it was Kendrick Lamar's turn to satisfy our current critical culture's hunger for big, meaning-laden objects to devour, digest, and ultimately leave it its wake. Same abrupt, surprise-ish release date, same intensely attentive reading, plus a meta-conversation about the role of the generational savior in hip-hop mythology—a role which, for better or worse, Lamar appears lab-engineered to inhabit. But, as Jay Caspian Kang outlined in an incisive essay in the New York Times Magazine, Lamar's *To Pimp A Butterfly* suffered somewhat under the weight of the designation, and, perhaps, of the suddenly awed tones of the (mostly white) writerly corps tasked with interpreting his effort. Taking up the tools of Western modernism—denseness,

disjointedness, impenetrability—Kendrick largely left behind humor, a crucial tool passed down by the rap messiahs who came before him.

Which brings us back to Kanye West, through whom rage and isolation are almost always transubstantiated into hilarity. Consider a few lines from Kanye's "New Slaves," punctuating a verse heralded by, well, himself as the greatest rap verse "OF ALL TIME IN THE HISTORY OF RAP MUSIC, PERIOD":

They prolly all in the Hamptons

Braggin' 'bout what they made

Fuck you and your Hampton house

I'll fuck your Hampton spouse

Came on her Hampton blouse

And in her Hampton mouth

This bit of blues-descended overstatement would do well as a setting for Kehinde Wiley's inevitable portrait of West: Imagine Kanye, skin asmolder in purples and blues, dressed in sightless garden-party white, behind him the slightly menacing striped trim of a Hamptons lawn. A shingled house somewhere in the distance, off-center. An UberCHOPPER hanging overhead. Kanye threatening to rip through the canvas and embarrass you in front of your guests.

There's something to learn from the fact that Ralph Ellison, America's great artist of racial encounter, also happens to be one of our funniest writers. He squeezed infinite amusement, sometimes brutal, from the optics of isolation: A man writing prologues from the black of a cave; little boys watched boxing for coins, on and on. In *Juneteenth*, the posthumously published section of his never-finished second novel, Ellison performs a deft reversal, then re-reversal, of the theme, tracing in Falkneresque stream-of-consciousness the life and trials of a white boy raised and trained to preach by a black tent revivalist, taught to think himself a Negro, only to become, later in life, a race-baiting U.S. Senator.

In his short essay *A Special Message to Subscribers*, Ellison describes the subconscious process that led to the creation of *Invisible Man's* protagonist. A voice, he says, comes streaming into his ears while he sits at his desk in Vermont, the voice of a comedian in blackface, calling himself an "invisible man" from the famous Apollo stage.

Here's Ellison:

He had described himself as "invisible" which…suggested a play on words inspired by a then popular sociological formulation which held that black Americans saw dark days because of their "high visibility." Translated into the ironic mode of Negro American idiom this meant that God had done it all with his creative tar brush back when He had said, "Let there be light," and that Negroes suffered discrimination and were penalized not because of their individual infractions of the rules which give order to American society, but because they, like flies in the milk, were just naturally more visible than white folk.
Yes: flies in the milk. In Kehinde Wiley's painted world, the textiles and the landscapes are the milk, the hip-hop kids the swimming flies—not drowning, but cracking up.

“The Exquisite Dissonance Of Kehinde Wiley,” *npr,* May 22, 2015.

The Exquisite Dissonance Of Kehinde Wiley

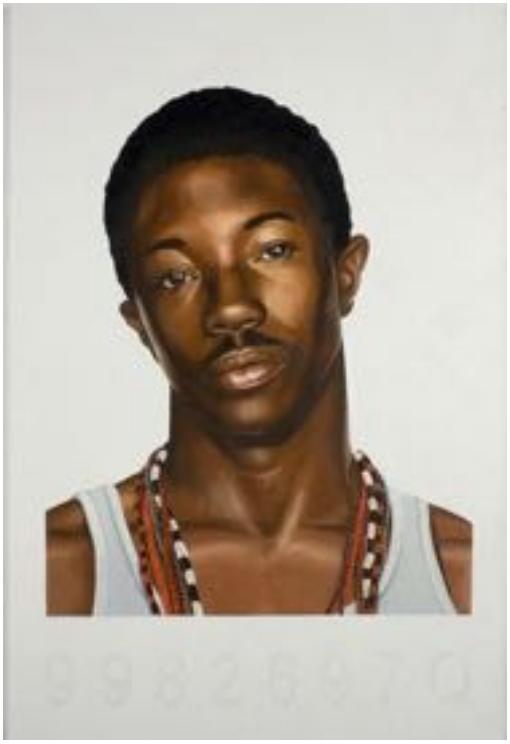
"Willem van Heythuysen," 2005. Oil and enamel on canvas. Wiley says his subjects pick their poses from art history books — as in this take on an old Dutch painting.
Katherine Wetzel/Virginia Museum of Fine Arts/Copyright Kehinde Wiley

This week, the Brooklyn Museum is wrapping up its mid-career retrospective of artist Kehinde Wiley — which means 14 years of work and something like 60 paintings.

It's been drawing a diverse and large crowd, partly because Wiley's work has been featured on the TV show *Empire*, and partly because he is a well-known and, in some ways, controversial figure in the art world. Wiley takes contemporary figures — oftentimes young black men and women — and places them in old European art traditions: Oil paintings, portraits, stained glass and even bronze sculpture.
Wiley tells NPR's Audie Cornish that the first time he stepped into a museum as a child, it was incredibly intimidating. "Great big paintings, history, gilded frames, a sense of power, a sense of majesty," he says. "It was alienating but it was fabulous at the same time, because I was trying to learn how to paint. And here you had images where people had spent hundreds of years trying to figure out how to coax reality into form, and here it was."

Interview Highlights

On the painting "Willem Van Heythuysen"
Well, the original painting is an old Dutch painting that depicts a man, he has his hand on his hip, his hand is turned outward, and he has a sword in the other hand. And it's a very regal look, it's very self-possessed. And in this particular painting that I chose to create, all of that pose is recreated, with the exception that there is a young man that I met in the streets of Brooklyn back in 2006, who chose that painting as his pose, and here he's wearing a velour Sean John suit, pair of Timberlands — but that same sense of regal hauteur is there.



Mugshot Study (2006) was inspired by a crumpled police mug shot Wiley found on the ground in Harlem.
The Sender Collection, New York/Copyright Kehinde Wiley

On why he leaves in brand names and clothing labels
Why take it out, would be the real question? The brands that people wear are a serious business. I remember growing up as a kid in South Central Los Angeles, back in the 1980s, when people were being killed for Jordan sneakers. Branding says a lot about luxury, and about exclusion, and about the choices that manufacturers make, but I think that what society does with it after it's produced is something else. And the African-American community has always been expert at taking things and repurposing them toward their own ends. This code-switching that exists between luxury and urban is something that was invented in the streets of America, not Sixth Avenue.

On the painting "Mugshot Study"
Wiley: Well, what this painting is is a portrait of a young black man, possibly between the ages of 18 and 26, I can't really say. He has these beaded necklaces around his neck; nothing more than a wife-beater. It's a painting that's cropped, and in fact, the way that I found this image was, I was walking down the street in Harlem, and I found this crumpled piece of paper. And on it as a mug shot. Presumably it fell out of a police car, and it got me thinking about portraiture, about the choices that one has to make in order to be in a portrait of this type.

Cornish: It's also the antithesis of the work people may recognize ... if anything, your work, for a lot of people, has been a rebuke of the mug shot when it comes to black men.

Wiley: It's a rebuke of the mug shot, it's an ability to say "I will be seen the way I choose to be seen." All of the models are going through our history books and deciding, out of all the great portraits of the past, which ones do they feel most comfortable, which ones resonate with them. And so I go through the studios with individuals who go through art history books and choose how they want to perform themselves.

On why he chooses to work in traditional forms rather than create something new
My love affair with painting is bittersweet. I love the history of art — you asked me about that moment that I first looked at the stuff and when I first fell in love with it. It was only later that I understood that a lot of destruction and domination had to occur in order for all of this grand reality to exist. So what happens next? What happens is the artist grows up and tries to fashion a world that's imperfect. Tries to say yes to the parts that he loves, and to say yes to the parts that he wants to see in the world, such as black and brown bodies — like my own — in the same vocabulary as that tradition that I had learned so many years before.

It's an uncomfortable fit, but I don't think that it's something that I'm shying away from at all. In fact, I think what we're arriving at is the meat of my project, which is that discomfort is where the work shines best. These inconvenient bedfellows that you're seeing all over this museum are my life's work.

On the gut feeling of vulnerability that informs his work
What I wanted to do was to look at the powerlessness that I felt as — and continue to feel at times — as a black man in the American streets. I know what it feels like to walk through the streets, knowing what it is to be in this body, and how certain people respond to that body. This dissonance between the world that you know, and then what you mean as a symbol in public, that strange, uncanny feeling of having to adjust for ... this double consciousness.

Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps, 2005. Wiley says he fell in love with classical art as a young child.
Sarah DiSantis/Brooklyn Museum/Copyright Kehinde Wiley

The Two Sisters, 2012. Wiley says he wants to see black and brown bodies depicted in the visual vocabulary he learned as a young art student.
Jason Wyche/Courtesy of Sean Kelly/Copyright Kehinde Wiley

Arms of Nicolas Ruterius, Bishop of Arras, 2014. Wiley works in many traditional media, including oil, bronze sculpture, and here, stained glass.
Courtesy of Galerie Daniel Templon, Paris/Copyright Kehinde Wiley

The exhibit (visible in the foreground is 2008's *Femme piquée par un serpent*) closes this week in Brooklyn. It travels to Fort Worth, Texas, in September, then on to Seattle and Richmond next year.
Courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum/Copyright Kehinde Wiley

Bell Brown, Jessia. “Kehinde Wiley Paints the Precariousness of Black Life,” *Hyperallergic*, May 20, 2015.

HYPERALLERGIC

Kehinde Wiley Paints the Precariousness of Black Life

Installation view, ‘Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic’ at the Brooklyn Museum, with “Bound” (2014) in the center (photo by Jonathan Dorado, courtesy Brooklyn Museum)

Much has been made of the current Kehinde Wiley retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum. We know the story well: daunted by the dearth of black figures in the art historical canon, Wiley reclaimed the regality and revelry in European painting, but superimposed young black men cast from the street onto backdrops of floral patterns often taken from 19th-century botanical drawings or Dutch wax prints — abstracted images of global imperial pursuit. From the streets of Harlem, Dakar, Tel-Aviv, and Kingston, Wiley has painted a narrative of marginal black bodies traversing the annals of time but speaking specifically to the present. He has also been heavily criticized for his thinly veiled surfaces, factory modes of production, and his complicity in the extreme capitalism of the art market.

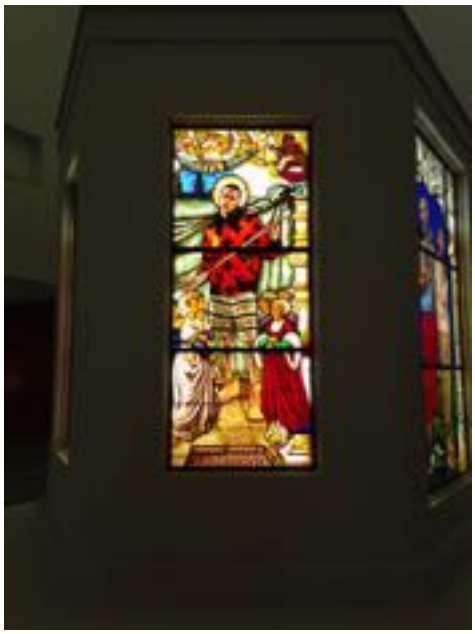
Kehinde Wiley, "The Sisters Zénaïde and Charlotte Bonaparte" (2014), oil on linen, 83½ x 63 in (212 x 160 cm), Collection of Nathan Serphos and Glenn Guevarra, New York (© Kehinde Wiley, photo by Robert Wedemeyer, courtesy Roberts & Tilton, Culver City, California) (click to enlarge)

Up until 2012, when he began the series*An Economy of Grace*, Wiley was reproved as well for the absence of women in his triumphant recuperation of black representational space. At the Brooklyn Museum this critique is addressed, somewhat, through the inclusion of his more recent images of black female figures, though they are cloistered in the final substantial gallery of the retrospective. Works like the large-scale bronze "Bound" (2014) and the stunning painting "The Sisters Zénaïde and Charlotte Bonaparte" (2014) drive home the gender politics of the retrospective's installation — the way these works of art featuring women, when read solely along gender lines, remain separate from his more well-known male portraits. Through the insertion of black women in the Bonaparte painting, for example, we may observe the conceptual binding of the regal legacy of the Bonapartes and the troubled fate of contemporary Haiti together; not beholden to Jacques-Louis David, Wiley poses these young women in full view, yet these important nuances are lamentably left for viewers to discern. Wiley might understand the history of Western art as one tussled over by great male virtuosos, but his women speak volumes about historical blindspots — and suggest a missed opportunity to open up new but difficult conversations about the exhibition's restraint in contextualizing Wiley's own complicity in systems of patriarchy for what seems to be the greater good of black representation.

Still, one can't deny curator Eugenie Tsai's admirable efforts in producing a democratic interpretative strategy for Wiley's work. Her curatorial team commissioned wall texts from dozens of thinkers, curators, and scholars in the field of art history, from Kobena Mercer to Naomi Beckwith, all of whom receive credit for authoring the didactic texts and providing personal takes on the artworks. Some of the more successful interpretations move to abandon the narrative of art history and Wiley's appropriative gestures all together, in order to account for other dissonances which emerge. Such is the case for cultural critic Touré, who rightly points to the way in which Wiley's investigations of wanted posters in *Mug Shot Studies*, from 2006, eerily bring us back to the present of racial profiling and inequity. Wiley, he writes, "saw not a criminal but a cherub."

Installation view, 'Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic' at the Brooklyn Museum, showing Wiley's 'Memling' series (photo by Jonathan Dorado, courtesy Brooklyn Museum) (click to enlarge)

Works like these, paired with recent high-profile instances of police brutality and racial tension (more phenomena concerning the politics of visibility), indicate how much we should be running, not walking, to reexamine *A New Republic* before it closes this weekend.



Kehinde Wiley, "Saint Ursula and the Virgin Martyrs" (2014), stained glass (photo by Jillian Steinhauer/Hyperallergic) (click to enlarge)

Kehinde Wiley is one of the most commercially successful artists of our time. Wiley's young black men are largely traded by the hands of the white art world elite, from the private collection to the art gallery to the museum. The politics of placement and spectacle demand an examination here, inasmuch as these are all discursive fields in which blackness is largely contained, kept at bay, or even erased. To set up an exhibition in which the black male body functions as the spectatorial premise is not only to reclaim a simulacrum of a European painting tradition; it is also to create a confrontation of metanarratives and ideologies that are ever-present outside the walls of the museum. That is, when you enter into the space of the exhibition, you see not just these multilayered offerings of queerness and blackness built into a

critique of art historical discourse; you could very well see a barrage of Mike Browns, Eric Garners, Walter Scotts, and most recently, Freddie Grays, too. (Or you could think about the stories of brutalized black women that remain underreported in the Black Lives Matter movement, as Kali Nicole Gross notes in a recent article for the Huffington Post.)

And so there is a productive discomfort in the hinging of Wiley's unreality to the pressing reality of the precariousness of black life that persists outside the museum walls. When is the last time we've seen such a metapolitical choreography of interpolating systems of capitalism, subjectivity, representation, and histories of colonialism and domination unfold within a major New York museum? To witness droves of museumgoers — young, old, black and white — sharing in the beauty and discomfort of Wiley's provocations is a rare opportunity. If anything, *A New Republic* interrogates the fleeting possibility of humanity underneath all the work's grandeur. And yet, Wiley's muses, taken together, seem to construct a postmodern mausoleum.

Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic *continues at the Brooklyn Museum (200 Eastern Parkway, Prospect Heights, Brooklyn) through May 24.*

“Black Lives Reimagined in Kehinde Wiley’s Art,” *WNYC*, April 13, 2015.

WNYC

Black Lives Reimagined in Kehinde Wiley's Art

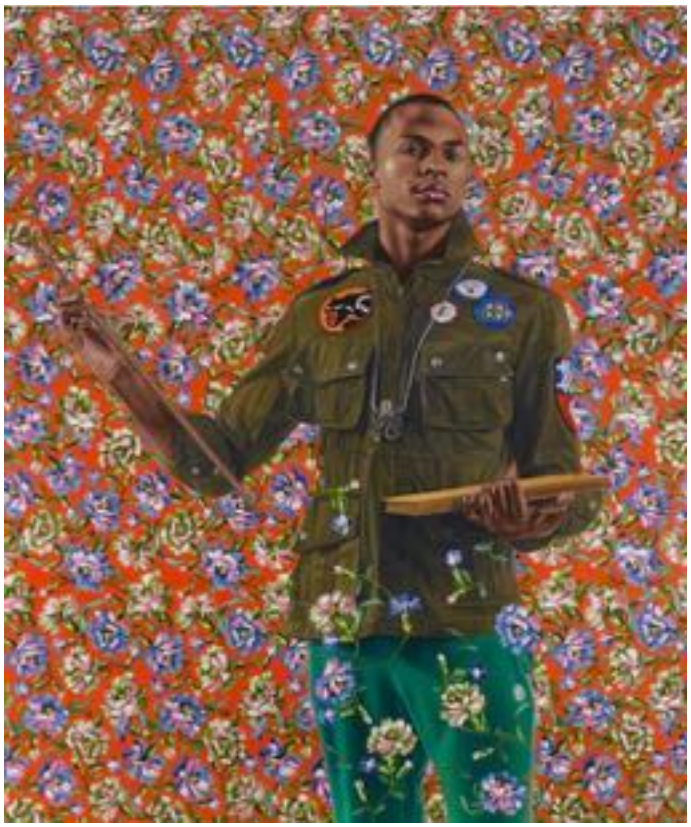
http://www.wnyc.org/story/black-lives-reimagined-kehinde-wileys-art/

The Two Sisters, Kehinde Wiley
(Collection of Pamela K. and William A. Royall, Jr.)

Artist **Kehinde Wiley** talks about his current exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. Wiley's signature portraits of everyday men and women riff on specific paintings by Old Masters, replacing the European aristocrats depicted in those paintings with contemporary black subjects, drawing attention to the absence of African Americans from historical and cultural narratives. The works presented in **Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic** raise questions about race, gender, and the politics of representation. The exhibition includes an overview of the artist’s prolific fourteen-year career and features sixty paintings and sculptures. The exhibit runs through May 24, 2015.

http://www.wnyc.org/story/black-lives-reimagined-kehinde-wileys-art/

Conspicuous Fraud Series #1, Eminence, Kehinde Wiley
(The Studio Museum in Harlem; Museum Purchase made possible by a gift from Anne Ehrenkranz)



Anthony of Padua, Kehinde Wiley
(Seattle Art Museum, gift of the Contemporary Collectors Forum, Washington)

Kehinde Wiley Installation (Courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum)

Israel, Matthew. “Kehinde Wiley’s ‘A New Republic’ at the Brooklyn Museum,” *Departures*, February 26, 2015.

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 bravure, 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.

Brunett, Zaron III. “More Than a Black Artist: Kehinde Wiley is American Art Royalty,” *Playboy*, February 20, 2015.

PLAYBOY

MORE THAN A BLACK ARTIST: KEHINDE WILEY IS AMERICAN ART ROYALTY

“There is something to be said about laying bare the vocabulary of the aristocratic measure, right? There’s something to be said about allowing the powerless to tell their own story.”
— Kehinde Wiley

To call Kehinde Wiley “the most famous Black artist alive” is to do him a disservice: he deals with themes as timeless as the Old Masters. His skill with oil paint is their equal. To attach an adjective somehow feels like shoving him off to the side of the art world. He is a painter. You could say he is a black painter. Or, that he is a gay black painter. But, really he’s “a history painter, one of the best we have,” as *The New York Times* art critic Holland Cotter put it in 2005. “By this I mean that he creates history as much as tells it.”

Today, the Brooklyn Museum of Art opens an exhibition entitled “A New Republic,” focused on the career of the 37-year-old American artist. It’s less a retrospective than a momentary pause to consider a body of work made over the past decade-plus.

After earning an MFA from Yale in 2001, Wiley moved to New York, exclusively painting portraits of young black men he discovered walking the streets of Harlem and Brooklyn. He’d invite them to his studio and pose their black bodies like European dukes and princes of the past. In 2003, he began to work with

the Los Angeles gallery, Roberts & Tilton. Bolstered by the success of this creative partnership, in 2006, he expanded his artistic focus and began his “The World Stage” series, painting men from around the globe, casting subjects from the streets of Haiti, Jamaica, Senegal and Sri Lanka. In 2012, he decided to include women for his show “An Economy of Grace” at the Sean Kelly gallery, which was the subject of a documentary of the same name that was shortlisted for an Oscar nom this spring. Today, his portraits—mostly of urban black bodies in snapbacks, jeans and Jordans, incongruously presented as aristocrats, riding resplendent horses, holding scepters—hang on the walls of the MOMA, LACMA and National Portrait Gallery. Before there was #BlackLivesMatter, Kehinde Wiley said it with paint, and with glamour, but he exceeded the universality of that message by making each of his subject’s blackness unique.

But Wiley also happily fetishizes his figures: the blackness (of the often poor and powerless) is turned into raw material for an expensive art object for the wealthy. Not everyone is cool with this approach. Martha Schwendener described Wiley in *The New York Times*, “as a slightly titillating but not too radical artist whose work nods toward racial and sexual taboos, but is safe enough to be shown just about anywhere.” Others critique his painting style itself: calling his paintings repetitive, thin, or lacking in personal narrative.

This “love-him-or-hate-him” sentiment has made Wiley into a Kanye of the art world: an unapologetic artist who uses uncomfortable cultural appropriation as a tool to his advantage, demaning respect—and paychecks—for black bodies and their beauty. Last week, Playboy caught up with Wiley, after a month that included receiving the State Department’s Medal of Art by John Kerry, watching his work make a weekly cameos on the sets of Lee Daniels' hip-hop soap opera, *Empire*, and overseeing installation of the most substantial show of his career. A notoriously difficult interview subject and complex thinker, Wiley opened up about his pan-African heritage, his unique bond with Michael Jackson, and what it means to be royal.

CHANCELLOR SEGUIER ON HORSEBACK [COURTESY OF SEAN KELLY GALLERY / ROBERTS & TILTON GALLERY / STEPHEN FRIEDMAN GALLERY / GALERIE DANIEL TEMPLON]

Does it make you feel old to have a retrospective at your young age? You’re not even 40 yet.

In the past you would have to be much further along in your career and be much older to enjoy this type of reception. I think it’s an exciting signal that museums are responding to what’s going on in real-time in the culture, as opposed to waiting for some sort of elusive academic consensus to arrive. In order for any

of these institutions to survive the drive of the 21st Century, a more nimble and much more holistic view of what art is and how it functions in the broader culture has to come to the fore. And this is a great achievement towards that direction.

You grew up in a gritty and dangerous part of South Central LA in the 1980s, and at your mother's behest you spent countless hours in the gallery in the Huntington Library-an aristocratic institution in wealthy Pasadena—how do you feel your unique experience of growing up in LA shaped you?

Without my biography you don't get the work I make right now. One of the things you have to consider when looking at this work: there is an amount of empathy for people who are trying to make it who are struggling, who don't necessarily come from much. I think it takes the background I have to be able to have an opportunity—and a credible opportunity and a responsibility—to tell stories and cast light on, perhaps, aspects of the culture that don't necessarily get told.

EQUESTRIAN PORTRAIT OF KING PHILIP II [COURTESY OF THE OLBRICHT COLLECTION]

You've painted LL Cool J, Biggie, Ice-T, and Michael Jackson, whose portrait you said was based on "a conversation with him about what it means to be an aristocrat. Is it good enough to be an aristocrat, or do you want to be royal? And what's the difference between all of that?" Are there any parallels in the way both you and MJ have used visual humor to demand the world see black men as royal?

Michael, like anyone, recognized the pageantry that surrounded his work. He was his own best creation. But I think he also had a sense of humor. There was something like a fabulist's aesthetic that surrounded everything he does. It was almost decidedly tongue-in-cheek. He sort of straddled this world between fantasy and reality. In terms of what I do is to be able to play within this fantasy of the art-historical pantheon. I have an abiding respect with the history of Western European easel painting, I also have a very critical mind when it comes to not taking it as whole but sort of breaking it into those pieces of what you want to run forward with and leaving to the side what you want to do away with.

HAITI SERIES: JUPITER AND THETIS [COURTESY OF ROBERTS & TILTON GALLERY]

Your mother seems to be a phenomenal person, a woman of integrity and grit. I've read she ran a Sanford & Son-style junk store, and that she was also an academic, a linguist—the person who taught you that languages are a tool. Do you feel your mother showed you how to play with language as a code?

I think code-switching is something that comes so naturally for kids of a certain type. It's something that within my own work, I almost take for granted that I'm speaking the language of high, conceptual art, and I'm speaking the language of an urban sensibility. I'm also trying to be incredibly sensitive and aware of the broader evolution of not only American culture, but of the sensibilities all over the world now. My mother's an incredible influence in that regard. Not only in terms of language but just as an example of how to stay curious about the world.

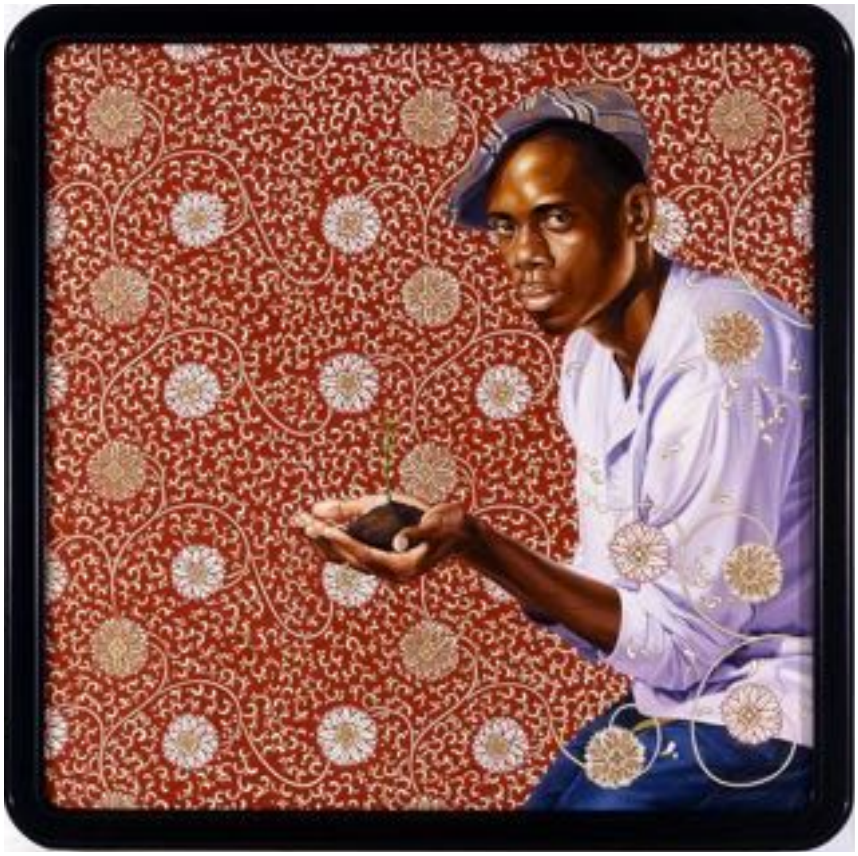
I've read that you went to Africa in your twenties to find your Nigerian father. Did that longing to know your African father inspire your desire to meaningfully connect with the pan-African world?

I think so. I went to Nigeria when I was twenty-years-old and had never really met my father. I jumped on a plane, looking for one man in the most populous country in sub-Saharan Africa. And I found him. It was the incredibly dramatic Oprah-Winfrey style, over-the-top story. But, in the end, what you're pointing out is a very real longing for so many African-Americans. I grew up, for a lack of a better term, as an African-American with a sense of Black American identity. To be able to now know and spend time with people on my father's side of the family—cousins and uncles and so on—it's an extraordinary blessing. The story of my work and its engagement with the broader world, and Africa in particular—it continues to unfold.

In the past you've talked about power and glamour in portraiture. In 2014, in an interview with Artnet, you said, "Glamour was always about the power of the individual to be that wasteful towards themselves. That power dynamic and the power play that's going on in these works has a

lot to do with all of that giving going towards this one person…" How does it feel to play with glamour to grant esteem to the powerless?

There are moments where when you create paintings of people you see their faces when they see those works for the first time … there's this incredible joy. There is something to be said about that. But at the same time I'm not painting one's life with these paintings. At it's best, what the work does is point to a set of possibilities. And I think that that is something. I think that is not nothing. Art is a very tough language to use if you want to get anything done in this world. I chose one of the hardest fields to go into if you're interested in social change. Beyond social change what my work does is that it allows for young artists and for viewers of certain types to be able to see themselves within a more accurate context, to see themselves outside of the ways in which they've been spoon-fed their entire lives. That's something that's certainly meaningful—that has some level of merit. Although, it's simply a painting in the end.



CHINA SERIES: ENCOURAGE GOOD MANNERS AND POLITENESS; BRIGHT UP YOUR SURROUNDINGS WITH PLANTS [COURTESY OF ROBERTS & TILTON GALLERY]

Since art as you say, is one of the hardest fields for "those interested in social change," what do you make of the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter? In a sense, you were way ahead of that social curve. Is the culture catching up to the message of your work?

I think I agree with that. But at the same time I'm also annoyed by that on some level. I agree with it because black lives do matter, and that's the call-to-arms of so much of what I've done. But I hate the idea that that's the only way of looking at my work. I think there's a type of fullness and nuance within the work that sometimes collides a little bit with your more politically-corrected presuppositions or assumptions of the work. Oftentimes my work can be incredibly driven by the redemptive desire, but sometimes, there's very destructive and wasteful and dark impulses that give rise to painting—or ideas surrounding painting. It's all mixed-up and that's what the work is, it's a type of self-portrait, that refers back to conflicting desires: the desire to be present, the desire to be beautiful, the desire to be taken seriously. All of those are in there.

Since your paintings are "high-priced, luxury goods for wealthy consumers," as you've called them, how do you ensure black people in your paintings don't become simply fetishized anew?

I don't. And in fact, I think they are being fetishized. That's my goal. My goal is to look at the culture and to look at some of the trappings of the exotic that black men and black women occupy, to criticize that, but also to be complicit with that. My work ends at the crossroads between the redeemed and the imprisoned. There can't be a single way of looking at our black bodies in public spaces; and I don't want to shut down the conversation by simply saying this is a plight of freedom.

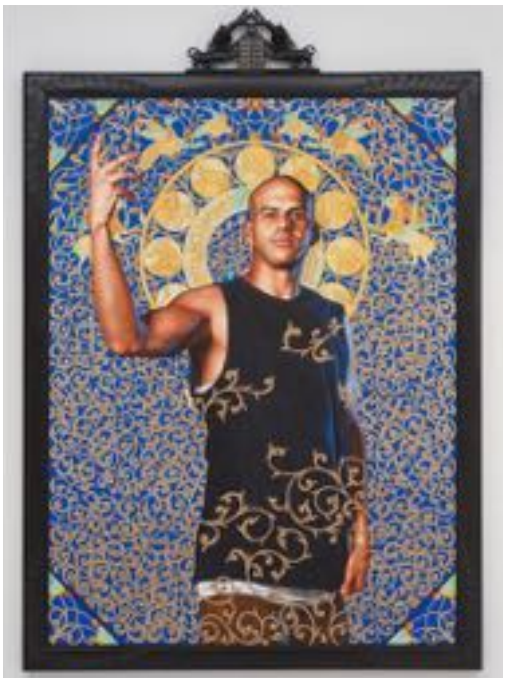
AN ECONOMY OF GRACE: JULIETTE RECAMIER [COURTESY OF SEAN KELLY GALLERY]

As a queer black artist who makes black men beautiful, sexualizing them as objects of allure and desire, do you ever worry that, ironically, you reduced them to objects, no different than how we treat women?

There's always a difference between intention and interpretation. There's what I have in mind and then there's what the viewer unpacks when they look at an object. Much of what I do is based on a set of assumptions I have, but you, as the viewer, bring a history, a personal story to these paintings. In so much as what you're looking at what I have in mind, you're also looking at how you see the world. And so, while looking at glorified images of regal black men that are luminously resplendent, regal and refulgent—all of these things can be read differently by different viewers. So, there's a responsibility for me to be truthful to my own set of impulses; but I can never take responsibility for the viewer's interpretation.

You once said: "Portraiture is something that's really suffering in the media environment that we have right now. What I try to do in image-making is try to create something that can compete on the same level—something that's as sexy and as current and as complex as the world we all continue to evolve in." Do you feel you're succeeding? How difficult is it to stay relevant in the crush of memes and gifs and surreal advertising like Old Spice ads—does the Internet challenge you to stay current?

You can't ever compete in that realm. You have to realize the strengths of what you do. And what I do is I work with a very ancient technology that speaks softly, evolves slowly over time, that requires you actually physically showing up, being in front of a real three-dimensional object in a room and spending time with that object. That's the very height of intrigue. I think once you make that commitment, once you cross that threshold, other types of communication tend to disappear and the painting itself becomes singular.



ISRAEL SERIES: LEVIATHAN ZODIAC [COURTESY OF ROBERTS & TILTON GALLERY]

You've been called the black Andy Warhol. And he famously said that we'd all have our fifteen minutes of fame. But you did him one better, and said, "Fuck the fifteen minutes. I'm going to give you a painting, and I'll make you live forever." When speaking about how you street-cast your paintings, you often describe the magic of that moment—what do you see in a person that makes you know they should live forever?

Some people are absolutely small and you know immediately that they will translate into something large. Some people have an over-the-top demonstrative personality but you can almost imagine them perfectly in miniature or watercolor or something that whispers. It really has to do with an instant reading of someone. In so far as this is about other people, it's also about me—my own way of looking at people, my own tastes, my own proclivities. I love going into the streets, not knowing for an instant what's going to happen next; and it's akin to the way I try to track my career which is to constantly give myself new challenges, new places to push where my comfort zones are. The idea that, a black American painter is now beginning a conversation around the state of Israel—and trying to think about its history, its very complex history with the outside world—what gives me the right to have this conversation? It's about throwing yourself off-kilter. It's about placing yourself outside of your natural point of strength, and arriving at new, unexpected conclusions. That's one of the reasons chance drives who I choose in my paintings. I want my work to be a place where surprise and serendipity rule the day.

SANTOS DUMONT THE FATHER OF AVIATION II [COURTESY OF ROBERTS & TILTON GALLERY]

What do you say to criticisms of your use of studio assistants to make your art, and that it's "Made in China," as if you're taking advantage of the cheap labor with your Beijing studio? What makes your process different than Apple or other major corporations?

I stand on the shoulders of so many artists who came before me, who participated in and continue to participate in a long tradition of having art studios where there is a division of labor between more decorative aspects and the sort of portrait I concentrate on. I don't necessarily have any issue with people being confused about that. So much of what the popular culture has been telling us over the years is that artists are creatures who live in caves divorced from society and are on the verge of finishing their magnum opus, their masterpiece, and I think that is an unfortunate misnomer. The fact is every single major working contemporary artist that I know has a studio full of assistants. This is the reality on the ground. Much is made of the fact I have studio assistants in Africa, and China, and oftentimes, the critics ignore all the white people that work for me in New York.

Do you have any thoughts on the LA art world? Would you ever return to open a studio here?

I go to LA every year to see my family. I'm constantly being drawn back. And I find myself being sort of jealous of the lifestyle. And it's really encouraging there are so many great galleries, museums and non-profits bubbling up all over Los Angeles. In short, yes, I could see myself having a studio there. We never know what the future holds.

HAITI SERIES: GOSSIPING WOMEN [COURTESY OF ROBERTS & TILTON GALLERY]

Laster, Paul. “Kehinde Wiley talks about portraiture and going for baroque,” *Time Out*, February 19, 2015.

Kehinde Wiley talks about portraiture and going for baroque

Kehinde Wiley's brand of hip-hop portraiture blows up at the Brooklyn Museum

Rayon Richards

Since 2001, Kehinde Wiley has mixed references to hip-hop with Old Masters portraiture. Wiley’s paintings and sculptures investigate race, power and the politics of representation, to which Wiley adds classical technique and compositional brio. With his first museum survey opening at the Brooklyn Museum, the Los Angeles native offers his thoughts on how the racial divide between art-world elites and the broader art audience impacts appreciation for his work.

You first began making the work you’re known for during an artist-in-residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2001. How much of an effect did the neighborhood have on you?
Harlem was major! You could see fashion trends and the way that people flaunted themselves, all of which began to inform my painting. I started inviting people from the street to pose.

What drew you to portraiture?
When I was a kid studying art, I’d go to the Huntington Library and Gardens and see these amazing 18th- and 19th-century portraits. I became fascinated by what they stood for, and consequentially began to wonder why people like myself were absent within the context they represented.

When you first started painting young black males—and later, women—it was almost as though you were trying to convince white viewers to see them as noble, instead of as the usual racial stereotypes. Was that your intention?
I don't believe I'm changing anyone's mind. The people who clutch their pearls and cross the street still clutch their pearls and cross the street. By and large, those same people are my collectors. Often, I'll go to their homes and find that the only brown or black presence is in a painting. But art is much more than a high-priced luxury good. What excites me the most is seeing how contemporary art can speak to people who aren't part of the elite.

That's interesting, because your 2005 painting of a young black man on horseback, mimicking David's *Napoleon Crossing the Alps*, has been hanging in the Brooklyn Museum's lobby for nearly a decade. It's probably inspired many young people of color to see themselves in that light.
It announces that it's okay—that you can envision yourself on the walls of this big, cultural institution. I remember wanting that as a kid. I'm happy that it's a reality now, not just at the Brooklyn Museum but wherever my work is hung. Not that there aren't other artists picturing people of color, but there's something different about my work, because it references the attitudes and dress code of hip-hop and the dominant American cultural temperature right now.

How do you find your models?
In Brooklyn and Harlem, I simply stopped people on the street, because this is a culture where you expect that. It's this just add-water, post-Warhol, Paris Hilton sense of celebrity: This is my moment of fame. It's tougher now, because my art has become this global project, where I can be anywhere from Sao Paolo to Sri Lanka. When I was in Israel, I wanted Ethiopian Jews, so we knocked on people's doors. In the Congo, I went to a village and spoke with the elders, asking them about recruiting some of the young members of the community there.

Your subjects are almost always placed in front of richly patterned backdrops. What determines those?
In America, it's based on Western art history: If I borrow from French rococo for a painting, the background will be rococo filigree. When I travel, however, things from the marketplace or landscape inform the patterns.

When you're operating around the world, how much advance work do you do? Who's involved in helping you?
We do try to do as much as possible, but nothing is better than simply showing up and being there. There's me, the portraitist, and then there's me, the operation, mobilizing in all of these different places. I've got a large team helping me, not only in Brooklyn but also in Beijing and in Senegal, West Africa, where I'm building a studio. They do everything from painting the backgrounds to lighting and photographing the models to digitally retouching the images I use. People assume that what you see in my work is what you get. That's true, but I'm also in the gorgeous-picture business! I want to create something seductive and alluring to serve a broader purpose.

Why have you titled the show "A New Republic?"
The American idea of freedom has always excluded black people, so in terms of its founding principles, our republic has always been broken. I'm trying to imagine a new republic where the promise of America is lived out, if not in real life, then in this sort of imagined space that painting represents, which might, in some small way, affect the trajectory of culture.

Kehinde Wiley opens Fri 20 at the Brooklyn Museum.

See the exhibition

"Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic"

Critics' pick

Wiley has made his name as a painter by limning portraits of African-Americans (some recruited by the artists from off the streets) in a grandiloquent style worthy of the Old Masters. While his approach is ostensibly meant to undermine the artistic biases of Eurocentric culture and white privilege, this 14-year survey of his career demonstrates that the real pleasures of his baroque style lie in his evident technical skills and in his frequent use of richly patterned backgrounds meant to recall opulent wallpaper or tapestries.

Beta, Andy. “Kehinde Wiley’s Global Vision on View,” *The Wall Street Journal*, February 19, 2015.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Kehinde Wiley’s Global Vision on View

A retrospective of the artist’s work opens at the Brooklyn Museum this month

Artist Kehinde Wiley sits in his studio in Brooklyn. A retrospective of his work, ‘Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic,’ is opening at the Brooklyn Museum of Art on February 20. PHOTO: KEITH BEDFORD FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Kehinde Wiley finds it maddening when he hears his body of artwork summed up as if all he does is paintings of rappers in classic art styles.

Yes, his subjects often wear baseball caps and hoodies. And yes, many are shown on thrones, on horseback and in other heroic poses and contexts traditionally reserved for kings and military leaders and saints.

But his work isn’t simply portraiture with a twist—it carries provocative commentary about the politics of race and representation throughout the history of art.

A midcareer retrospective of Mr. Wiley’s work, “Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic,” opens Friday at the Brooklyn Museum, including a selection of his immense, eye-popping paintings—some measuring 25 feet long—that have made him one of the most recognizable artists of the 21st century. Also on view: some of his most recent portraits, done in the more archaic medium of stained glass.

“It was super particular, with crazy-high stakes,” said Mr. Wiley, 37 years old, of reassembling and installing the stained-glass panels, which had been produced and shipped over from the Czech Republic. “If anything drops, the whole exhibition is over.”

An early supporter of Mr. Wiley’s work was New York art dealer Jeffrey Deitch, who said he values artists whose work engages with artistic precedence while still being accessible and part of a broader cultural dialogue.

“Kehinde has that,” Mr. Deitch said.

“Of all the artists I’ve shown, Kehinde connects with people in a big way: in the art world, in the music world and beyond,” he said. “The work speaks to people.”

Lately, Mr. Wiley’s work has become something of a cultural touchstone, appearing on screen in Lee Daniels ’s new Fox television series “Empire” and Spike Lee ’s latest film, “Da Sweet Blood of Jesus.”

Mr. Wiley works on a painting in his studio in Brooklyn. PHOTO: KEITH BEDFORD FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Mr. Wiley has gained pop-culture renown for a series of large paintings juxtaposing famous African-American celebrities in settings drawn from old-master paintings—from singer Michael Jackson in a suit of armor to New York Knicks’ Carmelo Anthony bearing a broad sword.

But Mr. Wiley said that giving contemporary black figures in hoodies and sneakers the same treatment traditionally used for history’s white elite has also led him to be pigeonholed.

“Everyone talks about my work as though it is just hip-hop meets classic painting and it is so frustrating,” Mr. Wiley said. “People reduce it to, ‘You paint rappers.’ ”

Mr. Deitch laughs off such generalizations, calling them a measure of the paintings’ accessibility.

“A lot of Kehinde’s message is asserting a black presence in this largely white, male history of Western art,” he said. “It is a profound statement he is making. It is a global vision versus a Western vision of art history.”

Some of Mr. Wiley's most potent work portrays models he encountered around the world—again using traditional art-historical treatments to give anonymous figures a sense of iconic power and presence.

From his first solo show at the Brooklyn Museum in 2004, "Passing/Posing," to his more recent series of portraits, "The World Stage," which showcases subjects found in Jamaica, Lagos and Brazil, Mr. Wiley has expanded his vision globally.

The artist now has workspace outside his home base in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn, including studios in Beijing and Senegal.

The Brooklyn Museum has had a long-term commitment to Kehinde's work, said Eugenie Tsai, the museum's managing curator of contemporary art who oversaw "A New Republic."

Eleven years after "Passing/ Posing," she said, "it seemed like a good time to catch up and see where he's gone and where he's going."

Mr. Wiley acknowledged "every artist wants a big fabulous show like this and that it feels really good." But, he added, "you have to put it in perspective and not allow it to be an occasion to put the nail in the coffin."

Mr. Wiley works on a painting in his studio. PHOTO: KEITH BEDFORD FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

On the day of the stained-glass installation—where no drops occurred—the artist returned to his studio and resumed work on a painting.

"The question is, how do you mix color and light together in a way that exists in the world and not the way that it exists in a camera?" Mr. Wiley asked rhetorically as he set to work adding color to his subject's brow, gazing intently at the canvas.

The image is one of a farmer he photographed in Cameroon who, except for his skin color, looks as if he could easily hail from a farm in Kansas, sporting an outdated leather jacket and big American-flag belt buckle.

"It is one of the aspects of the work I enjoy," he said, noting the strange fashion he encounters around the globe.

"Being in these small villages, I get a snapshot of what it is like to be alive in the 21st century right now."

Magdaleno, Johnny. “A Sprawling Retrospective for Kehinde Wiley’s Heroic Portraits,” *The New York Times Style Magazine*, February 19, 2015.

THE NEW YORK TIMES STYLE MAGAZINE

A Sprawling Retrospective for Kehinde Wiley’s Heroic Portraits

Kehinde Wiley’s “Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps,” 2005. Wiley’s work will be the subject of a major retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum starting Feb. 20. *Sarah DiSantis, courtesy of the artist and Brooklyn Museum*

Barely two months in, it has already been a big year for the Brooklyn-based painter Kehinde Wiley. Last month, the artist received a 2014 U.S. State Department Medal of Arts; and this week, he prepares for his first museum retrospective, “A New Republic,” which will open at the Brooklyn Museum on Friday. Throughout his career, Wiley’s pieces have canonized the people they portray: Descendants from Africa, Haiti, Jamaica and elsewhere, depicted along with emblems of culture and identity. “My work, for a long time, has focused on the ideals that we celebrate in America and abroad,” he says. Many of his paintings outsource their influence from popular movements that predate the 19th century, like Flemish portraiture from the Northern Renaissance. But instead of using dark colors to create a sense of severity or authority, Wiley’s portraits explode with energy and color — particularly in their use of clothing, which occupies a central role in his work. “Fashion is fragile and fleeting,” he notes. “But it is also an indicator for the cultural and social appetites for a nation.”

Occasionally, that fashion is high street style, like the young man sporting a bronze-tipped pompadour in 2014's "Saint Paul"; at other times, it's more casual, such as "The Marchioness of Santa Cruz" from Wiley's "Haiti" series (also 2014), in which a woman in denim and white t-shirt lies like royalty on a thin-cushioned chaise lounge, her weight resting on one elbow as it presses into a rolled bath towel. In every case, as seen in the portraits among the 56 pieces on view in "A New Republic," Wiley's backgrounds compete with his subjects to command the most attention, though neither overpowers the other. With their growing vines, blooming flowers and Rococo-influenced doily patterns, it's as if the surrounding world rises to celebrate the people in focus. But this balance is intentional, a technique to make his work comprehensive. "The background must capture a myriad bed of cultures and practices," says Wiley, "because increasingly, the people who populate my paintings are from all over the world." Despite their origins, each subject is imbued with a similar sense of majesty marked by lifted chins and puffed-up chests, like the antiquated, Caucasian kings and queens portrayed in galleries and museums across the world.

In addition to the large-scale portraits that have made Wiley famous, five bronze busts will also be on display, their subjects sculpted with the same prideful body language as those in his portraits. The retrospective also includes eight selections from his "Memling" and "Icon" series: paintings that are similar in style to the others, but created on a smaller scale, and framed by shrine-like panels that invite the viewer to lean in and, as Wiley says, "possess the object with his or her eyes and physical presence."

"A New Republic" is on view at the Brooklyn Museum from Feb. 20 through May 24, brooklynmuseum.org.

"Shantavia Beale II," 2012. Jason Wyche, courtesy of the artist

“Willem van Heythuysen,” 2005. Katherine Wetzel, courtesy of the artist and Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

“Conspicuous Fraud Series #1 (Eminence),” 2001. Courtesy of the artist

“Saint Remi,” 2014. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Daniel Templon, Paris

“Houdon Paul-Louis,” 2011. Sarah DiSantis, courtesy of the artist and Brooklyn Museum

Smith, Roberta. “Review: ‘Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic’ at the Brooklyn Museum,” *The New York Times*, February 19, 2015.

The New York Times

Review: ‘Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic’ at the Brooklyn Museum

“Randerson Romualdo Cordeiro” (2008) is one of the works on display in Kehinde Wiley’s first museum retrospective, at the Brooklyn Museum.
Byron Smith for The New York Times

You can love or hate Kehinde Wiley’s bright, brash, history-laden, kitsch-tinged portraits of confident, even imperious young black men and women. But it is hard to ignore them, especially right now, with scores of them bristling forth from “Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic,” the artist’s mind-teasing, eye-catching survey at the Brooklyn Museum.

A Sprawling Retrospective for Kehinde Wiley’s Heroic PortraitsFEB. 19, 2015
Kehinde Wiley Puts a Classical Spin on His Contemporary SubjectsJAN. 28, 2015
Since 2001, Mr. Wiley has been inserting black individuals into the generally lily-white history of Western portraiture, casting them in poses — including on rearing steeds — derived from Renaissance and old master paintings of saints, kings, emperors, prophets, military leaders, dandies and burghers. Usually these works have titles identical or similar to their sources, among them “Napoleon Leading the Army Over the Alps,” and “Colonel Platoff on his Charger,” creating the delicious sense that Mr. Wiley’s updates are perfectly normal, which in a way they are. Still, they are conceptually provocative and should startle just about anyone, regardless of race, creed or color, even if his often thin, indifferently worked surfaces can leave something to be desired as paintings.

In a way that few other living artists match, Mr. Wiley’s art is overtly, legibly full of the present. His paintings reflect some of the problems and pleasures of being alive right now, in times fraught with

corrosive bigotry and inequality; flooded with images, goods and sounds; and enriched by the incessant, even ecstatic interplay of cultures — whether high, low or sub — around the globe.

In the 44 paintings here, Mr. Wiley's subjects wear hip-hop fashion or designer gowns, and in addition to posing as kings and saints, they mimic aristocratic ladies in well-known paintings from the Louvre or masterworks of African sculpture. Very occasionally, we see someone famous and in costume, as in "Equestrian Portrait of King Philip II (Michael Jackson)" based on a painting by Peter Paul Rubens. In Mr. Wiley's reprise, produced in 2009, the face of the tragic pop star, who died that year, is overwhelmed by the ostentatious royal armor and hovering cherubs.

Often, Mr. Wiley's subjects are seen against decorative patterns based on textiles from various cultures — rich brocades, British Arts & Crafts designs, Africa-inspired Dutch wax-resist fabrics. Mostly floral designs, they curl across the figures, confusing foreground and background. Anointed with carved black or gold frames that look a little too fake, these paintings keep company with other borrowings from art history: among them six imposing full-length portraits in stained glass that are too photographic, and four bronze portrait busts that muster a terrific hauteur but otherwise are generically academic. In nearly every instance, the figures are larger than life; some paintings are nearly as big as billboards.

But there are also small-scale portraits of young black men, some on gold leaf, like Byzantine icons, and others ensconced in sturdy wood frames equipped with doors. Resembling portable altarpieces, and based on the austere portraits from the 1400s by Hans Memling, they bring to mind the quiet perfection of Northern Renaissance works amped up with a contemporary sense of seductiveness.

Continue reading the main story
When it comes to art history, Mr. Wiley has not only scores to settle but also possibilities to explore. He sees this terrain as ripe with potential, a revisionist approach that he shares with artists as diverse as Nicole Eisenman, Dana Schutz, Carroll Dunham, John Currin and especially Mickalene Thomas, who also inserts black women into art history (and with a degree of painterly innovation that exceeds Mr. Wiley's).

Mr. Wiley also belongs to a tradition of Pop Art-infused figuration that includes Mel Ramos, Wayne Thiebaud and Barkley L. Hendricks. And he owes something to the flamboyance and painting-consciousness of artists from the 1980s, especially the slyly layered images of David Salle and the sampled patterns of Philip Taaffe.

But as an artist and a persona, Mr. Wiley may best be described as a combination of Andy Warhol, Norman Rockwell and Jeff Koons. Like Warhol, he makes striking images of his contemporaries. Like Rockwell, he elevates everyday Americans with somewhat corny portrayals that are more interesting as images than as art objects. Like Mr. Koons especially, Mr. Wiley's is largely an accessible public art that also raises issues about the role of the artist's hand and the use of workshop production. Like all these artists, Mr. Wiley has a carefully cultivated public persona, and is, along with his art, the subject of considerable art-world argument, which matters little. Mr. Wiley's work is part of the larger culture, and so is he.

Mr. Wiley was born in Los Angeles in 1977 and grew up looking at old master paintings and sculpture at the Huntington Library in San Marino, Calif. He earned his B.F.A. from the San Francisco Art Institute in 1999 and his M.F.A. from Yale in 2001, followed immediately by a residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem. One day, on a street near the museum, he picked up a piece of paper featuring the image of a young black man; it was a confidential police mug shot of a suspect. Looking at the image in the catalog, or the painting from 2006 based on it, one can see why the innocence and nobility of this young face became, as Eugenie Tsai writes, "a catalyst for his subsequent work."

Covering just 13 years of activity, this exhibition was organized by Ms. Tsai, the museum's curator of contemporary art, and offers an early midcareer report on Mr. Wiley's progress. It presents the scope of his ambition and his carefully constructed artistic and social project, which has improved as he has gone global, finding subjects in Africa, Brazil, Jamaica and Haiti. It shows his willingness to risk and fail. The primary flaw is his seeming indifference to the physicality of painting, as he more or less said in a recent article, but that may be changing.

However, Mr. Wiley is, as all artists should be, aspirational. In the first gallery, “Conspicuous Fraud series #1 (Eminence)” portrays a young man in a business suit whose black hair swirls around him like a large, powerful serpent. It is so cursorily painted as to seem unfinished.

Continue reading the main storyContinue reading the main story
His later paintings adhere to a formula of repeating elements: figure, pose, garments, props, background, as do most portraits. The problem is that in many of his efforts, the elements battle one another. The figures, which are painted by Mr. Wiley, convey a certain intensity, but the backgrounds, painted by assistants, often seem skimpy, filled in, not quite up to the task. The imbalance can be even worse in canvases that replicate the actual setting of the borrowed work, as in “Gossiping Women” and “Santos Dumont: The Father of Aviation II,” in which marvelously solid subjects (two women and two men respectively) are set in landscapes that resemble sloppy stage sets or images painted by numbers.

The patterned backgrounds are especially overdone in the first paintings Mr. Wiley made of young black women, a 2011 series titled “An Economy of Grace.” For this he went all out, outfitting the women in Givenchy gowns, with piled-up hair and elaborate makeup. It doesn’t help that they also seem ill-at-ease, having been removed from the comfort zone of their own clothing in a way that their male counterparts are not. The fashion photographs that Mr. Wiley orchestrated for a recent issue of New York magazine, using some of the same models, are better. And so are his latest paintings of women in everyday dress: especially “The Sisters Zénaïde and Charlotte Bonaparte,” after another Jacques-Louis David, where two young women, seated, reading a letter before what may be the artist’s simplest background pattern, based on a William Morris design.

A general complaint here is that the labels cite the paintings’ high-art sources intermittently. The origins of the backgrounds are almost never mentioned. Full disclosure for each would strengthen the show.

But aspiration pays off. Like the artist’s most recent paintings of women, his three small and highly detailed portraits based on Hans Memling in the show’s final galleries end the exhibition on a high note, especially the muscular, slightly androgynous Rasta-braided subject of “After Memling’s Portrait of a Man in a Red Hat.” This is perhaps the only work in the show that you can imagine seeing anywhere near its Flemish original. The smooth pore-less surfaces and intimacy of Mr. Wiley’s effort have a rare physical and emotional concentration. Now that he has our attention, he may find his true métier working small, in oil on wood panel, in the manner of Northern Europe’s self-effacing early portraitists. At least for a while.

Correction: February 20, 2015
An earlier version of this review misidentified the artist who made the painting on which Mr. Wiley's “Equestrian Portrait of King Philip II (Michael Jackson)” is based. He was Peter Paul Rubens, not Jacques-Louis David, whose paintings of Napoleon crossing the Alps inspired another work by Mr. Wiley.

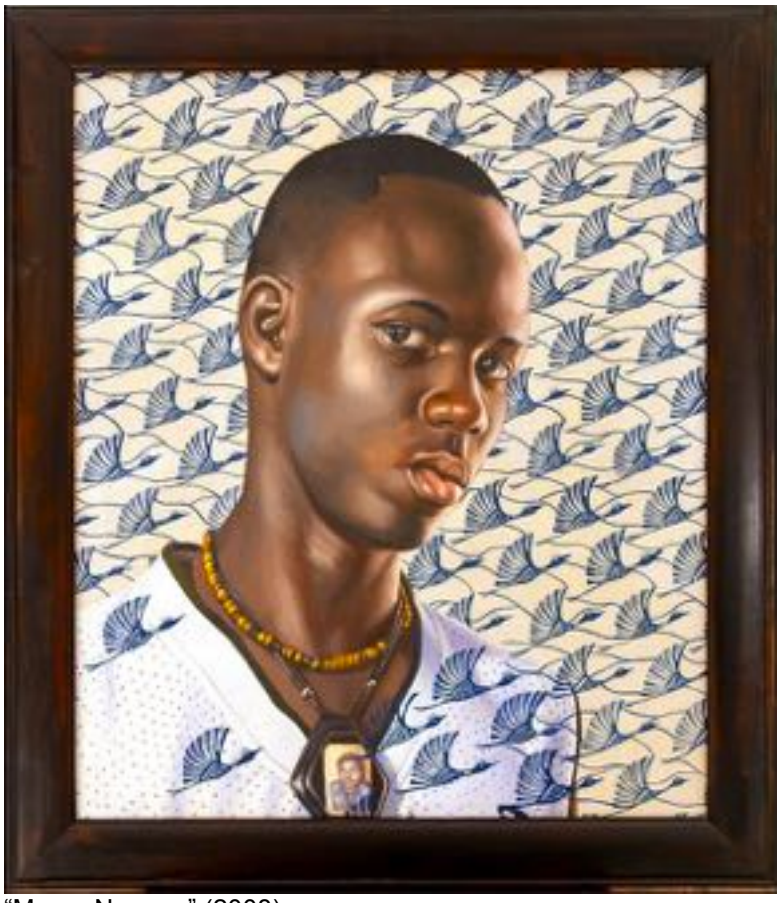
“Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic” runs through May 24 at the Brooklyn Museum, 200 Eastern Parkway, Brooklyn; 718-638-5000, brooklynmuseum.org.

“The Sisters Zénaïde and Charlotte Bonaparte” (2014), left, and “The Two Sisters” (2012).
Bryon Smith for The New York Times

“Saint John in the Wilderness” (2013).
Byron Smith for The New York Times

“Dogon Couple” (2008).
Byron Smith for The New York Times

“After Memling’s Portrait of a Man in a Red Hat” (2013).
Kehinde Wiley, Collection of Phoenix Art Museum



“Mame Ngagne” (2008).
Kehinde Wiley, Private Collection

Byzantine-style icon paintings.
Byron Smith for The New York Times

“Ibrahima Sacko” (2008).
Kehinde Wiley, Collection of Shaill Jhaveri

“Shantavia Beale II” (2012).
Kehinde Wiley, Collection of Ana and Lenny Gravier

“Saint Adelaide” (2014).
Byron Smith for The New York Times

“Likunt Daniel Ailin” (2013).
Byron Smith for The New York Times

From left, “Mrs. Siddons” (2012), “Judith and Holofernes” (2012) and “Mrs. Waldorf Astor” (2012).
Byron Smith for The New York Times

“Equestrian Portrait of Kin

La Force, Thessaly. “Kehinde Wiley’s Spring: The Clothes of the Season, Worn by the Artist’s Muses,” *New York Magazine*, February 8, 2015.

NEW YORK

Kehinde Wiley’s Spring: The Clothes of the Season, Worn by the Artist’s Muses

KEHINDE WILEY’S SPRING FASHION PORTFOLIO
Khalidiah Asante
Dress by Michael Kors, available at 790 Madison Ave.; 212-452-4685.

“I wanted beautiful women,” says the 37-year-old artist Kehinde Wiley. It was the summer of 2011, and Wiley — known primarily for his ornate, classical-style portraits of young black men — was scouting the streets of Harlem, Brooklyn, and Queens for new subjects. Female subjects, for his first formal attempt at painting women. “I knew that I wanted to cast a broad net and not go within the fashion-world-model look. I wanted women who had a sense of self-possession and a kind of haughtiness that you can just pick up on.” With his team of two or three plus a camera crew (the project was filmed for a PBS documentary called *Kehinde Wiley: An Economy of Grace*), he took scouting snapshots on the street, eventually whittling his list of subjects down to just seven. Over the next several months, Wiley photographed them, had them fitted for haute-couture gowns designed by Riccardo Tisci at Givenchy, then painted them large-scale, in works modeled after French and British portraits from the 18th and 19th centuries (pictured

this page). A number of them will be on display at a retrospective of Wiley's work opening February 20 at the Brooklyn Museum, in what will likely be one of the big exhibitions of the winter.

Here, in a portfolio of original photographs for *New York*, Wiley updates those paintings — six of the same women, styled in this season's gowns from the Row, Chloé, Erdem, Rodarte, and others and staged, as his paintings are, to seem both out of time and sumptuously of the moment. He calls the photographs, like the paintings, "intelligent, wasteful acts of spending." With their exaggerated hair and surreal makeup, and accessorized with jewels, the women look both regal and demure. "What we wanted to do was to play up the real world within the language of glamour," Wiley says. "I wanted to have a reprise of that moment, to go back to this idea of fashion and art having something in common, the idea that fashion could change the perception of an individual."

The women hail from a variety of backgrounds. Ena Johnson, 25, is studying for her nursing degree. Candice Stevens, 30, works for the Department of Correction. Shantavia Beale, 23, is a mother of two. But Wiley isn't interested in turning anyone into a Cinderella story. "He portrayed us in a beautiful way without whitewashing our representation," recalls Johnson of the first time she saw Wiley's paintings. "He let little details about us shine through, things that are cultural — that are human. In the painting of Treisha, he painted on her nail designs." Khalidiah Asante, 28 and an art teacher, says of her experience: "I have always been self-conscious about my feet. I'm a dancer, I have calluses underneath my feet that I'd never want to get rid of, because I need them. But when I was younger I wasn't really happy or confident about that, but the fact that he got every detail of my foot, every wrinkle — God, that is wonderful — the part I really hate about my body, I was like, Wow, this is *gorgeous*."

"We need to see more positive representations of ourselves," Johnson says. "There's too much negative. When I was in the Chelsea gallery, my daughter pointed me out, and that was an experience that was so amazing, to be seen in that light."

Styling by Rebecca Ramsey; makeup by Deja Smith for DD-Pro using Makeup Forever; hair by Dee Trannybear for DD-Pro using Redken.

**This article appears in the February 9, 2015 issue of New York Magazine.*

KEHINDE WILEY'S SPRING FASHION PORTFOLIO
Ena Johnson
Dress by Valentino, available at valentino.com.
Photo: Kehinde Wiley

KEHINDE WILEY'S SPRING FASHION PORTFOLIO
Treisha Lowe
Dress by Blumarine, available at blumarine.com.
Photo: Kehinde Wiley

KEHINDE WILEY'S SPRING FASHION PORTFOLIO
Candice Stevens
Dress and wrap by the Row, available at neimanmarcus.com.
Photo: Kehinde Wiley

KEHINDE WILEY'S SPRING FASHION PORTFOLIO
Shantavia Beale
Dress by Emilio Pucci, available at 855 Madison Ave.; 212-752-4777.
Photo: Kehinde Wiley

KEHINDE WILEY'S SPRING FASHION PORTFOLIO
Candice Stevens
Dress by Chloé, available at Bergdorf Goodman, 754 Fifth Ave.; 212-753-7300.
Photo: Kehinde Wiley

KEHINDE WILEY'S SPRING FASHION PORTFOLIO
Dacia Carter
Dress by Erdem, available at erdem.com.
Photo: Kehinde Wiley

KEHINDE WILEY'S SPRING FASHION PORTFOLIO
Khalidiah Asante
Dress by Rodarte, to order at Ikram; 312-587-1000; shoes by Marc Jacobs, available at 163 Mercer St.; 212-343-1490.
Photo: Kehinde Wiley

KEHINDE WILEY'S SPRING FASHION PORTFOLIO
Treisha Lowe
Dress by Chloé, available at Saks Fifth Ave.; 611 Fifth Ave.; 212-753-4000.
Photo: Kehinde Wiley

KEHINDE WILEY'S SPRING FASHION PORTFOLIO
Ena Johnson
Dress by Giorgio Armani, available at 760 Madison Ave.; 212-988-9191.
Photo: Kehinde Wiley

KEHINDE WILEY'S SPRING FASHION PORTFOLIO
Kehinde Wiley's Muses As They First Appeared, On Canvas, In 2012
Dacia Carter and Khalidiah Asante
Photo: Jason Wyche/Courtesy of Sean Kelly, New York

KEHINDE WILEY'S SPRING FASHION PORTFOLIO
Kehinde Wiley's Muses As They First Appeared, On Canvas, In 2012
Treisha Lowe
Photo: Jason Wyche/Courtesy of Sean Kelly, New York

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Kehinde Wiley's Muses As They First Appeared, On Canvas, In 2012
Shantavia Beale
Photo: Jason Wyche/Courtesy of Sean Kelly, New York

KEHINDE WILEY'S SPRING FASHION PORTFOLIO
Kehinde Wiley's Muses As They First Appeared, On Canvas, In 2012
Ena Johnson
Photo: Jason Wyche/Courtesy of Sean Kelly, New York

Solomon, Deborah. “Kehinde Wiley Puts a Classical Spin on His Contemporary Subjects.” *The New York Times*, January 28, 2015.

The New York Times

Kehinde Wiley Puts a Classical Spin on His Contemporary Subjects

CreditChad Batka for The New York Times

Kehinde Wiley began thinking about the stereotypes that shadow black men long before events in Ferguson, Mo., pushed the phrase “unarmed black man” back into the headlines and inaugurated a new wave of the civil rights movement.

“I know how young black men are seen,” he said on a recent winter afternoon in his studio in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn. “They’re boys, scared little boys oftentimes. I was one of them. I was completely afraid of the Los Angeles Police Department.” He grew up in South-Central Los Angeles and was 14 when four white police officers were acquitted in the videotaped beating of Rodney King; riots flared in the neighborhood.

Now 37, Mr. Wiley is one of the most celebrated painters of his generation. He is known for vibrant, photo-based portraits of young black men (and occasionally women) who are the opposite of scared — they gaze out at us coolly, their images mashed up with rococo-style frills and empowering poses culled from art history. He maintains studios in China and Senegal in addition to New York. As a self-described gay man and the son of an African-American mother and a Nigerian father, he offers a model of the artist as multicultural itinerant.

At the moment, Mr. Wiley’s work seems to be everywhere, from the set of the Fox drama “Empire” to all of the right institutions. His first museum retrospective opens at the Brooklyn Museum on Feb. 20, before traveling to museums in Fort Worth, Seattle and Richmond, Va. In January, he was summoned to Washington to receive a Medal of Arts from the State Department. (“I brought my mother as my date,” he said.)

A Wiley painting is easy to recognize. More often than not, it shows a solitary figure, an attractive man in his 20s, enacting a scene from an old-master painting. Dressed in contemporary garb — a hooded sweatshirt, perhaps, or a Denver Broncos jersey — the man might be crossing the Swiss Alps on horseback with the brio of Napoleon or glancing upward, prophet-style, golden light encircling his head. Typically the man has a lean frame, and his clear skin gives off a coppery sheen. His posture is regal: shoulders rolled back, head turned slightly to reveal the elegant sweep of a jawline.

Every Wiley painting is a two-punch affair — the masculine figures contrast sharply with the ornately patterned, Skittles-bright backdrops unfurling behind them. Based on design sources as varied as Victorian wallpaper and Renaissance tapestries, the backgrounds can look as if thousands of curling petals had somehow been blown into geometric formations across the canvas. For the moment depicted in the painting, the men are protected and invincible, inhabiting an Arcadian realm far removed from the grit of the artist's childhood.

Mr. Wiley's champions tend to view his work in overt political terms. He redresses the absence of nonwhite faces in museum masterpieces, "using the power of images to remedy the historical invisibility of black men and women," as Eugenie Tsai, the curator of the Brooklyn Museum show, observes in the accompanying catalog.

But you can also read his work in psychological terms, and Mr. Wiley himself emphasizes the never-ending tension in the paintings between their male and female aspects. "It's about a figure in the landscape," he said of his output, adding that the backdrops symbolize the land. "For me the landscape is the irrational. Nature is the woman. Nature is the black, the brown, the other." He added, "That's the logic behind it, but everyone has their own sort of reading."

Mr. Wiley, who attended graduate art school at Yale, has a taste for academic language. During our conversation he used the words "slippage" and "surd," the last of which sent me to the dictionary. It's a math term for irrational numbers with no square root.

Surd, in truth, seems to capture something essential about Mr. Wiley, his distrust of reductive explanations. Although he has a warm manner and a winning gap-tooth smile, there is an aloofness about him, too, especially when he does not care for a question. I asked him whether he felt an affinity with the work of Chuck Close, who similarly paints portraits that disclose next to nothing about their subjects.

He fetishizes the material process instead of an external story," he said.

What about John Currin, his fellow Yalie and devotee of brazen pastiche? "We have different projects," was Mr. Wiley's businesslike reply.

Even his sexuality, by his description, defies categorization. "My sexuality is not black and white," he said. "I'm a gay man who has occasionally drifted. I am not bi. I've had perfectly pleasant romances with women, but they weren't sustainable. My passion wasn't there. I would always be looking at guys."

Before meeting Mr. Wiley, I had seen a photograph of him in a magazine and was struck by his stylishness. He was wearing a suit whose jazzy stripes matched the background of one of his paintings. Jeffrey Deitch, the art dealer who gave Mr. Wiley his first one-man show in New York and represented him for a decade, had urged me, only half-jokingly, to try to look in the artist's bedroom closet if I wanted to understand him. It contains, Mr. Deitch said, dozens of custom-made suits, many of them by Ron & Ron, a tony label founded by Haitian twins.

Mr. Wiley's studio does not look like the haunt of a dandy. You enter the building by buzzing past a steel-frame security door that opens onto a long, sunless courtyard. The heat wasn't working on the day of my visit, and the artist met me at the door bundled in layers of paint-stained work clothes. He proposed that we talk in a small front office warmed by a space heater, and night was already falling.

A fish tank glowed with blue light. Above it hung what appeared to be a Basquiat from the '80s, a smattering of cryptic words ("teeth," for instance) scratched into its brushy surface. When I complimented the painting, Mr. Wiley replied mischievously, "I painted it myself."

Clearly, he has a gift for mimicry. He can do a Velázquez. He can do a Jacques-Louis David. He can do a Basquiat. His devotion to pastiche has kept him operating on a meta level, and perhaps at a deliberate remove from his past. "The stuff I do is a type of long-form autobiography," he said, with his usual attention to paradox, "but the starting place is not me."

The artist said he never met his father during his childhood, or even saw a photograph of him. Isaiah D. Obot — a Nigerian citizen who came to the United States as a scholarship student — returned to Africa after finishing his studies. He went on to have a second family in Nigeria and a substantial career in city planning.

The artist's mother, Freddie Mae Wiley, a Texas native, studied linguistics and eventually became a teacher. Kehinde was the fifth of her six children, and a twin. For most of his childhood, he said, the family subsisted on welfare checks and whatever spare change came in from his mother's thrift shop. The store didn't have a sign or a retail space, other than a patch of sidewalk in front of the house on West Jefferson Avenue. But everyone in the neighborhood thought of it as Freddie's Store. Mr. Wiley recalls the mounds of merchandise: used books, windup Victrolas, tarnished gold-leaf picture frames, porcelain figurines of rosy-cheeked lovers.

"It was like 'Sanford and Son,' " he said, referring to the '70s sitcom about two men with a salvage shop, "junk everywhere."

The children would help their mother scout for new inventory, driving around in a Dodge van that backfired noisily. "That was the more embarrassing part," he recalled. He added, "You're 11, and you don't want to be seen jumping out to go through your neighbor's garbage. That's social death!"

At 11, everything changed. His mom enrolled him in a free art course at a state college. Suddenly, he knew how he wanted to spend his life; his career unfolded with remarkable velocity. He attended college at the San Francisco Art Institute, before winning a scholarship to Yale. He arrived in New York in 2001 as an artist-in-residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem.

Since then, Mr. Wiley has "street-cast" his paintings, heading out to scout for models — initially along the jammed sidewalks on 125th Street in Harlem and later, when he had enough money, overseas, in China, Israel and elsewhere.

His paintings all begin with an exchange of glances between artist and subject. Mr. Wiley describes the process as "this serendipitous thing where I am in the streets running into people who resonate with me, whether for cultural or sexual reasons. My type is rooted in my own sexual desire."

He added, with amusement, "Most people turn me down." The willing few are instructed to come to his studio to pose for photographs that serve as source material for the portraits.

Mr. Wiley delegates much of his production to a bevy of assistants, so much so that he has been accused of outsourcing his entire output. "Wiley's paintings are created by teams of assistants in China," the critic Ben Davis observed in an ulcerous review at BlouinArtinfo.com in 2012.

At the time, Mr. Wiley had declined to say much about his process, but during our meeting, he was candid about the division of labor. In general, he said, his assistants are responsible for painting the super-busy, detail-packed backgrounds. "Let's face it," he said, "I'm not doing all that."

After a background is laid in place, he starts in on the figure, the gently lit face and body, which he seems to view as the heart of his work. Rendering skin tones, especially black and brown ones, is a subtle process, and, if you look closely at a patch of cheek or forehead in his paintings, you are likely to notice an array of indigo blues and alizarin reds.

Even so, his surfaces are thinly painted, and he speaks with distaste for the Expressionist tradition of visible brush strokes. "My work is not about paint," he told me. "It's about paint at the service of something else. It is not about gooey, chest-beating, macho '50s abstraction that allows paint to sit up on the surface as subject matter about paint," he said.

Mr. Wiley has his share of critics who say his work is formulaic and repetitive. Whether he's working in oil or watercolor, he deploys the same strategy of inserting dark-skinned figures into very white masterpieces of the past.

To be fair, he has varied his subjects over the years. In 2012, for his debut show at the Sean Kelly Gallery, he added women to his roster of models. (“It was my idea,” Mr. Kelly said, explaining that he was pushing Mr. Wiley to branch out.) Mr. Wiley has also ventured into sculpture, and his coming show at the Brooklyn Museum will include six stained-glass windows as well as a few bronze heads that can put you in mind of the portrait busts of Jean-Antoine Houdon, who flourished during the French Enlightenment.

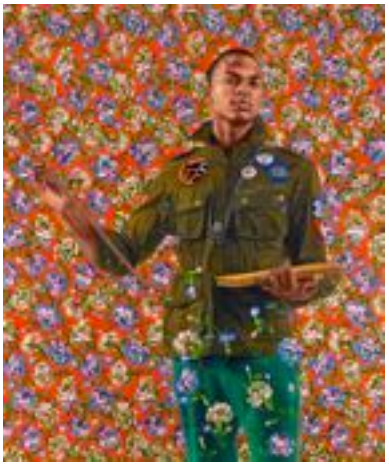
“I am interested in evolution within my thinking,” he said. “I am not interested in the evolution of my paint. If I made buttery, thick paintings, there would be critics of that. You just have to proceed.”

In all fairness, he is only 37, which is still young for an artist. It would make more sense to talk about his evolution when he is 60 or 70. See you back here then.

Correction: February 8, 2015
An article last Sunday about the painter Kehinde Wiley, using outdated information from the Brooklyn Museum, misstated the number of stained-glass works in his coming exhibition at the museum. There will be six, not two.

Kehinde Wiley with his mother, Freddie Mae Wiley, at a reception in Washington in January.

Kehinde Wiley at his Williamsburg, Brooklyn, studio with his painting “Jose Alberto de la Cruz Diaz and Luis Nunez” (2013). Credit Chad Batka for The New York Times



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Saito, Stephen. “Interview: Jeff Dupre on Keeping up With Kehinde Wiley for ‘An Economy of Grace’,” *The Moveable Fest,* December 18, 2014.

THE MOVEABLE FEST

INTERVIEW: JEFF DUPRE ON KEEPING UP WITH KEHINDE WILEY FOR “AN ECONOMY OF GRACE”

On the Oscar-shortlisted short about one of the world's most provocative young artists.

“Documentary films are all about having some idea about the story you want to tell and then being surprised again and again over the course of the shoot,” says Jeff Dupre, director of “Kehinde Wiley: An Economy of Grace.” “This project had surprises built into the concept.”

Having last co-directed a portrait of the ever shape-shifting performance artist Marina Abramović during her famed exhibition at New York’s Museum of Modern Art with Matthew Akers (“The Artist is Present”), Dupre was ready for anything. But while the filmmaker could count on something new every day from his latest subject Kehinde Wiley, the Los Angeles-born, African-American painter who has shaken up the art world with his vivid, lush portraits that place modern subjects of color in the heroic context once afforded to kings and queens by Renaissance artisans, what he couldn’t expect was the two years and the countless visits to cities around the globe that it would take to fully realize his own portrait of the man, a larger than life figure in the midst of a great transition, painting women for the first time after a career of focusing on men.

Dupre’s film, named after the Wiley’s resulting collection of work “An Economy of Grace,” allows audiences to be immersed in Wiley’s world, a constant swirl of inspiration and extravagance. One minute Wiley’s in Israel or China preparing for a gallery opening, the next he’s on the streets of New York interviewing potential subjects for his next series, fitting in between a trip to Paris to Givenchy to nail down the details on the fitted gowns his subjects will be painted in. As Dupre chronicles, all of it is a long way from his birthplace of South Central Los Angeles where Wiley’s frequent escapes to the Huntington Gardens in Pasadena led to his eventual rechristening as an internationally renowned artist.

Yet just as Wiley's canvases fuse the past and the present to feel undeniably of the moment, Dupre's film is just as immediate, balancing the time spent in the surreal and rarefied air that the painter inhabits with equal consideration given to the subjects of his work who aren't as accustomed to the spotlight and undergo a transformation of their own by being included in one of his works. The result is itself is a work of art, one recognized by the Academy's documentary branch as one of the best shorts of the year to go by its inclusion on their shortlist of films that could be eventually nominated for an Oscar and recently, Dupre took the time to speak about the wild ride he took with Wiley and hanging on with every surprise that came his way. Also, since the film has been made available online by PBS, you can watch it right below.

How did this come about?

[The gallerist] Sean Kelly represents Marina Abramović and I made a film about her called "The Artist is Present." I met Kehinde through Marina and through Sean, who has a stable of artists who are all amazing. So Sean [explained] how Kehinde had always painted men and he was about to embark on a series where he was painting women for the first time and how it was time for him to challenge himself in that way and take on something new. I thought it sounded like a great idea for a film because the film about Marina was her getting ready for this show at MoMA, then with Kehinde, he also has this distinct process that he goes through when he does a new series of paintings.

Kehinde was about a month away from going over to Paris to look at the paintings that would be the inspiration for "An Economy of Grace" and he asked me, do I want to go to Paris with him to walk around the Louvre? And I said sure. [laughs] Simultaneously, he was doing his street casting, so we would go out to Harlem or Brooklyn or Queens where he was just going up to people he thought were interesting and asked them if they're interested in being in the painting. So we were off to the races. We filmed the street casting, we went to Paris, [where] he selected the paintings that would serve as the inspiration and met with Ricardo Tisci at Givenchy and filmed their collaboration, which was really interesting to see – a painter and one of the most renowned fashion designers in the world working together. That was great.

Is there something different about filming artists that you have to do to convey what makes them special to the screen?

The main thing you have to do as a filmmaker is attempt to create a work of art in response to their work of art. With someone as extraordinary as Marina, who has this unbelievable ability to create and project a mythology about herself, the film had to aspire to that mythological scale. With Kehinde, he's the most incredibly vivid character and his work is so stunning that you have to make a film that is commensurate with that level of artistry, so that was the challenge. I can't make something that's dowdy. [laughs] It has to make a big impact.

Given his great attention to presentation and recontextualization, it seemed particularly poignant when you catch him getting a haircut. What was that moment like to film?

Yeah, the day when we filmed that scene, we went over to get him because we were going to go up to Harlem to film him doing a bunch of stuff at the museum. We got there a little bit early and [someone said], “Oh, he’s going to get his hair cut.” And I was like,”What!?! Great!” [laughs] Because I knew we would capture some kind of window into who he is. The barber was this really interesting guy and the conversation they just struck up conversation naturally was really revealing. He was this very kind of macho guy and Kehinde started asking him what he thought of his work and it was just really interesting to hear what he had to say because so much of Kehinde’s work is about shifting your perspective on gender, on race and on sexuality, so hearing it straight from the guy’s mouth was one of the great points of reference.

Your producer Jessica Chermayeff has spoken quite eloquently on the race and gender issues that Kehinde’s work raises, but I’m wondering whether you felt intimidated initially in telling this story, given you’re coming from a different place?

No, I feel like my job as a filmmaker is to create a portrait of him that’s true to my experience of him and to really let him speak for himself and let the film crystallize what his perspective is. And for him, his perspective shifts a lot. One stumbling block for a while was wondering, “Are you trying to capture who these women are and convey that to the world in the way that a Rembrandt [would], representing the souls of those people so effectively?” And for him, [the answer is], “No, that’s not what I’m doing. I’m actually creating this performance of self, so it’s not about authenticity. It’s not about these traditional ideas of a window into the soul.” That was something I didn’t quite understand at first, then I got it. When he started talking about “Paris is Burning,” the documentary, as something that meant a lot to him, that was a very interesting way in to understanding his work.

Did you feel he was at all apprehensive at first about letting you into his process, particularly at such a transitional moment for him as an artist?

He’s very self-assured. At first, it was different for him to have a giant camera and a sound man following him as he’s casting people, but he got over it very quickly. He knows how to put on a show whether the camera’s there or not. [laughs] He’s just an incredibly charming person, so you always consider yourself very lucky when the subject of your movie delivers the way he delivers.

There’s so many different locations in the film. How much travel was there?

It was a lot of travel. We also went to Miami with him for Art Basel, so not even everything is in the film. But he’s a globetrotter and it’s actually part of his process. He’s constantly out in the world absorbing so many different things, so many different ideas. And he likes to go to Paris and get inspiration at the Louvre and he has a studio in China, but he’s casting people in New York. He loves that global mix.

You mentioned the surprises. Did this turn out to be something different than what you envisioned it to be?

It's a process film, so I knew there was going to be a beginning, middle and end. I knew what the steps would be along the way, but the things you never count on are the characters you're going to meet and the way they make you laugh or make you think about things. Those are always the surprises and it was very moving and very interesting to get to know these women and to have this window into how the art world works and to get an inside look at an artist's career and how it builds. It was just a real privilege.

Williams, Erin. “Kehinde Wiley explains his ‘An Economy of Grace’ paintings focusing on black women,” *The Washington Post*, October 4, 2014.

The Washington Post

Kehinde Wiley explains his ‘An Economy of Grace’ paintings focusing on black women

Kehinde Wiley paints in his New York Studio. (Jessica Chermayeff/Copyright Show of Force)

Over the past decade, artist Kehinde Wiley has created -larger-than-life paintings of black men in everyday culture. The Los Angeles native and Yale-educated portrait painter has captured everyone from men on the street to rapper LL Cool J (whose painting hung in the National Portrait Gallery). But in 2012, he changed his focus to black women. Wiley recruited women off the streets of New York, draped them in flowing gowns and created the exhibition titled “An Economy of Grace” that was on view at the Sean Kelly Gallery in New York. The process was filmed and made into a documentary of the same name and has garnered recognition from the Toronto Reel Artists Film Festival and South By Southwest Film Festival, where it won the Jury Prize for Best Documentary Short.

We spoke with the 37-year-old artist, who will be presenting his first retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum in 2015, about his decision to focus on women for this project..

The documentary premiered on PBS in September and can now be viewed online at PBS.org.

Q. Your work has been largely focused on the image of men in modern society, starting with the streets of Harlem and expanding into an international brand. What made you arrive at the idea of creating work that was focused on women?

A. In the end, so much of what I wanted to do was to have a body of work that exhaustively looked at black American notions of masculinity. How we look at black men — how they’re perceived in public and private spaces — and to really examine that, going from every possible angle. And so far as women were concerned, I always had been curious about how they would fit into my vocabulary, but I didn’t know how

to go about [making] a fresh new body of work. I didn't think it was appropriate to thoughtlessly remake the same type of work and just place women in that field. I thought it would be useful to look at the history of how women had been seen in paintings, how they'd been portrayed in paintings, and how specifically a painting made in the 21st century, they both acknowledge and respond and accept and protest to all of those beautiful and terrible things from the past.

Q. In the documentary, we see the women go through a heavily outward transformative process — they wear gowns, headpieces and makeup — not unlike the paintings of women of status in earlier centuries.

A. I really thought it was important to look at the language of power as opposed to our historical painting. But also I think in many ways it was to sort of pay homage to all the myriad black women in my own life. It's amidst the sometimes daunting realities of thinking about my own mother and her story, thinking about my aunts, and sort of the space and the circle of women that surrounded me as a man and paying homage to that in a body of work that used the language and power of dignity but also folds that into a conversation around our historical dignity and how that language has been used and manipulated.

Q. At the beginning of the documentary, you are discussing the idea of the exotic in everyday culture, and you say "I think that when I watch television or participate in media culture in America, sometimes the way that I've seen black people being portrayed in this country feels very strange and exotic, because it has nothing to do with the life that I've lived or the people that I've known." In examining the recent events of the death of Mike Brown, a young African American man in Ferguson, Mo., how can your artwork continue to mold the conversation of the image of the modern-day black man?

A. I think it gets to what the heart of what my work is about. So what does it feel like to be in this colored skin that I inhabit every single day? The difference between the reality of that and knowing your own personal history, your own desires and longings and humanity. And then watching in the public sphere your own precepts and thoughts around it — you're reduced to this charade, this two-dimensional caricature.

The heart of what my work is about is to be able to flesh out the tension and anxieties of life at the intersection between those two places. Not to run away from it but to be able to accept that conflict, and to be able to create images that at once celebrate and not denounce the very confusing state of being. And so far, as the nation is still going through this and coming to grips with the way they view black men in the streets of Ferguson or New York or Los Angeles, it shows that in a very real way whilst we have the first African American president, as we may think gains [are being made], it remains a work in progress.

Handout image: "Princess Victoire of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha." (Jason Wyche/Copyright Kehinde Wiley, Courtesy Sean Kelly)

Guiducci, Mark. “Watch an Exclusive Video of Painter Kehinde Wiley’s Collaboration with Riccardo Tisci,” *Vogue*, August 29, 2014.

VOGUE

Watch an Exclusive Video of Painter Kehinde Wiley’s Collaboration with Riccardo Tisci

Mrs. Graham, 2012

Princess Victoire of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, 2012

Artist Kehinde Wiley is best known for painting African-American men and rendering them in the lofty, grand manner of Old Master pictures. But in 2012, Wiley set his gaze to women, premiering “An Economy of Grace,” a much-hyped body of work in which he notably employed female models for the first time. Hailing from Harlem, Brooklyn, and Queens, the women ranged from a Rikers Island prison guard to a teen mother completing the G.E.D. to a nurse with ambitions to start an art gallery. Wiley reimagined the subjects in poses inspired by a selection of works at the Louvre and, in an effort to attain the glamour of the ancien régime, asked Riccardo Tisci to make the Givenchy couture dresses that each wears for her sitting.

Filmmaker Jeff Dupre captured the entire process of creating “An Economy of Grace,” from initial preparations in Paris to final presentation at the Sean Kelly Gallery, in a film that debuted at the Reel

Artists Film Festival in Toronto earlier this year. Vogue.com's exclusive preview centers on one of Wiley's meetings with Tisci, wherein the painter introduces the designer to John Singer Sargent'sMadame X and Tisci muses on the varying virtues of organza, chiffon, and tulle, the layering effect of which he brilliantly compares to snow. The rest of the documentary is just as fun and at times quite poignant—like art-world reality television—and premieres next Friday, September 5 on PBS.

"Riding the Slipstream: Artist Kehinde Wiley Evokes Old Masters and Crowns Modern Kings of Culture," *Vanity Fair*, August 4, 2014.

VANITY FAIR

Riding the Slipstream: Artist Kehinde Wiley Evokes Old Masters and Crowns Modern Kings of Culture

Photograph by Martin Schoeller

"What you see isn't always what you get," says award-winning, genre-busting artist Kehinde Wiley, referring cannily to both his work and himself. "When you look at it, you slow down and something *changes.*"

A revolutionary whose powerful portraits of young, African American men rendered in the style of the old masters defied expectation and set the art world abuzz, Wiley is deeply conscious of the context in which his work appears.

"I think my life has been transformed by the ability to take things that exist in the world and look at them more closely. I think that's what art does at its best: it allows us to slow down," Wiley says. "We're contending with pop culture, digital media, and all these moving things. As a painter, I'm taking paint and coaxing images into the world and I'm asking the viewer to stop. As opposed to that painting changing, it's the *viewer* who has to stop, look, and hopefully change on some level." Change is a constant force in Wiley's life, one characterized by dramatic transformation through sheer will, passion, and a drive that has helped him transcend boundaries and defy expectations. "I'm that kid who doesn't necessarily meet up with the classic story of a painter," Wiley says. "I didn't come from a background of privilege. I came from a family where my mother was trying to

raise six kids and educate herself at the same time. I came from a background where access to museum culture was rarely granted and, when you got it, people wondered what the hell you were doing there."

Rather than be deterred by his circumstances, Wiley was inspired to beat the odds and make his mark as an artist. "Being a kid with black skin in South Central, Los Angeles, in a part of the world where opportunity didn't necessarily knock every day is what gave me this sensibility and drove me to explore my fascination with art."

An outsider who found his way in to the art world, Wiley is working to change the terms of the cultural agenda. "What I try to do is defy expectations in terms of boundaries, whether it is high or low art, pop culture, or fine-art culture. My work is about reconciling myriad cultural influences and bringing them into one picture."

His very presence as a leading figure tells its own tale of transcendence from the periphery to the center of influence. “Let’s face it: all art is about power,” Wiley says. “I am fascinated by power within art. It’s about your desire to be seen; it’s about communication. All art presupposes an audience.”

By breaking down boundaries, Wiley has expanded his audience considerably and certainly brought more faces of color into museums around the world. In some of his most seminal, iconic work, Wiley celebrates the tradition of great narrative paintings, exploring themes of scale, force, and brute strength. “It’s boy stuff,” he says, “and sometimes that boy stuff can be quite destructive. What happens when you use those tools to really delve into what those boys have been up to for the last 800 years? My work turns that language into something that says, ‘enough of that already.’ It explores the middle space where people aren’t being celebrated; tipping scales in favor of those who are typically overlooked and unheard, and then juxtaposing that against the state of grace and strength that royalty occupies.”

Royalty is a subject of particular interest to Wiley, especially in his partnership with Grey Goose as it celebrates the launch of Grey Goose Le Melon, known as “the flavored vodka crafted from Cavaillon melons—the fruit of kings.” For this newest variety of “the world’s best-tasting vodka,” Grey Goose creator and *maître de chai* Francois Thibault selected the essence of Cavaillon melons from Provence, fruit that is particularly prized by French kings, nobility, and artists. And indeed, the Grey Goose Le Melon “Modern Kings of Culture” series celebrates those who “Fly Beyond” all expectations to achieve the extraordinary in the fields of film, music, and sport.
Wiley is creating a series of custom portraits honoring these newly crowned “modern kings of culture,” including filmmaker Spike Lee, music producer Kasseem Dean (a.k.a. Swizz Beatz), and two-time Olympic Gold Medal winner and NBA sensation Carmelo Anthony.
“It happened quite organically,” Wiley says of his partnership with Grey Goose. “I put out that I was interested in history and in rethinking the way that kings and queens were being made and celebrated and Grey Goose has a product that plays to the strengths of [that] history. Never in my life did I imagine that a project would put me in the room with Spike Lee, Swizz Beatz, or Carmelo Anthony. In the end, I believe there is a commonality between myself and Grey Goose in celebrating this spirit of passion and drive, and I think, when done tastefully, why not explore it together? Bring it on!”

SEANKELLY

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Cochran, Samuel. “Twenty Works Art Basel Miami Beach Is Buzzing About,” *Architectural Digest*, December 2013.

ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

TWENTY WORKS ART BASEL MIAMI BEACH IS BUZZING ABOUT

From bicycles by Ai Weiwei to a spotted scultpure by Yayoi Kusama, *AD* surveys eye-catching works from the global art fair

The Tribute Money III, 2013, by Kehinde Wiley
Sean Kelly

Luke, Ben. “KehindaWiley on his first solo show for Frieze week,” *London Evening Standard,* October 11, 2013.

London Evening Standard

Kehinde Wiley on his first UK solo show for Frieze week

For his first UK show, hip-hop’s portrait artist Kehinde Wiley has turned his attention to the Jamaican dancehall with dazzling results. It’s all about history and identity, he tells Ben Luke

Kingston parade: Alexander I, Emperor of Russia, after Gerard’s 1817 painting

Kehinde Wiley is already a big art world star. He’s the South Central LA kid who became the darling of the hip-hop scene, with A-list celebrities queuing up to be painted by him; he’s a fixture in American museums, with paintings that reach six figures at auction; and he has studios around the world, in New York, Beijing and Dakar.

Britain has been slower to notice him but that’s set to change as London bursts into brighter-than-usual colour for Frieze week and Wiley’s first UK solo show opens in Mayfair. Once seen, these paintings aren’t forgotten: images of young black people, mainly men, in poses from grand historical portraits, with dazzling flower-patterned backgrounds.

In the new show, all the paintings are based on great British portraits by Joseph Wright of Derby and other masters, and the backdrops are like William Morris on acid. “I’ve turned the volume up on notions of acceptable colour and taste,” the 36-year-old artist tells me from Beijing.

It’s all very bling — and intentionally so, in reference to what Wiley sees as the conspicuous flaunting of money and power in so much historical painting from the imperial and colonial past: a time, he says, when art was “the embodiment of so much of the wealth that was fortifying Europe”.

He's particularly uncomfortable with painting's role as "the iPhone of its time", documenting flora and fauna, "but also documenting peoples in new territories that were considered to be now possessions of the empire".

His relationship with art is a conflicted one, he adds. "I have this love affair with the history of painting but I can't accept the entire project, because clearly there are certain ways of being that are politically incorrect and outmoded."

Of course, there are barely any black faces in the history of western painting and by casting ordinary people of colour from across the world in the roles of the nobility and royalty of the past, Wiley challenges all that.

"I'm in love with the tricks of coaxing paint into form, and making something that's almost a type of Trojan horse," he says. "Where it's striking, it's vibrant and you think only later about some of the broader cultural or political implications, some of the power juxtapositions. All those things are important but I don't want to bore myself, or anyone else for that matter, with making work that's simply didactic."

Colour and taste: A Portrait of James Hamilton, Earl of Arran, based on the 1623 work by Mytens

His London exhibition, The World Stage: Jamaica, is the latest in a series inspired by his recent travels, where he finds a new cast of characters in cities around the world, poses and photographs them, then paints them against his chosen background. Wiley says the project is about "trying to figure out how painting plays a role in these places, in their history, and in the way we look at the people".

Though he has long wanted to show his work in London, he says, "the question has always been how to do it, and meaningfully". The answer was Jamaica, and its colonial relationship to Britain. The paintings are all based on portraits he saw on tours of nine UK galleries, with all the sitters young people he encountered in Jamaica. But while they probe British and Afro-

Caribbean history they are as much about his homeland, he now sees: "They're classically American struggles — to come to terms with who you are and this identity that's been cobbled together over a couple of centuries."

The paintings are based on photos he took of both men and women in sessions in Kingston nightspots.

“What’s interesting is that a lot of those clubs and improvised dancehalls, which are often outdoors, will have cameras and lights set up with a backdrop with clouds or sports cars, or all these aspirational objects pictured in them”, there for revellers to have pictures taken of themselves in their finery. So, Wiley says, when he set up his own camera and backdrop, it “wasn’t anything special”, the clubbers weren’t at all fazed.

Homeland history: a painting of Sir Brooke Boothby, which will be among other new works at Wiley’s new exhibition

Wiley is gay, so I ask how he feels about Jamaica’s appalling record on homosexuality, which remains illegal, and particularly the homophobia endemic in dancehall culture.

“For years I was afraid to go to there,” he says. “As a gay man, I had a really bad taste in my mouth for a lot of the news that I heard coming out of Jamaica.”

He feels his paintings inevitably address the issue because “so much of the work has to do with this charged male beauty”. He’s not interested in “hyper-political ‘free-the-gays’ kind of work because that would be boring” but says that “by virtue of my being there, it sheds light on a specific way of looking at the black male body in public space that rarely comes out of Jamaica”.

The new paintings, just like those from Sri Lanka, Brazil and his other World Stage locations, reflect the huge international influence of black American urban identity, and particularly hip-hop culture. “In the Seventies, no one would have imagined that hip-hop would have gone global,” he says. “It was this outcropping of kids in the Bronx, playing around with poetry and their words and their grievances. Fast forward and it becomes one of our dominant cultural exports.”

Urban identity: another new painting by Wiley of China Samantha Nash

Hip-hop has always been at the heart of his life — and not always in a positive way. He grew up in South Central Los Angeles in the Eighties, an environment which he once said was “driven by some of the defining elements of hip-hop: the violence, antisocial behaviour, streets on fire”.

With a single mother who was intent on doing anything to get him and his siblings out of the neighbourhood, he was sent on numerous free programmes, including, when he was 12, a trip to what was then Leningrad, “to study painting in the forest with these Russians”. He also visited the great LA museums, including Huntington Library and Gardens, with its remarkable collection of British paintings.

He remembers being struck by the “powdered wigs and lapdogs” in the paintings, and by the “huge amount of hushed protocol and ceremony” surrounding them.

“We could barely afford to pay our rent and people were paying for security and having people trim the hedges to house and protect these little paintings. There was something really wasteful, I thought, about it but fabulous at the same time. It was like going to another planet.”

He eventually went to art school in San Francisco, then Yale, and immediately afterwards won a residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2002. At a loose end, he began painting portraits of the young, hip-hop-loving men he met on the Harlem streets. He talked to his sitters about art. “I asked them about what they liked in the collection of art history books that I had, helping them choose their favourite paintings and positioning them as those paintings — and the process began.”

Flower power: in his new Jamaican series, Kehinde Wiley's W Graham Robertson is inspired by John Singer Sargent

That residency prompted his first New York exhibition, and he has never looked back. By 2005, he was depicting hip-hop royalty, including Ice T and LL Cool J. For a time, he was best known for these celebrity paintings, but he has always been more interested in what he calls “under-served and invisible communities”, hence his desire to seek them out all over the world.

“My inbox is full of celebrated people who’d pay a lot of money to be featured in those images,” he says. “But what gets me most excited when I step back from a painting at the end of the day and imagine it ultimately hanging in a museum somewhere, is knowing that this person was minding their own business, trying to get to work, and all of the ceremony and all of the trappings of importance and the resistance of death that painting allows just shined on this person as a matter of chance.”

Kehinde Wiley’s The World Stage: Jamaica *is at Stephen Friedman Gallery, W1 (020 7494 1434, stephenfriedman.com) from Tuesday until November 16.*

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

FLATT

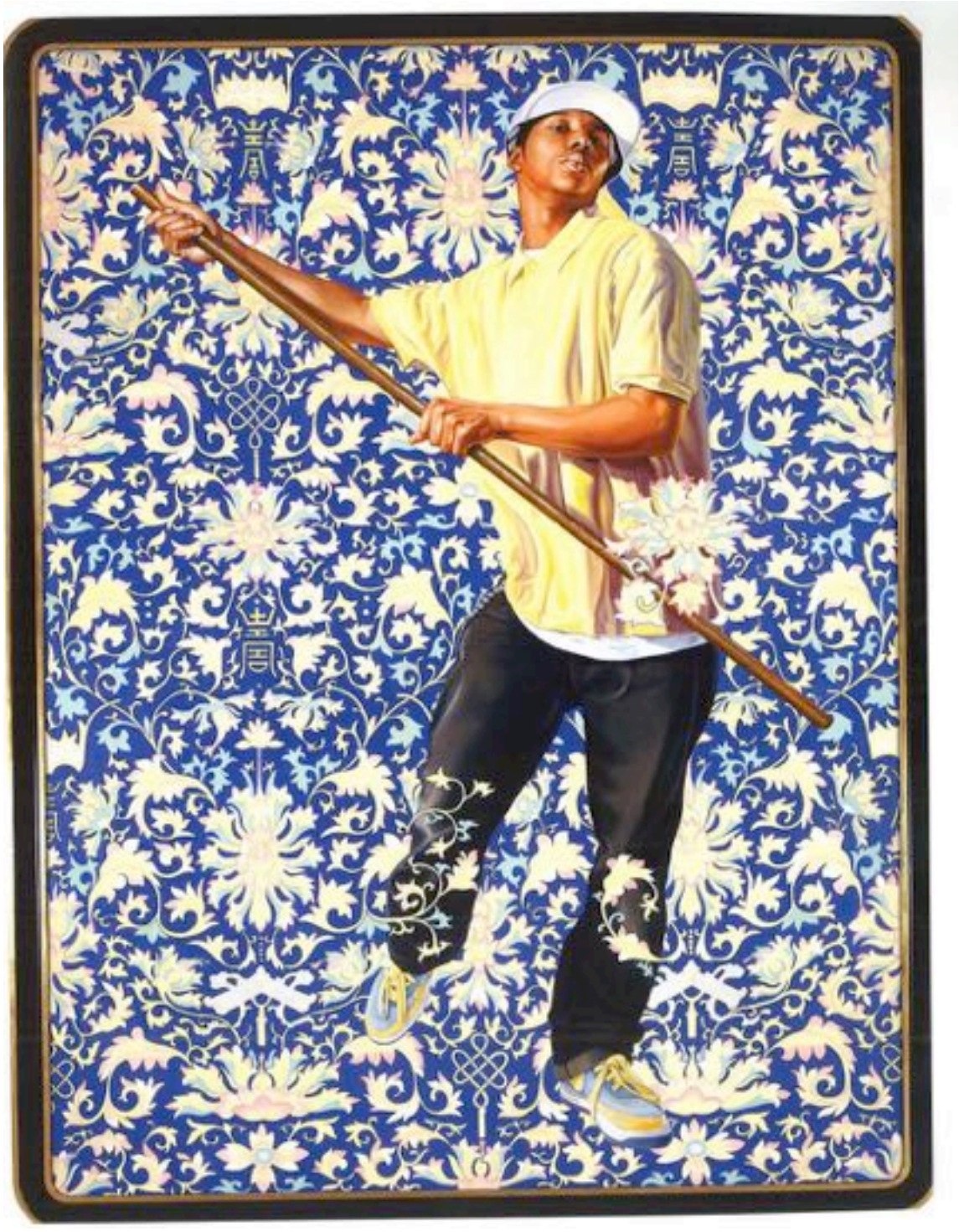
KEHINDE WILEY

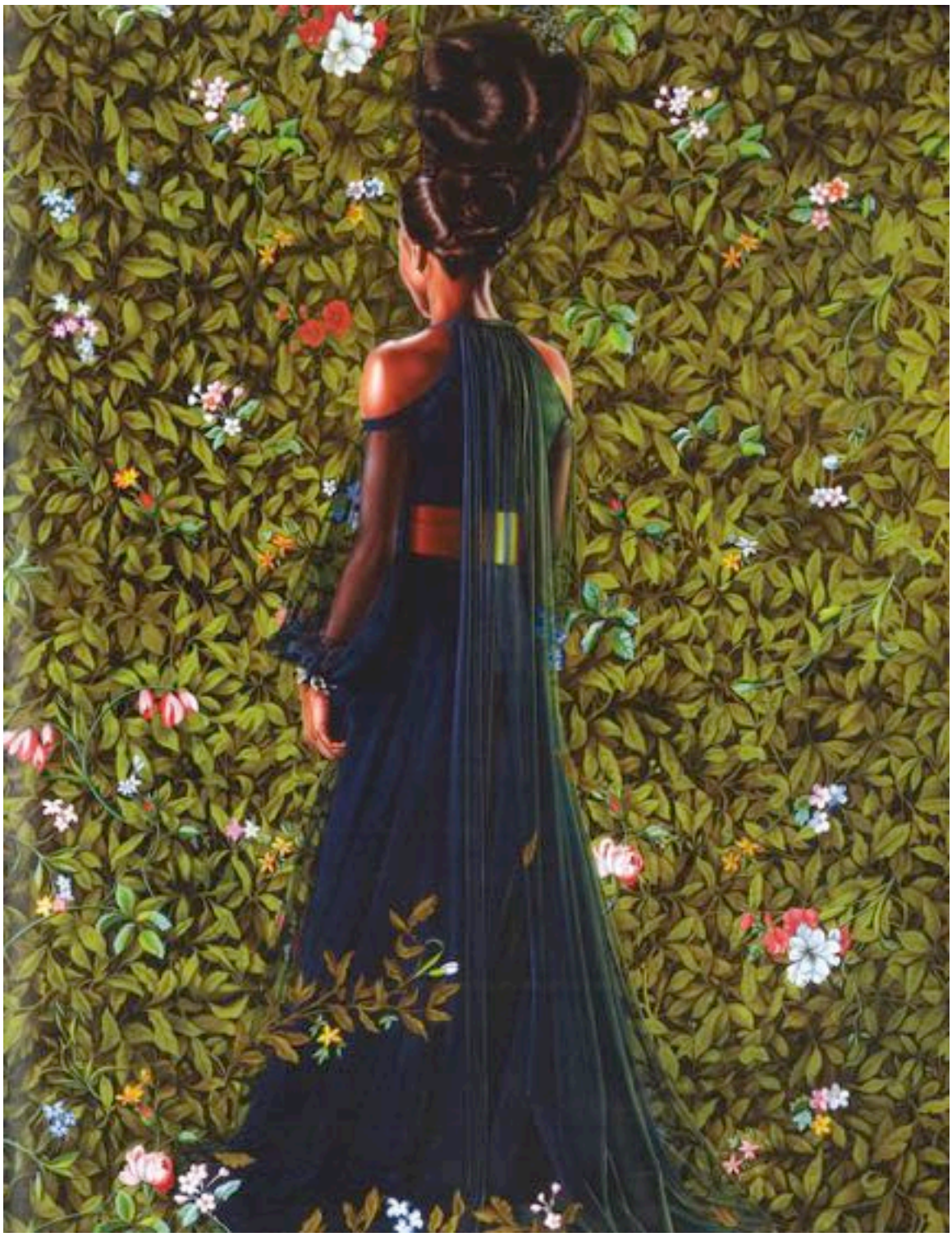
Breaking the Code

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.

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.





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.

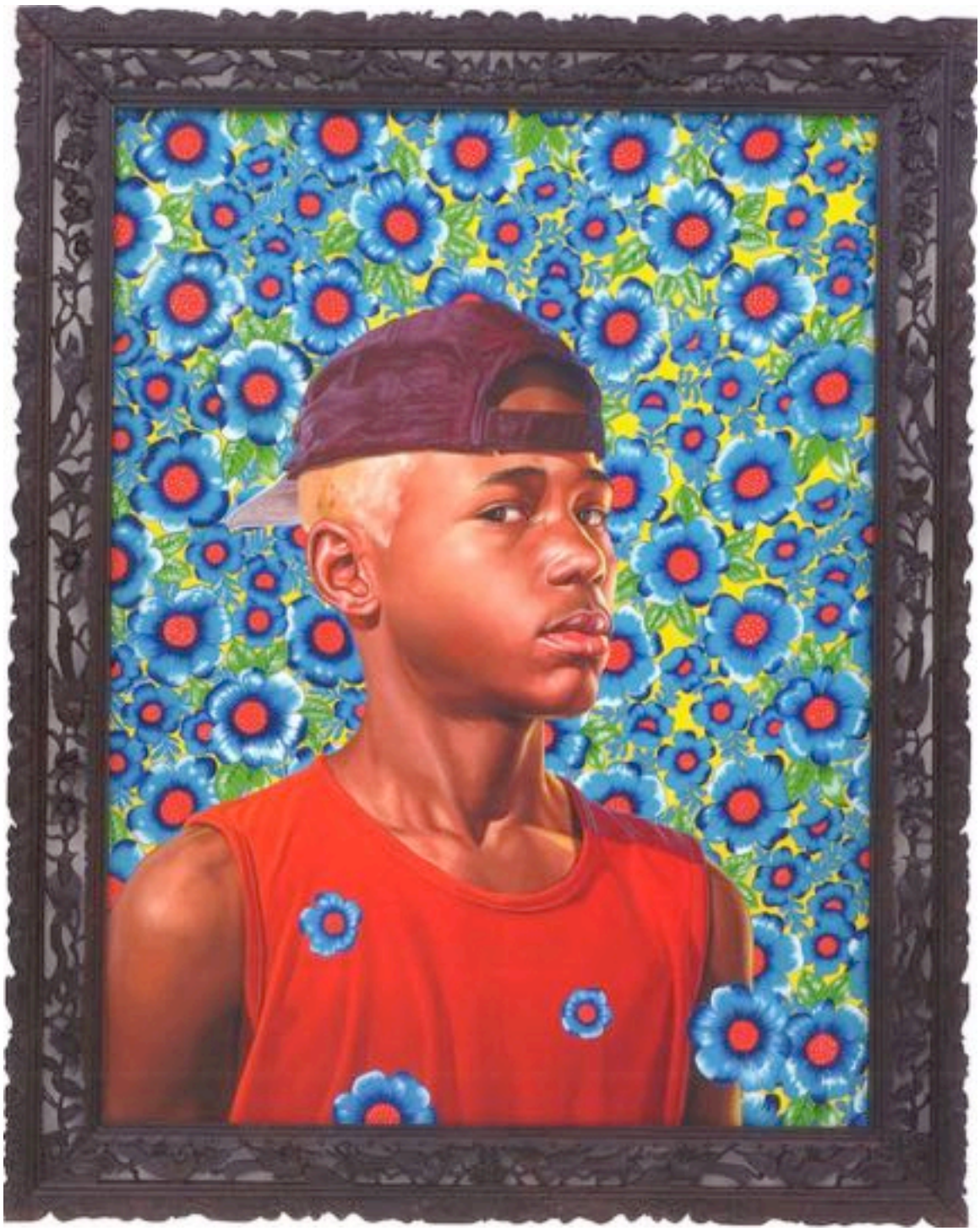
CHRISTINA LESSA: When I look at your work, I am drawn to – it's that one gesture. It's not about the stroke or other technical aspects that these critics linger on...I look for that simple thing that draws me in and connects me...it's the body language. It's subtle in a lot of the work but it can be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

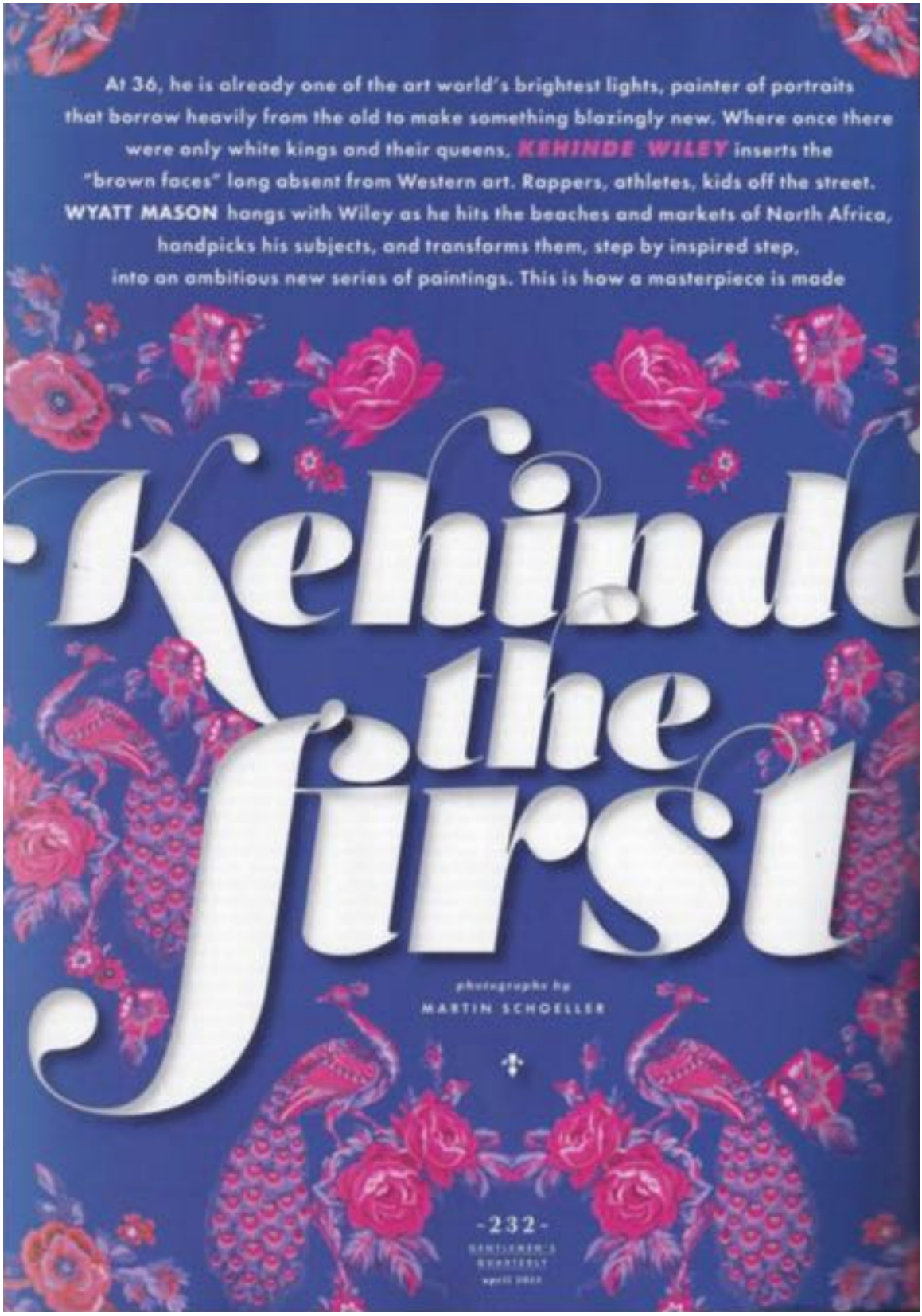
KEHINDE WILEY: Depending on what I'm working on. There's the mechanics of doing shows and going, and then there's the scheduling of the new exhibition places, and the other stuff is like, "We have this to do and that to do..." How do I choose? Generally, in the beginning there was a lot of strong conversation 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.

Mason, Wyatt. “Kehinde the First,” *GQ,* April 2013.



DOWN THE MIDDLE of this busy African beach, in stupendous summer heat, Kehinde Wiley is striding, a man you couldn't miss: that black guy—which is to say not Arab, which most everyone else here is, in Morocco, just outside Casablanca. He's the fellow over there, in the flashy pink bespoke shirt, with the motley retinue in tow, a gang of seven of which I'm presently one, tied to Wiley as if by invisible strings. In front of him, boys teem across the flat glittering low-tide sands. They're chasing soccer balls, their bodies lean and strong. Most in their teens, they run in and out of play, passing and giving chase. Despite large tortoiseshell aviators, there's no question that Wiley's eyes are on the boys—but not creepily. Professionally. Purposefully.

Wiley, as some of you may know, is an American artist, an unusually successful one. In the decade of his career to date, he's become one of the most sought-after painters in America. Holland Cotter, of *The New York Times*, called Wiley "a history painter, one of the best we have.... He creates history as much as he tells it." Even if you don't know him by name, you've likely glimpsed his grand portraits of hip-hop artists—LL, Ice-T, Biggie. Maybe you've even seen his massive portrait of the King of Pop: the one of MJ in full armor, astride a prancing warhorse. If all this suggests that Wiley, a 36-year-old gay African American man, is court painter to the black celebretariat, that misconception has been useful to promoting his brand, up to a point. More often Wiley's paintings are of people you don't know, people like those he'll meet over the next month in five different African countries—Morocco, Tunisia, Gabon, Congo, and Cameroon—in search of representative men, hundreds he'll photograph all over Africa, returning to his studio in Beijing to paint a wildly ambitious, continuing endeavor that he calls the World Stage. It's why we're on this tourist-free beach outside Casablanca today: scouting for models who will be part of a show already scheduled for October in Paris—just four months away—a show that will feature paintings of beautiful young men like these.

Napoleon leading the Army over the Alps (2005), at the Brooklyn Museum

"That one," Wiley says to a woman close by in his entourage, pointing at a passing boy. "You first," he says, "and then I'll join you."

The young woman at Wiley's side is Arab; her beautiful name is Narrimane. A local fixer, she is there to translate. Dark hair shaggily up and highlighted pale orange, Marlboro red between full, pretty lips, her black tank revealing black bra straps that strain against substantial breasts—no idle detail, given that the female bathers nearby go full burka in the mild surf, baring no more than dark eyes. Alone, Narrimane approaches a boy with a Boogie Board at the verge of the waves. Tall in a black Lycra mock-turtle surf tee, he listens to her Arabic as she gestures at Wiley, standing with arms crossed a ways off, mouth pursed ducklike, a public face, one he seems to adopt in moments of frustration or boredom or deep thought, a mask. The boy listens a beat, shakes his head east-west a few times, and slips away into the water.

Narrimane shrugs, and Wiley turns up-beach toward a group of boys congregated around an unsteady umbrella beneath which some are smoking. Narrimane makes her way over. Two boys, small-bodied in board shorts, greet her.

The Arabic preamble again; Narrimane gesturing to Wiley, who steps now into their midst. Spend an afternoon with Wiley and you'll discover that he's a champion talker. Seems to know something about everything and is interested in everyone, at least for a minute or two. You can get his attention easily, but keeping it's another matter. You'd better be interesting, or he's not interested. And this whole going-through-a-translator thing is clearly crimping his style. So he tries a little English, a little French, one of the languages spoken here by some. Wiley's French is pretty good; the boys' French is not. So as Narrimane continues in Arabic, Wiley shows the boys something he has in his hands: a perfect-bound Kinko's-ish softcover filled with colorful pages—examples of his paintings. As he opens the book, you see that Wiley wears a wedding ring on his left hand. Later, when asked why he, a single gay man, would do this, he tells me it's a bit of stagecraft, something to set the boys at ease. Wiley opens the notebook to a vivid image of a handsome African man in a skin-tight pale blue Puma athletic shirt, a large lemon yellow number 10 printed on the front. Seen from the waist up, arms comfortably crossed, he stands boldly, chin slightly raised, before an extravagantly patterned background. This is Wiley's signature mode: an almost photo-realistically rendered foreground figure, skin alive with light and shade; a flamboyantly patterned, defiantly colorful background, its repeating pattern's whorls creeping past the foreground figure like vines growing toward sunlight.

Wiley and his entourage search for models on a beach near Casablanca.

"Eto'o!" one of the boys exclaims, of the man in the painting.

"That's right!" Wiley says, delighted. "Of course you know Eto'o!"

"Eto'o?" say some boys nearby, darting over as if a dinner bell's been rung. They clot around Wiley and the first boy, looking at the image of Eto'o. Those of us not as well versed in international soccer heroes as

teenage Moroccan males are may not recognize the name Samuel Eto'o—the Roger Federer of African soccer, all but a secular saint to a billion people.

A little guy with a Mohawk and bulging abs speaks. Narrimane says the boy wants to know if Wiley took the photo.

"Photo?" Wiley says, laughing. A deep, jolly laugh. "No," he says, "it's a painting. I painted this. Say that it's a painting."

Narrimane translates this into Arabic for the boys. Small nods, dense silence. It's not clear if they get what Wiley means. Flipping pages, Wiley listens as the boys name other African footballers there—Eboué! Mensah!—but he also shows them paintings of faces they don't recognize, boys and men with brown faces like theirs.

This is when Wiley says, "I want to paint you, like this. I want you to be my model. Translate, please."

Narrimane does. The bare-chested boy looks at her a beat, his look saying: *You've gotta be kidding.*

Wiley catches the look. He's seen it before.

"You," he points to the boy, "like this," he points to his painting.

Seconds pass; wheels turn; Narrimane reiterates; the boy finally smiles.

In a notebook, Narrimane writes the boy's name in large letters with a Sharpie, his phone number below it. She hands the boy the notebook, tells him to hold it to his chest: a mug-shot pose. One of Wiley's studio assistants, a slight white kid named Zack, steps in and snaps a photograph of boy with notebook. They tell him they'll see him tomorrow.

To what end, this quest? The history of art, Wiley argues, has ignored brown faces, consigning them to tiny parts in the backgrounds: slaves, footmen, fallen combatants. Wiley is aiming to give them their aesthetic due, country by country. "Andy Warhol said that we would all have our fifteen minutes," Wiley has said, with pugilistic bravado. "Fuck the fifteen minutes. I'm going to give you a painting, and I'll make you live forever." A self-styled Noah in this biblical epic, Wiley has been called by calamity—the world's museums, flooded with whiteness—to bring the art world a salvational brownness. It's an argument he's bet his career on. It's an argument he's winning.

~†~

A PAINTING MIGHT seem like a quaint kind of immortality in 2013, when more people see, in an afternoon, some trending meme than will see, in a lifetime, a great painting. Even so, Wiley's designs on posterity—enormous ones—are based on the practice of putting faces onto canvases with paint.

Let's look at the Wiley painting that Michael Jackson commissioned. It stands over ten feet tall and portrays Jackson, in full armor, seated on a blue-beribboned warhorse, cherubs hovering above his head and poised to crown him with a wreath of laurels. If this portrait seems like exactly the sort of painting one might expect of a man given to wearing gilded military uniforms as casualwear—in other words, a painting that is bombastic, syrupy, and garish—those adjectives, curiously enough, aren't mine: They're Wiley's. He's used them to describe the work by the painters from whom he frequently draws inspiration—Baroque Flemish master Peter Paul Rubens; eighteenth-century British artist Thomas Gainsborough; France's court painter to Napoleon, Jacques-Louis David.

"There's a reason for that," says Wiley, "and that has to do with, power." The power implicit in a rich person's ability, historically, to advertise wealth through the opulence of his holdings, holdings that included what once was the ultimate in luxury: a portrait of oneself painted by a master. Wiley is an accomplished student of these dynamics and their presence in painting as much as he is a practitioner. He's not mining images originated by others because he can't come up with them himself. Rather, he's curating a conversation with art history. In the background, it's with the painters he loves; in the foreground, it's one about money and power and race.

In 2009, Wiley got word that Michael Jackson was trying to reach him. "I ignored him, because quite honestly I thought it was a prank," Wiley says. They ended up speaking on the phone at length about the commission: "Surprisingly, he was really knowledgeable about art and art history." Although Wiley has said that the painting, which was executed after Jackson's death, draws on five different paintings to form the composition, central to it is the Rubens known as *Philip II on Horseback*. It's almost as I described above, with one major compositional adjustment: Wiley's version, of course, swaps out the Spanish king for the American one. Despite the swap, the gist of the title doesn't change—*Equestrian Portrait of King Philip II*—asking the viewer to consider the pictorial past with which Wiley and subject are engaging. What's become pretty remarkable about Wiley's paintings is that, if you Google the titles of some of the original artworks he's appropriated, what comes up isn't the original. It's Wiley's. In the Great Art Museum of Googlestan, Wiley has already succeeded in inserting brown faces to such an extent that they often supplant the originals.

His route to success is almost perfectly improbable, a story that has about it the whiff

of myth. Born in 1977, the fifth of six children to a single mom living in South Central Los Angeles, Wiley is a twin, five minutes younger than his brother. Wiley's name means just that: second-born of twins. The boys' father was Nigerian, their mother having met him at UCLA. Despite living on welfare, Wiley's mother was able to finish college and go on to earn her master's degree in African linguistics at USC. Taking permanent leave from an architecture program, his father abandoned her, returning to Nigeria before his twins were born. Wiley's mother destroyed her photos of the man, erasing him from their lives as surely as he had erased himself.

Although the household was located in one of America's most brutal '80s neighborhoods—crack was on the rise, gang violence was at an all-time high—the interior of the home was as cultured as the streets around it were dangerous. "A lot of it was my mother having been a linguist," Wiley told me. "She was obsessed with language. Black American vernacular speech and American Standard English. As kids, we were consciously thinking about the code switching that appears between school and home. Much more often, it's just a survival mechanism that occurs with black kids who are bused to a white neighborhood. For us it was a conscious lived experience because of Mom's work. We reveled in it. It taught us that all languages are tools."

Despite her emphasis on education and conversation, Wiley's mother became disenchanted with academic life and opened a junk shop in their area, a shop that Wiley has alternately described as straight out of *Sanford and Son* and a magical space, one filled with old chests, clothing, antiques. He and his siblings would scour the neighborhood for objects they could bring their mother to sell. For her part, she was scrounging for activities and opportunities to keep her kids off those streets. When Wiley and his twin brother, Taiwo, were 11, she enrolled them in a small art conservatory that was on the campus of Cal State L.A., where the boys would go on weekends. Taiwo exhibited greater initial talent but lost interest.

HOW A WILEY GETS MADE

AS PART OF HIS GLOBE-SPANNING PROJECT, THE WORLD STAGE, WILEY CASTS MODELS OFF THE STREET (OR THE BEACH), WHO ARE THEN PAIRED WITH A MASTERPIECE, POSED, PHOTOGRAPHED, AND PAINTED

Omar and Ali Berguen on the beach near Casablanca in July.

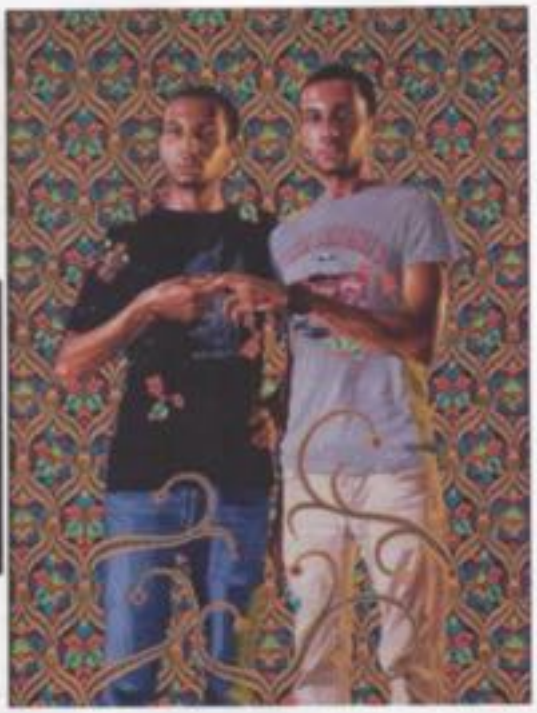
At 12, Wiley was sent much farther afield: the Center for U.S./U.S.S.R. Initiatives. During the summer of 1989, Wiley was among fifty American children sent to live in a forest outside Leningrad. They studied Russian language and they made art. Though Wiley's mother couldn't afford the tuition, a grant opened up the world to her son. When he returned from Russia, he was mostly kept on lockdown by his mom inside their home. He stayed safe, worked hard, and excelled, the San Francisco Art Institute leading to graduate school, for painting, at Yale.

While this trajectory took Wiley far from the dangers he grew up with, it didn't lead him to ignore the straits faced by so many other young urban black men. He draws the majority of his subjects from the streets, soliciting the interest of strangers in becoming paintings. That practice began in earnest in Harlem when Wiley was just out of Yale. He received a yearlong residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem. The neighborhood was filled with faces and bodies that spoke to Wiley, and so he talked to them, inviting them back to his studio, where he posed them, shot them, and painted them—the personal process that he's since expanded to global scale.

While Wiley's critics acknowledge his talents and his seriousness, some begrudge him the racial politics of his mission on aesthetic grounds. "I don't think that they're terrible paintings," art critic Ben Davis, a vocal Wiley detractor, told me, "but they don't benefit from close scrutiny. I find them cartoonish and the painting itself flat. It seems very formulaic. If you think of really good portraiture, you get a sense of emotion, paintings that have a spark of individuality where

The day after being handpicked on the beach, Omar and Ali were posed by Wiley and photographed by his right-hand man, Ain Cocke.

The source painting for the Wiley: *Portrait of a Couple* (1610) by an unknown artist.



The final product: *Portrait of a Couple, 1912–1956* (2012) by Kehinde Wiley was unveiled at a show in Paris in October.

something of the sitter is captured. Wiley's formula smothers that. He's releasing product lines. 'Here I am releasing my Ethiopia line, my Israel line.' He's not producing a new critical image of black identity. He's an art director selling a formula, a style, that can be translated into a lot of different mediums."

It's hard not to concede that Wiley's work insulates itself against criticism—who could object to more brown faces in the white-washed art world?—but that isn't to say that his figures stand for nothing. Consider a painting from 2008, which had its first showing the weekend before the presidential election that put Obama in office. Called *The Virgin Martyr St. Cecilia*, it takes its pose from a sculpture known by that name by Stefano Maderno, an Italian of the same era as Rubens. In the original sculpture, Cecilia lies prone and lifeless, depicted at the moment of her death. In his own massive eight-by-nineteen-foot painting of the saint, Wiley replaces her with a young black man wearing an orange hoodie, gray pants with a bright yellow belt, and gray Nikes with a bright yellow swoosh and matching laces. Against a vivid blue background, a flurry of pink and white flowers fall, behind and onto and in front of the young man. As is the face in Maderno's sculpture, his is unseen, facing downward into a crumpled white sheet. He could be sleeping, but the title makes clear he isn't: He's dead. The image brings to mind a gang slaying, or a police shooting, at the moment after the boy's death, memorialized bloodlessly in a rain of flowers.

The first time I saw *The Virgin Martyr St. Cecilia*—and because I'm a white guy from Manhattan—it made me think not of a reality known to me personally but of a fiction beloved by me: *The Wire*. Specifically, the character of Wallace in season one, the corner boy who ends up with a bullet in his chest when he crosses a drug dealer. The truly memorable moment comes afterward, when another character mourns the boy. "Where's Wallace?" he asks the dealer, again and again, knowing that he's the man who's had Wallace killed. It's a powerful scene, but the moment that stays with you isn't the image of Wallace lying dead so much as that of the man who seeks him and who has lost him. In Wiley's painting, here, as it were, is Wallace; and what's more, here's the idea of the innocents who fall. And here, too, is the idea of the artist's attempt to commemorate such losses with images that lodge in the eye long enough that they can reside in the mind, remaining there long enough that they might work their way to the heart.

To put it another way, in *The Virgin Martyr St. Cecilia*, Wiley has given us a painting through which fallen boys live forever by dying forever. He makes it hard to turn away. Or, by being not particularly confrontational, he makes it easy to keep on looking.

BACK IN CASABLANCA, the boys aren't turning away.

It's the next day, and they've been told to come to an apartment building in the middle of town. It's here that two dozen of them will be photographed, the hundreds of images carried off to Wiley's Beijing studio with the thousands of others that will be taken during this latest month of travels. For now, though, the courtyard is a clutter of lobster red Pumas and slate gray Nikes, nervous boys tapping their toes. Narrimane appears from upstairs, calls one of the boys' names, hands him a release form, and ushers him away to hoots from the others, who crane their necks to watch him disappear.

I follow the boy upstairs. As he turns to climb to the next landing, the expression on his face says: *It is not unlikely that I am being led to my death.*

Enter the adytum: a narrow hallway, a wall painted a vampiric red. Boys in a line. Here's one from the beach, with braces and a backward ball cap. Here's another, a huge guy whose long little head and its heavy brow give him the face of a killer until he smiles and *poof* is a little kid with eyes a-twinkle. They're all standing slightly away, release forms in hands, holding them at their edges like wet watercolors they don't want to smudge. There's banter, but they're not looking at one another, not really. They're staring through a double doorway, transfixed. Through it, music is swelling, up-tempo French cabaret stuff. Wiley's dancing to it, after a fashion. He's sporting another pink-and-white-striped bespoke shirt, like the one he was wearing on the beach.

This very morning we were out buying fabric. These fabrics will find their way into the backgrounds of the paintings—Wiley pairs local fabrics from each of the countries in the World Stage with his models, those fabrics being a visual language that speaks to the creativity of the particular country. But some of these fabrics will make it to his Beijing tailor, a man who makes his suits—at least a *hundred* of them—to Wiley's exacting specs that include waistcoats with pockets for watches. The label in all his Beijing-made couture reads Wiley's name in a baroque cursive. "China!" he says of what you can get done there, laughing.

For shoes he's gone with fluorescent yellow trainers that make him look like he's coasting around on huge *(continued on page 244)*

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 237

highlighters, carrying him back and forth across the wooden floor of this big, empty, white-walled, high-ceilinged room. Pausing here, darting there, his hands in constant motion, touching the model, adjusting, pausing at his chin as he stares, considering the fantastic-looking creature before him.

Take Diana Ross's hair from 1973, settle it onto a tall, dark, slender man with a Gilbert-and-Sullivan mustache, a fellow dressed in a T-shirt and red shorts braced by American-flag suspenders, an outfit which might scream midwestern fairgoer but which actually makes him look sultanly, the tee dangling long strands of itself from sleeves and neck, the shorts baggy and droopy in a way that seems to force you to stare at his crotch. This is no fluke: The guy made every stitch he has on. Turns out he's a fashion designer of Moroccan extraction: Amine Bendriouich, proprietor of the label Couture & Bullshit—no, really. His company logo features two bulls standing on either side of the monogrammatic lettering, each holding it with a hoof, each astride a large pile of shit he's just evacuated, head canted just so, as if to say: *Ooops!*

CRITICS WONDER ABOUT THE EXTENT TO WHICH WILEY'S PAINTINGS ARE PAINTED BY WILEY HIMSELF. WHAT IS NOT HARD IS COPYING SOMEONE ELSE'S STYLE; ***WHAT IS HARD IS ACHIEVING A STYLE WORTH COPYING.***

We met him last night at a party Wiley and Co. were invited to. It was high in someone's unpromising-looking Casablanca apartment building—there were mutterings, as we rose in the snug, grimly lit elevator, that it had all the ambience of the projects. Inside it was large and lavish and merry and full. We'd been told it belonged to some local lovers of the arts dying to meet Kehinde. Turns out the illness that might have brought on such a death had been improperly diagnosed—they'd been under the impression that Wiley was a notorious American musician.

Wiley's suit was awesome. Words fail your reporter, who remembers it as zebra-striped, which is inaccurate, for it actually featured jagged bursts of black on a white ground. The suit, if it could speak, would say: *Wheeeeee!* This word would do double duty to describe Wiley in party mode, moving through the room like a jolly mayor, a politician you could trust, meeting and greeting, laughing and laying on hands, in the loud room, leaning in close to ears and recoiling in laughter that became general as the night wore on. "Their parties go all night," said a woman of improbably long legs who stood with others of her species, one of whom, her cohorts were quick to tell me, was a former Olympic pole-vaulter. Rumors of a meal circulated, for hours, until a lavish spread was served in a small city of crockery, emitting steam and scents that drew the party to the table the way lions rush an elephant.

And it was there, amid such festivities, that we met Bendriouich, who was all animation and noise but now stands, in the daylight of Wiley's lighthouse stare, silent and stock-still. Wiley has just circumnavigated him in a few fleet steps, stopping here to neaten and broaden and sculpt the fabulous tousle of his diva hair, to take that mustache of Bendriouich's, to grip it with his fingertips at both its drooping ends simultaneously, twirling them in his fingers as a villain would his own—Wiley producing from that frowning mustache a great dark smile. These intimate manipulations of Bendriouich's person do not faze him.

Wiley is looking at an image of eighteenth-century artist Gabriel-François Doyen's painting of Saint Jerome in a big three-ring binder—its front cover reads "Africa 2012," reference images. From these paintings, most of which hang in the Louvre, Wiley is choosing poses into which he contorts his models. Though Wiley has said that he and his models collaborate on choosing painting and pose, that collaborative dynamic isn't much in evidence today. Wiley just picks a picture, shouts its number to his friend Gandy, sitting gatekeeperly near the threshold of the double doors, noting number and name of the model in a ledger. (Gandy is also responsible for paying the boys the $50 or $100 they'll get for the shoot.) In the Doyen, Jerome holds a skull, iconographic trope of Introspective Man Pondering Mortality and Eternity; via Wiley, he will hold a bowl. In the Doyen, Jerome stares down at the skull; via Wiley, he will stare out at us. Like a man directing traffic, Wiley stands off to one side now, out of frame. Pointing, he indicates where the model should look—*eyes up...good*—whether his whole head or only his eyes, Wiley tapping his own chin with his finger, a gesture to which Bendriouich responds, lifting his chin slightly, looking in that direction, there and—*that's it...nice—PAP!*

The strobes flash; the shot is taken.

The shooter of these thousands of images, for years, has been Ain Cocke (rhymes with *pain coke*). Cocke has worked for Wiley for close to a decade, first as a painting assistant and now as Wiley's studio manager in Beijing. A very accomplished painter, Cocke is also far less successful than Wiley, in the market sense—not even in the same conversation. He has collectors, he has a gallery, but he also has a Chinese wife and an attendant appreciation for food and shelter, and so runs that studio in Beijing. An unusual place for Wiley to have a studio, you say, this African-American from South Central? Wiley moved there part-time about six years ago after he began a now ended relationship with a Chinese DJ, staying on because he likes the distance from the West, the privacy it affords, and doubtless the savings it provides. The Beijing studio remains his principal point of production.

Critics have long wondered about the extent to which Wiley's paintings are painted by Wiley himself. When I asked if I could visit his studio in China to watch him paint, he declined. He welcomes studio visits qua visits, and there are snippets of video of him painting on the interwebs—Wiley in headphones, palette and tiny brush in hand, delicately drawing the dark outline of a large eye. Caption: "Man, Alone, Confronting the Muse." This surely isn't inaccurate, at times. But due to high demand for Wileys, a single Wiley can't produce them fast enough, and that's where the assistants take over—though, again, to what degree and at what point it's deliberately difficult to say. Not that this is at all unusual in the history of art. For every Caravaggio, who painted his work himself, soup to nuts, there were ten others—Giotto, Botticelli, Brueghel, David, and on—who had teeming workshops. What is not hard is copying someone else's style; what is hard is achieving a style worth copying.

"The sentiments about authenticity in the public eye," Wiley tells me, with conversational casualness and an air of mild fatigue over having, once again, to explain this, "the discomfort with a large-scale art practice, comes from a myth in an artistic process that never existed. Rubens, Michelangelo: Both had large studios with many assistants. There is a long line of artists who work with other artists to realize a larger vision than is possible with one hand. Education in art history taught me this, as did being steeped in the reality of painting. My interest is in completing an image that is spectacular beyond belief. My fidelity is to the image and the art and not to the bragging rights of making every stroke on every flower. I'm realistic. It's not romantic, but that romance never existed."

Today, in Casablanca, the pair of hands working for Wiley are Cocke's, hands that will return to Beijing to manage the execution of the Paris show's paintings under Wiley's direction. With a nine-inch-long blue slothead screw tattooed from the top of his shoulder to his biceps, Cocke is arranged behind a tripod that holds a Nikon digital rig. He has the significant job of getting photos that serve as road maps for the paintings, for he and his assistants do not paint from life, only from photo reference.

"Painting from life is a completely different monster," Wiley says, "which I like. But because I've been painting from photography for so long, I've learned my best moves from photography."

On the LCD of Cocke's camera, the seized images of the boys are striking indeed. Luminous, austere, strange. They look like catalog shots, and they don't. There is, without question, an inscrutable something about them, and, it seems to me, this something is not the pose or the light or the hands, whether Wiley's or Cocke's. It is the boys themselves, a quality they share. They have, after all, been chosen—cast in the role of the Beautiful and the Overlooked.

That quality is something I see all afternoon: a quality of desire, on the part of the boys, both to want, and to not be seen

wanting, to be seen. The biggest hams here, for example, those who bound in from the hallway and hand their form to Gandy and prance puppyishly over to Wiley—clearly enough they want to be seen, even if it's clear that they aren't sure where here is or what seen will mean. They look at me and my camera, hopefully, awkwardly, rather than at Cocke and his, Wiley gently directing them to look where they should.

Spoiler alert: These boys don't become paintings.

Rather, it's the boys who were reluctant to be talked to at the beach, those who were suspicious, or shy, of this black man who was saying he wanted to paint them.

Twenty-nine brown-faced boys that day were made to resemble Napoleon, or Jerome, other names from history, posing, being touched, touching. One boy, Amil, who was all but buried under a beach umbrella when we met him—he would become a painting. Where many of the boys were photographed in their own T-shirts and shorts that afternoon, Amil was dressed up by Wiley in a long kurta, that gownlike shirt worn by men in hot climates in Africa and Asia. This one was designed by Bendriouich, actually, coming from his C&B line. Amil looks awkward and uncertain, standing there in the center of the room as Wiley crouches, flips through his sourcebook, finds what he wants. He shouts out the number to Gandy, rises to his highlightered feet. Steps to a wall to retrieve a curtain rod and the bowl Bendriouich bears, and adjusts the boy—touches his arm, his cheek, his hand—into a transformative pose: Emperor Napoleon by Jacques-Louis David. Wiley tells Amil to lift his chin, just a little. The boy blushes, does.

PAF!

• • •

THE NEXT MORNING, we were taken by Mercedes van south into the high desert, into the 100-degree-plus heat of Marrakech, the Ibiza of Africa, some 200 miles from coastal Casablanca. We have come here to shop, or Wiley has, having spent the day traversing the warrenlike lanes of the enormous bazaar, in search of handwoven rugs and huge brass door knockers—and vast golden doors!—with which he would furnish his unfinished estate in Senegal. Five of us—me, Cocke, Gandy, Zack, and novelist Brian Keith Jackson—attempted to keep up with him, but he is tireless, and we are tired.

We'd rolled up, poured out, and headed in to this restaurant. The two white guys in our party in shorts were allowed to enter, whereas the bouncers stopped Gandy and Jackson, saying that they couldn't come in that way. Yeah, the bouncers made the case that the shorts Gandy was wearing were more casual than the ones the white guys were wearing, but that seemed like clear bullshit to your eyewitness. I asked for the manager, told him I worked for a major media organization, and wondered aloud if he'd like me to write a story about these fellows not being allowed in. An empty threat, essentially, but we were given a table straight off.

"Pulling rank!" Wiley said, as we were walked in. And then: "Please don't write about this." And yes, I am now writing about it, as I told him I had to, because it seems like the subject of this ugliness—blacks treated like shit—is the subject of Wiley's work, a subject that he's both been painting and refusing to paint. This seems to be how Wiley wants it, to find ways of acknowledging the issue without depicting it, of finding a place at the table without making a big commotion about how degrading and soul-killing that process can be.

And, anyway, here we are now—collapsed on cushions, ceilings twenty feet high, tiled in vivid colors, candles flickering madly, igniting the room—eating and drinking like sultans as, yes, belly dancers, some of uncomfortable loveliness, bearing platters of candles balanced on their heads as they writhe, approach us, breasts invitingly bared, beckoning that we thrust paper money deep in their cleavage, which we do, all this after our altercation at the door.

To questions about his process, or about his biography, or his ambitions, Wiley will not so much resist answering as he will show a preference to speak on subjects about which he has greater enthusiasm at that moment—which is pretty much anything else. As a version of MJ's "Billie Jean" pumps through the vast space, Wiley tells me that it sounds like a product of the Muzak corporation of elevator-annoyance fame, noting, with wonder, "You just can't take all the oxygen out of Michael," for even this version has its charms. Caviar is discussed as well, its grades, Wiley's appreciation of domestically sourced sturgeon, not to say his love of fishing, his plans to soon travel to the Rio Negro for peacock bass. ("I've fished everywhere I've traveled.") Foie gras, too, has its conversational moment as it arrives at the table ("organ butter!"), Wiley explaining how easy it is to make at home.

"It is its own heaven," he says of foie gras, more toasts for which arrive. "I have this bible in my house," he says, *"Foie Gras: A Passion."* I confess that I can only imagine that the author of such a book would be insufferable with a title like that—*A Passion!*—someone to stay far away from.

"He's such a faggot," he says, laughing.

A ridiculous flotilla of dishes arrives before us, cluttering things so much it looks like a table in the Marrakech market larded with goods for sale. I say so: "I'm looking at everything on this table and thinking: 'No! I won't pay more than forty!' " Wiley laughs his big laugh. I have seen how he loves to bargain, how he goes at it.

"My thought is: Come in hard and leave early," he says. Upon entering a shop piled teeteringly ceilingward with colorful carpets, Wiley would seize on one, hear the price, and shake the seller's hand in a "you've got a deal" mode while naming a number, mid-handshake, well below what the seller had named, guaranteeing a what-the-fuck? reaction from the seller as he is caught in a pantomime of assent to an agreement he didn't agree to.

See Wiley, dressed as he was today in local garb, a pretty cream-colored *shalwar kumeez*, complete with matching slippers (and dark aviators; and puffing a cigar), holding the hand of a rug seller with a hideous boil on his ear, one so large it looks like an animal has affixed itself to his head. Imagine the moment when Wiley takes the man's hand and names a number, the seller very, very surprised. *PAF!*

For it occurred to me, watching, that were I to paint Wiley in the style of Wiley, I would be inclined to choose such a moment: colorful carpets as background, cigar clenched in his teeth, left hand holding a heavy fist of cash—the artist reaching out, taking hold, laying claim.

• • •

AFTER ANOTHER WEEK of travel, through Tunisia, we parted ways, Wiley and his entourage rolling on, boarding a plane to Gabon, the next stop on this leg of the World Stage tour, street casting and fabric shopping, rinse and repeat, before heading on to Congo, where shit got crazy. There they were again, in a tiny village in the Congolese jungle, shooting there as they do. And the Congolese secret police swooped down, seized them and their things, took them to several black sites. And held them for days.

THERE THEY WERE, IN A TINY VILLAGE IN THE CONGOLESE JUNGLE, AND THE SECRET POLICE SWOOPED DOWN, SEIZED THEM AND THEIR THINGS, TOOK THEM TO SEVERAL BLACK SITES, AND HELD THEM FOR DAYS.

"They thought that we were tampering with the democratic elections," Wiley tells me later. "They thought we might be buying votes. It was our fault. We should have known better." In the documentary about their travels, Wiley does not say that Zack was able to call his parents, that they may have known some people with the clout to get them out. I tell him it's curious that these things don't get mentioned. He says he doesn't want to go into that stuff much because "it's a negative way of talking about Africa."

That negativity has no place in Wiley's art, to date. Its message, a positive one, a repetitive one, is as tireless as its maker. Wiley is literally spanning the globe in search of brown faces to paint in every country he can travel to, fish in, shop in, spreading his colorful vision of what inclusiveness looks like, miles to go before he sleeps, whether it's at the Sofitel in Marrakech or under arrest in Congo, where, eventually, a few days in, he and his entourage were released and told to leave the country, immediately.

"It's painful," Wiley told me, over the phone, with the flu, this February. He was speaking not of his arrest but of the process by which he came to select, from the thousands of photos with which he and his team returned from Africa, the models who would become the fifteen paintings that went on display in Paris at the end of October. "There's so much more material than we can actually use. When the trip was over, Ain and I were in Cameroon, and we went down to the bar in the hotel and laid it all out. Laptops. Went through the images together. Culled and culled. Two hours. Culling by

country. Then so many were left. And from those we picked. It becomes pretty clear."

Wiley traveled more in August, as preparations for the paintings began. By e-mail, Wiley and Cocke decided on sizes for the various paintings, which backgrounds would be paired with which models. In Beijing, Cocke began to prepare the surfaces, having the large custom stretcher bars built and the linen stretched, and the assistants began painting on layers of gesso, which dries and then is sanded smooth and painted on again and sanded down again, to create a surface on which to paint. And the painting began, the painting of the backgrounds, the projecting and tracing of the figures of the boys they photographed. There is Amine, his huge hair, his cocky red shorts. And there is Amil, bearing a bowl. And there are the others, taking form. Wiley's hands, his many hands, laying on the lines and outlines and underpainting as the peaceful proud army of Africans is constituted.

On October 27 in Paris, a party was held at the gallery on Rue Beaubourg, where French collectors and friends came to fete Wiley. Look at the paintings. They have been shipped in from Beijing in rolls, have been restretched on their boards and framed. They are enormous, explosively colorful in this severe white space where they hang. They will be sold, for big numbers. Attempts are made to get some of the boys, the models, visas to fly over and see what they have become. It's too short notice, though, most don't even have passports, it's impossible. They will not see themselves. Would they see themselves, if they saw these paintings?

How very much I would like to ask the twins, Omar and Ali, the boys pictured on pages 236–237. They were the last models we'd found on that first day on the beach. They were standing together, each the mirror of the other, their tiny matching bodies, their identical, kind eyes. Let's imagine them into this gallery in Paris, passing paintings of brown faces staring proudly down at them until, at last, they stand before themselves, enormous on Wiley's canvas. "Painting has the ability to communicate something about the sitter that gets to his essence," Wiley said to me at that restaurant in Marrakech. Would Omar and Ali—these identical twins who, when each looks at the other understands he is seeing, essentially, himself—would they see, in Wiley's double-portrait, their essences? Or would they see what everyone sees when they look at a Wiley: the familiar patterns, the bright colors, the luminous brown skin, the decorative abundance—features not of faces but of a painting, of a Wiley. What does one see when one sees a Wiley? One sees a Wiley. Which is to say, one sees the things Wiley set out to show you.

WYATT MASON, *a contributing writer to* The New York Times Magazine, *teaches at Bard College.*

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Page 80. Poster-sized print by Mary Maguire, available unframed (18" x 24") for $60 via mmlyme@aol.com

Pages 184–185. 7) From left: JBphoto\Alamy; Yannis Vlamos/GoRunway; Josephine Schiele; courtesy of Michael Allen; Phil Oh. 8) Courtesy of Joe Schildhorn/BFAnyc. 13) Condé Nast Archive/Corbis. 14) Runway: Filippo Fior/GoRunway. Street style: Tommy Ton/Trunk Archive (2).

Pages 194–195. 21) Clockwise from top right: Julot Bandit; Rick Diamond/Getty Images for BET; Michael Loccisano/Getty Images; Jason Merritt/Getty Images; Ron Galella, Ltd./WireImage/Getty Images; Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images (3). 22) From left: Ahmad Elatab/Splash News; x17 Online. 29) Lauren: Jim Spellman/WireImage/Getty Images. Other photographs, clockwise from Spurr: Courtesy of Steve Eichner/WWD (2); Dario Cantatore/Getty Images for Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week; Matthew Eisman/WireImage/Getty Images; Courtesy of Steve Eichner/WWD; Courtesy of Thomas Iannaccone/WWD. Top, from left: Courtesy of Steve Eichner/WWD; Michael Tran/FilmMagic/Getty Images; Courtesy of Thomas Iannaccone/WWD.

Page 197. 35) Courtesy of Hiroyuki Hirai. 37) Sydney Maag. 38) Courtesy of Leather Soul. 47) From left: Yannis Vlamos/GoRunway (4); Filippo Fior/GoRunway.

Page 204. 50) From left: Ron Galella/WireImage/Getty Images; Kai Regan/Corbis; J. Vespa/WireImage/Getty Images; KMazur/WireImage/Getty Images; Eamonn McCabe/Redferns/Getty Images; Prince Williams/ATLpics; Britt Chester; Mychal Watts/WireImage/Getty Images.

Page 216. 96) Ford: Jason LaVeris/FilmMagic/Getty Images. Other photographs, clockwise from Brady: Jason Kempin/Getty Images; Jeff Vespa/WireImage/Getty Images (2); Tommaso Boddi/WireImage/Getty Images; Charles Eshelman/FilmMagic/Getty Images; Bennett Raglin/WireImage/Getty Images; Dave M. Benett/WireImage/Getty Images; Albert L. Ortega/Getty Images; Gregg DeGuire/WireImage/Getty Images.

Page 217. 99) From left: Lambert/Getty Images; Silver Screen Collection/Getty Images; Warner Bros./The Kobal Collection; Everett Collection; H. Armstrong Roberts/ClassicStock/Corbis

Pages 224–225. From left: 1. Shirt, $225: Shipley & Halmos. Tie, $85: Gitman Vintage. Tie bar, $15: The Tie Bar. Shoes, $255: Walk-Over. Belt: Ralph Lauren. 2. Shirt, $255: Band of Outsiders. Loafers, $440: N.D.C. Made by Hand. 3. Shirt, $230: Band of Outsiders. Tie, $15: The Tie Bar. Boots, $120: Clarks Originals. Canvas belt: vintage. 4. Sneakers, $45: Keds. Belt: A.P.C.

Page 226. From top: 1. Tie, $175: Charvet. 2. Tie, $13: Uniqlo. Tie bar, $15: The Tie Bar. Pocket square: Brunello Cucinelli. 3. Shirt, $255: Bespoken. Jeans, $220: Baldwin. Belt: Brunello Cucinelli. 4. Tie bar: The Tie Bar. Belt: Dolce & Gabbana.

Page 227. Bottom right, belts from left: 1. Charvet. 2. Gant by Michael Bastian. 3. Thom Browne New York.

Page 233. Suit vest and pants: Kehinde's own. White shirt: Brooks Brothers. Tie: Michael Bastian. Watch: Nixon. Rings: Burkindy. Bracelet: Moussa Traore.

Page 236. T-shirt and jacket: Kehinde's own. Rings and bracelet: Moussa Traore.

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Cross, Leah. "Kehinde Wiley: An Economy of Grace," *Dazed Digital,* May 14, 2012.

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ARTS & CULTURE

KEHINDE WILEY: AN ECONOMY OF GRACE

PUBLISHED ON MONDAY

As part of today's Santigold coverage we speak to the talented artist and illustrator who created her album cover art about the piece as well as his new exhibition

TEXT BY LEAH CROSS

US-based artist Kehinde Wiley's latest exhibition, 'An Economy of Grace', steps away from his previous subject matter as his first ever series dedicated to female subjects. The focus of the collection is the marginalising of African-American women within art history and society's ideas of feminine beauty.

Following his exhibition, Wiley talks to us about his inspirations and the concept behind his artwork for Santigold's album cover - as shot by photographer Jason Schmidt, with Santi appearing as three different characters (two of which are Bond Girl-esque "lady-guards" who wear custom-designed gold Alexander Wang bodysuits, the third is a mafia Don seated between his two attendants) Whilst behind the threesome is a painting of Santi as an army officer designed by Wiley himself.

Dazed Digital: How did you first get into art and illustration?
Kehinde Wiley: I began with studying art back in LA as a young kid. I first went to art school when I was about 11 and went to big museums in Southern California. On weekends I would go to art classes at a conservatory. As an undergrad at the Art Institute of San Francisco, I really honed in on the technical aspects of painting and being a masterful painter. And then at Yale University, where I did my MFA, it became much more about arguments surrounding identity, gender and sexuality, painting as a political act, questions of post-modernity, etc.

DD: Who or what inspires your work?
Kehinde Wiley: Classical European paintings of noblemen, royalty and aristocrats. I was trained to paint the body by copying the Old Master paintings. Whenever I do photo shoots for paintings, I pull out a stack of books, whether it be something from the High Renaissance or the late

French Rococo or the 19th century. I take the figure out of its original environment and place it in something completely made up. Most of the backgrounds I end up using are sheer decorative devices - things that come from things like wallpaper or the architectural façade ornamentation of a building.

DD: What were the inspirations/the concept behind the piece/artwork for Santigold's album cover?
Kehinde Wiley: The historical painting reference that we looked at for Santi's portrait is Portrait of Sir Banastre Tarleton by Sir Joshua Reynolds

DD: What parallels do you feel link your illustration style to her music, if there are any?
Kehinde Wiley: Santi and I are both concerned with decentralising a certain aesthetic taste. Our influences are also similar, pulling from places like Brazil, West Africa, and Sri Lanka. Aesthetically Santi and myself both have an abiding interest in finding parallels between cultures and genres.

DD: What are your favourite subjects to cover and why?
Kehinde Wiley: My goal is to be able to paint illusionistically and master the technical aspects, but then to be able to fertilise that with great ideas. I want to continue to challenge myself, to be able to wake up in the morning and be excited about what new projects are over the horizon.

JULIETTE RECAMIER, 2012 OIL ON LINEN FRAMED: 82 1/2 X 106 1/4 INCHES COPYRIGHT KEHINDE WILEY COURTESY SEAN KELLY GALLERY, NEW YORK

MARY LITTLE, LATER LADY CARR, 2012 OIL ON CANVAS FRAMED: 38 1/4 X 32 3/8 INCHES COPYRIGHT KEHINDE WILEY COURTESY SEAN KELLY GALLERY, NEW YORK

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O'Rourke, Meghan. "Kehinde Wiley," The Wall Street Journal, April 25, 2012.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Kehinde Wiley

On studying art in the forests of St. Petersburg at age 12, his hyperdecorative style, and combining grandeur with chance

FAR FROM HERE Artist Kehinde Wiley in his studio in Beijing, with works from his recent Armory Show. He lives part time in China, where he is able to paint free from distractions. *Portrait by Mark Leong*

Painter Kehinde Wiley, 35, has enjoyed the kind of meteoric career that led Andy Warhol to quip about 15 minutes of fame. When he was a child, his mother, a linguist, enrolled Wiley and his siblings in art and literary programs as a way to help keep them safe in the rough South Central Los Angeles neighborhood where they lived. Early on Wiley gravitated toward the visual arts; when he was 12, he went to the U.S.S.R. on an arts exchange program, thanks to a foundation grant funded by financier Michael Milken, which ignited his interest in global politics.

After Yale's MFA program, Wiley got a coveted residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem, where he started establishing himself as an art-world luminary. Drawn in by the "peacocking" of Harlem street life, he began making luxurious, Old Master–influenced portraits of young black men in street clothes. Subsequently, in his "The World Stage" series, he broadened his focus to include large-scale portraits of young men from regions around the globe. His work references Titian as easily as it does pop culture, and addresses stereotypes of race and class, power and history.

Unlike other artists, Wiley is not interested in art for art's sake. His work shares his lively sense of humor, and he believes it's important for African-American kids to see pictures of people who look like them on

museum walls. And he continues to break down boundaries. He collaborated with Givenchy's Riccardo Tisci on his latest project, "An Economy of Grace," which will open at New York City's Sean Kelly Gallery this month. The two chose paintings from the Louvre to serve as inspiration for a series of portraits of African-Americans in couture gowns they designed. Wiley's work, now more than ever, pushes the lines between design and high art, reinventing classical portraiture for a contemporary world.

—Meghan O'Rourke

Wiley with his mother, Freddie, and siblings.

I think the central narrative of my early childhood had to do with growing up in a family where my mother had to raise six kids alone and do graduate school, while figuring out how to keep us from becoming products of the environment that we were living in. I grew up in South Central Los Angeles in the '80s, back when it just wasn't a cool scene. But my mother had the foresight to look for a number of projects that would keep us away from the streets.

One that was particularly fortuitous for me was called the Center for U.S./U.S.S.R. Initiatives. It was a program set up to create an educational exchange between American and Soviet youths, with the idea that there would be a sort of ping-pong politics style—so that perhaps Soviet children would become envious of our way of life. We had 50 American kids hanging out in the forest outside of St. Petersburg. We had to study Russian for the year, and we did art in the forest.

Most of the kids came from very well-heeled families. But my tuition for the program was covered by the Milken Family Foundation. Milken's contribution to my early development was seminal, in the sense that it opened the whole world up to me—the possibility of seeing other cultures, and envisioning a world beyond the confines of Los Angeles, certainly. It brought up race and different modes of language and expression.

"After La Négresse, 1872" (2006), a bust inspired by Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux's "La Négresse" (1872).

When my mother was working her way through college, we kids helped her run her junk store. It was like "Sanford and Son." We'd go through the streets finding things, and people would donate things knowing that she would take them; we'd be pulling in old furniture and redoing it and selling it to people on the streets. Most of the clientele was Spanish and we learned to speak Spanish on the streets. A lot of the furniture had this really heightened, decorative, late–French Rococo, old-lady sensibility that was really annoying to me at the time. But I remember in later years feeling an affinity with the hyperdecorative because it had a sense of nostalgia, in a way.

I have a fondness for making paintings that go beyond just having a conversation about art for art's sake or having a conversation about art history. I actually really enjoy looking at broader popular culture. So, for example, in my last book of photography, the lighting was inspired as much by Tiepolo ceiling frescoes in Venice as it was by Hype Williams's early-'90s hip-hop videos—both having a sense of rapture, both having a sense of this bling. One more sacred, one more profane.

My father is Nigerian; my mother is from Texas and African-American. My father was the first in his family to go to university. He flew from Nigeria to Los Angeles in the '70s to go to UCLA, where he met my mother. They broke up before I was born, and he returned to Nigeria. She destroyed all the photos, and I'd never met the guy. So, when I turned 20, being fatherless, and also being profoundly interested in portraiture and wanting to know what he looked like physically, I decided to hop on a plane. Without the experience in Russia, I don't know if I'd have had the guts to do it because it was just so outsize for my life experience. I had a very youthful sense of invincibility. There were warnings all over the Internet from the State Department not to go into Nigeria at that time.

Wiley (far right) with his father (lower left), stepmother and half-siblings in Nigeria.

I went looking for one man in the most populated nation in all of Africa. I think there was a sense of curiosity, a psychic necessity. Just who is that other thing? What's my other half? And to stare this other guy in the face and be like, wow, that's weird.

I found him. But it was tough. All I knew was his first and last name and what he'd studied—architecture. I went from architecture department to architecture department looking for this guy. Finally, I took the ethnic route and went to the area where his last name comes from, to the major university there. His name's on the door of the architecture building. He heads the department.

I began a series of portraits of him. Once I get a project in my head, I start getting really obsessive about it. I studied how art-making practices have evolved in Africa, and how they've influenced art-making practices in the States and in Europe, specifically with people like Braque and Picasso, who were experiencing this feeling of the uncanny when looking at African art objects, which has a lot to do with historical European notions of the black body. And, conversely, I started going back to Africans thinking of themselves through the mirror of how someone else thinks of them.

All of those different perspectives and shattered ways of thinking were incredibly helpful to me. Later on when I was studying art theory, first in San Francisco and then at Yale, this sort of postcolonial postmodern condition of shattered identities and fractured selves, I didn't have to look very far. You know? This is not conceptual; this is actual life lived. In terms of how I started putting one foot in front of

the other in my own art-making process, I didn't—my job was always to absorb and learn as much as possible and then just be in the world.

I went to the Studio Museum in Harlem and became the artist in residence there, and began this process of street-casting. And so in terms of designing a practice or designing a life, I've always had certain goals in mind: find the father, build the studio in this country, or what have you. But then you just let go and you allow radical contingency to take place, and that's where the magic sort of happens. You think you know what you're going to do when you hit the ground, but then the actualities show themselves.

"Prince Tommaso Francesco of Savoy-Carignano" (2006), based on a van Dyck portrait.

The work is also about the power of letting go. So much of portraiture has to do with powerful people: powerful white men in powerful poses in big, powerful museums. So what happens when portraiture is about chance? Absolute chance? Someone who just happens to be trying to get to the subway one day now ends up in the painting that goes to one of the large museums throughout the world!

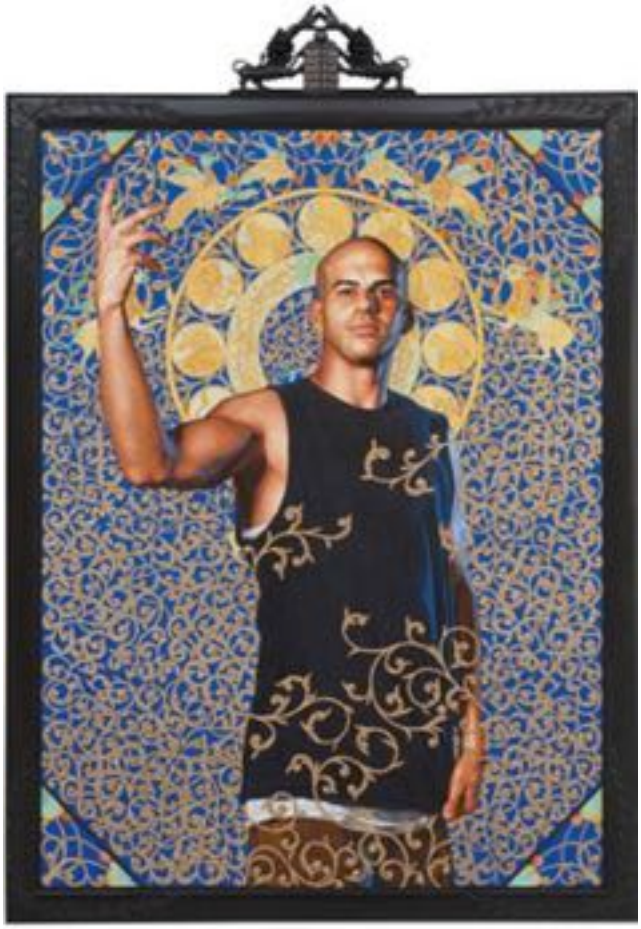
Wiley's 2009 print "After Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres's 'The Virgin with the Host.' "

For the new project, Riccardo Tisci and I pulled some connections and got a private audience at the Louvre. The poses of the women, all of whom came from the New York metropolitan area, were taken from specific paintings that we saw in the Louvre, as were the gowns that we designed together. Couture is a symbol of wealth and excess, and that's what art has been. There's a certain guilt associated with it—desire and guilt—it's always more sexy when you feel slightly guilty about it.

I think one of the things that must happen in the work is for it to become class-conscious. You'll never be able to exist within this marketplace without recognizing that paintings are perhaps the most expensive objects in the art world. It's not going to change anyone's life. But what it does function as is a catalyst for a different way of thinking. The very act of walking into the Los Angeles County Museum and seeing Kerry James Marshall as a kid gave me a sense of, Damn, maybe I can do this. And, so, symbols matter. One of my interests is in having the work in as many public collections as possible. When I go to the Brooklyn Museum or the Metropolitan Museum and see my stuff, I'm aware that there are other young kids who don't have access to anything like it.

—Edited from Meghan O'Rourke's interview with Kehinde Wiley

The inspiration for Wiley's 2009 print "After Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres's 'The Virgin with the Host.' "



"Leviathan Zodiac" (2011), part of "The World Stage: Israel" series, now on display at New York's Jewish Museum.

"Defend and Develop the Island Together" (2006) from "The World Stage: China."

"Hunger" (2008) from "The World Stage: Lagos & Dakar."

PHOTO CREDIT: Kehinde Wiley and Sean Kelly Gallery

Beam, Christopher. " The New Art World Rulebook – #6: Outsource to China, while riffing on the Western canon. Kehinde Wiley's global reach," *New York Magazine*, April 22, 2012.

NEW YORK

« The New Art World Rulebook

6. Outsource to China

While riffing on the Western canon. Kehinde Wiley's global reach.

By Christopher Beam Published Apr 22, 2012

Kehinde Wiley in his Beijing studio.
(Photo: Matthew Niederhauser/Institute)

In a soaring studio on the outskirts of Beijing, where Kehinde Wiley came in 2006 to set up the first of his several global production outposts, the 35-year-old painter is showing off his women. Most of them are still incomplete—their faces need touching up, their gowns (custom-designed for his models by Givenchy) lack texture. But one already stands out: a tall, elegant black woman in a long blue dress—the canvas is enormous, eight feet by ten feet—calmly staring down the viewer. In one hand, she holds a knife. In the other, a cleanly severed brunette female head. "It's sort of a play on the 'kill whitey' thing," Wiley says.

Subtle, I think. Not that Wiley's work ever seems that subtle at first. Best known for his oversize portraits of young African-American men he finds on the street—"the boys," he calls them—against florid wallpaperlike backdrops in poses lifted from old portraits of European gentry, Wiley has in a mere decade built a monster career around bright colors, big ideas, and a canvas the size of Earth itself, every person in every nation a potential subject. His series "The World Stage" makes that promise literal, as he globetrots from the favelas of Rio to the slums of Delhi, pulling charismatic-looking men into the studio for Renaissance-style tribute. And his newest portraits, for a show opening May 5 at Sean Kelly Gallery, constitute his first all-female exhibition and tackle no less grand a theme than the historic representation of women in art.

That unabashed bombast has made Wiley a walking superlative: the most successful black artist since Basquiat, possibly the wealthiest painter of his generation, certainly the one who made his name earliest (he was 26 for his first major solo show), a gay man who has become the great painter of machismo for the swag era, a bootstrapper from South Central who talks like a Yale professor (much of the time), a genius self-promoter who's managed to have it both ways in an art world that loves having its critical cake and eating the spectacle of it, too, and a crossover phenomenon who is at once the hip-hop world's favorite fine artist (Spike Lee and LL Cool J own pieces) and the gallery world's most popular hip-hop ambassador. Not to mention an all-around positive guy.

"Women have always been decorative," Wiley says, gesturing at the portraits around him. "They've never been actors or possessed real agency." Compact, with a pink dress shirt tugging at itself across his chest and an unself-conscious gap-toothed grin, he doesn't look like the grave, hoodie-rocking men he often portrays so much as their nerdy cousin. (He listens to NPR on his Beats headphones.) Despite seeming exhausted, he's affable and reflective, as if picking up where he left off in some past interview.

Which brings us back to the lady with the severed head. Like most Wiley paintings, this one has a backstory: Her name is Triesha Lowe, Wiley explains. She's a stay-at-home mom whom Wiley found at the Fulton Mall. Her pose is a riff on classical depictions by Caravaggio and Gentileschi, of the biblical story of Judith beheading Holofernes. And the severed head? "She's one of my assistants."

There's nothing new about artists using assistants—everyone from Michelangelo to Jeff Koons has employed teams of helpers, with varying degrees of irony and pride—but Wiley gets uncomfortable discussing the subject. "I'm sensitive to it," he says. When I first arrived at his Beijing studio, the assistants had left, and he made me delete the iPhone snapshots I'd taken of the empty space. It's not that he wants people to believe every brushstroke is his, he says. That they aren't is public knowledge. It's just a question of boundaries. "I don't want you to know every aspect of where my hand starts and ends, or how many layers go underneath the skin, or how I got that glow to happen," he says. "It's the secret sauce! Get out of my kitchen!"

Producing work in China cuts costs, but not as much as it used to, Wiley says. These days in Beijing he employs anywhere from four to ten workers, depending on the urgency, plus a studio manager, the American artist Ain Cocke. The Beijing studio began as a lark: After visiting an artist friend there and liking what he saw, he and a couple of his New York staffers flew out, rented some space, and started painting, "sort of like a retreat," he says. One thing led to another—"another" being a five-year relationship with a Chinese D.J.—and eventually the Beijing studio became the main production hub as well as his second home. He recently bought an apartment overlooking Chaoyang Park, complete with a live-in maid and two miniature greyhounds, Xiaohui, or "Little Gray," and Celie, named after the character in *The Color Purple*.

Napoleon Leading the Army Over the Alps, 2005 (Photo: Courtesy of Kehinde Wiley and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York)

And working in Beijing gives him a little space to breathe. "It's distracting," he says of my natural interest in finding out who did what. "I want the illusion of a fully formed object without seeing the mechanisms going on behind the curtain. That's show business."

He knows show business. VH1 commissioned a series of Wiley portraits of rap greats like Ice T for its 2005 Hip-Hop Honors. He worked with Puma to design shoes for the South Africa World Cup, the first such event held in Africa. And in 2009 he painted a commissioned portrait of Michael Jackson clad in armor atop a white horse, the King of Pop made literal. He and Jackson worked for months on the look and feel of the portrait. "We were talking about Rubens, and he wanted to know if it was late or early Rubens I was referencing."

The spectacle is always carefully staged, particularly with "the boys," which can sell for more than $100,000. "There are certain ground rules," says Wiley. Eight to ten paintings per show. Men, usually. Street casting: Wiley goes out with a team to recruit young men as models. Back in the studio, they leaf through art-history books, and the subject gets to decide which old-style work he wants to be portrayed as. He poses for photos, and the photos become templates for full-size paintings, which Wiley produces with his assistants in New York, Dakar, and Beijing.

Or not. In many cases, Wiley acknowledges, none of that official process—the street casting, the selection of poses from art books, the painting based on those poses—happens at all. "The clothing, sometimes completely made up," he says. "The models themselves, brought in from a fashion agency." And in at least one case, the "boy" is in fact a girl. "Oftentimes, if there's a show of ten paintings, four of them will be complete frauds."

Wiley likes to keep his intentions ambiguous, comparing himself to the two-faced Nigerian trickster god Eshu. Does the decision to paint an anonymous black man (or Ice T) posing like Napoleon constitute an act of social justice that gives African-Americans their rightful place in the Western pantheon? Yes. Is it a mockery of the pantheon itself and anyone who would wish to be in or buy into it? That too. "As an artist and a student of history," he says, "you have to be at once critical and complicit, to take a stance that says, 'Yes, I'm in love with this magic, this way of painting, but damn it's fucked up.' "

By embracing contradiction rather than running from it—by toggling between insider and outsider, art-history party-crasher and homage-payer, Serious Artist and practical jokester—Wiley has broadened his potential audience to include ... everyone. (Everyone, that is, who doesn't see the work as "dead and mechanical," as the *Times* put it, or isn't uncomfortable with his "market-friendliness," as *Artforum* put it.) His paintings appeal to buyers interested in interrogating the social construct of portraiture, those who think it's hilarious to put black dudes in do-rags on horses carrying scepters, and those who just miss the grand scale of history painting. Perhaps that explains his popularity beyond the Chelsea whirlpool: In addition to top collectors like Mera and Donald Rubell, Wiley counts Elton John, Lance Armstrong, Venus Williams, and Neil Patrick Harris among his buyers. Wiley isn't merely many things to many people. He's whatever you want him to be. Even if all you want is a big, badass military-style portrait to hang next to your gold records.

Of course, ambiguity is itself a stance, as he knows. "Painting does more than just point to things," Wiley says. "The very act of pointing is a value statement." He crosses his arms, pointing in opposite directions. "I'm just doing this sometimes."

Wiley always knew he would be an artist. "I never had to choose," he says. "It's the only thing I've ever been any good at."

We're sitting in an impossibly fancy Mediterranean restaurant in Sanlitun Village, a commercial development in Beijing that barely existed four years ago. He's wearing a dinner jacket and sampling an extensive cheese plate (trying to, at least—he's lactose intolerant). "I love that you sense growth around you all the time, whether it be fashion or architecture or art or politics," he says of living in China. "There's still a sense of malleability."

Wiley grew up in South Central Los Angeles, the fifth of six children raised by a single mother on welfare putting herself through grad school in linguistics. "I grew up in this weird, educationally elite but economically impoverished environment," says Wiley. "Total *Oprah* story."

When he was 11, his mom sent him and his fraternal ("Thank God—we've got enough issues as it is") twin brother Taiwo to after-school art classes. In those days, Taiwo was the better artist. "It would piss me off how well he could draw," says Wiley. But Wiley enjoyed it more and stuck with it.

He attended the Los Angeles County High School for the Arts and then the San Francisco Art Institute. He took cooking classes, too, since he knew painting likely wouldn't support him. "I thought I'd be a chef by night and paint by day," he says. "Now I just have fabulous dinner parties." The Yale School of Art pushed his thinking. There, Wiley devoured the whole academic buffet—art theory, world history, identity and cultural theory.

The question of identity wasn't just academic. His father, Isiah Obot, had come from Nigeria in the seventies and studied architecture at UCLA, where he met Wiley's mother. He left before Wiley was born, and Wiley's mother destroyed all her pictures of him. "I always wanted to know what he looked like," Wiley says. "As a portraitist, I was obsessed with his face." (The name Wiley comes from his mother's first husband.) When Wiley was 20, he raised $700 from family members, hopped a plane to Nigeria, and started searching. Knowing nothing more than his father's name and expertise, he traveled to Akwa Ibom, the state in southern Nigeria where his father's tribe originated, went to the state capital of Uyo, learned his father was working at a nearby university, and walked into the architecture department. "His name's on the door," Wiley says. "He's the head of the department."

It was awkward. "He didn't understand my intention at first. He probably thought I was there to shake him down," Wiley says. His father had recently married and hadn't told his wife about his far-flung progeny. "I fell into this deep depression afterward." He painted a series of portraits of his father. He had videotaped the whole saga and watched it over and over.

That was also around the time Wiley came out. The inciting incident: His girlfriend at the time came out to him. "I was like, 'Well, if you're not playing this game, I'm not playing either,' " he says. His brother wasn't surprised. His mother was just happy she had five other kids who could give her grandchildren. His sisters? "Total fag hags," Wiley says. Was there any trouble at school? "Art school? San Francisco? Get the fuck out of here. The problem was if you were straight."

After graduating from Yale, Wiley took a residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem. "One Hundred Twenty-fifth Street was so dense and packed with pageantry and peacocking," he says. "I wanted to try and get that down in painting." He started stopping men on the street and asking to paint their portraits. Eventually he and his subjects started talking about art history, and Wiley began painting their portraits based on their favorite classics.

He didn't have one big break so much as a string of them. In 2002, a couple of high-profile exhibitions at the Studio Museum featured his paintings. Jeffrey Deitch took notice and offered him his first major solo show. Wiley was on an Italian Renaissance kick and had the idea of creating his own Sistine Chapel. The result was *Faux/Real*, which featured guys in modern hip-hop garb posing as saints in front of swarms of sperm, among other decorative patterns, while other men floated among clouds like thugged-out angels on a canvas sky hung across the ceiling.

In *Rumors of War* (2005), he transposed men into contexts of military glory. *Down* (2008) depicted dead and dying men on a massive scale, while *Black Light* (2009) used blown-up photos instead of painted figures. *The World Stage* takes mostly black and brown men from Brazil, Senegal, Nigeria, India, and Israel and sets them against a country-specific backdrop, such as Dutch wax-resist fabrics.

His next gallery show, called "Mr. President," will feature portraits of presidents of various African countries as they wish to be portrayed, he says, and will address "notions of taste and vulgarity." Painting a powerful political figure is different from pulling a kid off the streets, of course. "It's redundant, almost," he says. But as Wiley sees it, it's not his job to judge. "The games I'm playing have much more to do with using the language of power and the vocabulary of power to construct new sentences," Wiley says. "It's about pointing to empire and control and domination and misogyny and all those social ills in the work, but it's not necessarily taking a position. Oftentimes it's actually embodying it."

Schwendener, Martha. "The Diaspora is Remixed," *The New York Times, March 22, 2012.*

The New York Times
Art & Design

March 22, 2012

The Diaspora Is Remixed

By MARTHA SCHWENDENER

For all its professed liberalism and even radicalism, the art world is considerably less diverse than many of the institutions its products criticize. Government agencies, large corporations and the military — at least in this country — can make the art world look like a segregation-era backwater. This puts enormous pressure on young black artists who have come up through the system to speak not only as individuals but also for a large population — particularly when they show in museums, which don't just exhibit art but also frame it in the context of a larger historical narrative.

Kehinde Wiley is one such artist. After earning a Master of Fine Arts degree at Yale in 2001, Mr. Wiley, then in his mid-20s, began exhibiting his large, figurative oil-on-canvas portraits of young black men in hip-hop apparel.

Kehinde Wiley/Roberts & Tilton, Culver City, California

Kehinde Wiley/The World Stage: Israel An exhibition at the Jewish Museum includes "Mizrah" and 13 other paintings.

With an emphasis on bright, acid colors and ghetto-fabulous outfits, Mr. Wiley's paintings borrowed heavily from the work of an earlier Yale M.F.A., Barkley Hendricks, whose portraits coincided with the Black Power movement and the '70s heyday of photorealist painting.

Mr. Wiley's contribution was to push things in a more bombastic direction. Hijacking — or appropriating, to use the art world-approved term — the format of old master altarpieces and three-quarter-length portraits, he likened the notorious opulence of successful hip-hop artists to that of European aristocrats. And since most of his subjects were actually disenfranchised black and brown youths — that is, hip-hop fans rather than stars — he effectively transformed his subjects into aristocrats, at least in the world of the picture.

Mr. Wiley's work hasn't changed much over the last decade, although his scope has gone global. A series called "The World Stage" has featured youth in Nigeria, Senegal, Brazil, China, India and Sri Lanka. Now "Kehinde Wiley/The World Stage: Israel," at the Jewish Museum, takes on that country.

This latest leg of Mr. Wiley's world tour starts with a portrait of a young Ethiopian-Israeli man, "Alios Itzhak" (2011), set against a pattern borrowed from a 19th-century Eastern European mizrah, a papercut made to be placed on a wall to indicate the direction of Jerusalem for purposes of worship. The portrait, acquired by the museum, is joined by 13 additional paintings of young men by Mr. Wiley, along with 11 historic papercuts and textile works he selected from the museum's collection.

Like Alios Itzhak, most of the other portrait subjects are shown in their street clothes and painted against elaborate patterns from traditional Jewish art. T-shirts advertising YouTube or sportswear companies are juxtaposed with decorative motifs like lions, birds and arabesques that wrap around the figures, moving from background to foreground. The result is a fusion of Pattern and Decoration painting with figuration, a mash-up or sampling of historical styles and references.

One canvas, "Kalkidan Mashasha" (2011), does feature a hip-hop-reggae artist, who is painted in a light brown military shirt with patches depicting the Ethiopian flag and commemorating Haile Selassie, the last emperor of the Ethiopian monarchy and a deified figure in Rastafarian culture. Meanwhile, cases nearby quietly display intricately painted mizrahs and textiles from 19th-century Italy, Poland and Ukraine.

There are some good elements to this show, and some problems. On the positive side, the Jewish Museum has been in the vanguard of showing contemporary art. The exhibition provides an opportunity to exhibit the work of an African-American while celebrating the Jewish diaspora's diversity and Israel as a "melting pot" (to quote the catalog).

And yet the show raises some difficult questions. For instance, what is the position of the Ethiopian Jew in Israeli society? The gallery installation gives the impression of Jewish culture as a seamless visual narrative, slipping faultlessly from old Europe to modern-day Tel Aviv. It also posits, particularly in a video accompanying the paintings, Israel as a haven for persecuted Ethiopian Jews.

In the catalog, however, Mr. Mashasha, who cites thinkers and activists like Frantz Fanon, Malcolm X, Nelson Mandela and Marcus Garvey as influences, states, "I am struggling with the issue of not becoming what I criticize, not to be racist if others are, not to perceive things simply because I'm sensitive and I'm black."

Another question is why Mr. Wiley's work focuses solely on young men, when many of the textiles on view were made by women, and, as the catalog informs us, one of the best-known Israelis of Ethiopian descent is a female singer named Hagit Yaso, who won last year's edition of an Israeli show similar to "American Idol."

Part of the answer is that Mr. Wiley has generally painted preening young men, and there is a strong homoerotic element in his work that is glossed over here.

It's not necessary to label him as a gay artist — or an African-American one — to understand or appreciate his work. And yet this omission speaks to the way Mr. Wiley has been packaged: as a slightly titillating but not too radical artist whose work nods toward racial and sexual taboos, but is safe enough to be shown just about anywhere. (This is reflected in the paintings themselves, which look particularly bland and factory-produced when viewed up close.)

Perhaps the greater problem is that Mr. Wiley's work gains its currency by leaning on hip-hop for cultural authenticity, but veers away from what gives that medium its extraordinary power. In Mr. Wiley's hands, one of the most vital and viral idioms of the last quarter-century becomes safe and palatable, a domestic product that has been successfully exported around the globe and re-enters American art as fashion or style, largely stripped of its political and emotional charge and dressed up with extraneous decorative motifs.

Just as music critics have complained of hip-hop's becoming a corporatized global commodity, Mr. Wiley can be accused of using it to neutralize differences and difficulties like those cited by Mr. Mashasha in the catalog. And it is those very difficulties that we rely on art to broach.

"Kehinde Wiley/The World Stage: Israel" continues through July 29 at the Jewish Museum, 1109 Fifth Avenue, at 92nd Street; (212) 423-3200, thejewishmuseum.org.

Duray, Dan. "Kehinde Wiley, Fresh From Israel, Brings His Ferocious Poses and Flashy Duds to the Jewish Museum," *Gallerist NY – The New York Observer*, March 6, 2012.

Gallerist

Kehinde Wiley, Fresh From Israel, Brings His Ferocious Poses and Flashy Duds to the Jewish Museum

Alios Itzhak (The World Stage: Israel) (2011)

The artist Kehinde Wiley does a lot of things. Later this week he opens "The World Stage: Israel," a 15-painting show at the Jewish Museum that brings his Old Masters lens to the night club denizens of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. His first major show with his new gallery, Sean Kelly, opens in May, and he's just done a career-spanning monograph with Rizzoli—all this in addition to doing a portrait for the cover of the new Santigold album.

He also does a solid impression of his former New York dealer Jeffrey Deitch. When *The Observer* told Mr. Wiley we were going to reach out to Mr. Deitch for this piece, he jumped into it, hunching his shoulders to make himself shorter in his chair at his Soho apartment Monday. "So, so, so," he said in a low, nasally voice, squinting to imply that the forthcoming flattery should be taken very seriously. "Kehinde's doing *fantastically*."

Mr. Wiley now operates three studios around the world, one in New York, one in Beijing, where he keeps two Italian greyhounds in addition to the three he keeps here, and another in Dakar. He's planning a fourth in the jungles of the Dominican Republic large enough to accommodate six other artists. The idea, he said, is to create a place where he can invite his artist friends. "I want to be able to ask them, 'Hey, want to go paint in the middle of nowhere?'" he said.

"The World Stage: Israel" is the fifth installment in a global project that has him had finding portrait models, invariably young men, on the streets of India and Sri Lanka, Brazil, China, and Lagos and Dakar, then painting them in the classic style once reserved for wealthy patrons. The series' intricate backgrounds swirl with cartoonlike flowers that creep onto a subject's tank-top or, in the case of Hamza El Essawi at the Jewish Museum (nicknamed "Big Boy" by Mr. Wiley, he said as we flipped through the

catalogue—they all have nicknames; another subject, “Montel,” is a dead ringer for the talk-show host), vines that foreground so lushly it looks like the alligator on his Lacoste shirt might leap off into them.

The paintings in the show are accompanied by Judaica from the museum’s collection selected by Mr. Wiley himself and reminiscent of the ceremonial Jewish papercut style seen in the backgrounds of the Israel paintings. Torah ark coverings lie in cases inside each room and, next to Mr. Wiley’s paintings, their purple satin and gold threads almost seem to display a similar MTV gaudiness. His radiant subjects aim to portray Israel as a melting pot—one featured subject is Kalkidan Mashasha, an Ethiopian Jewish rapper.

The theme of assimilation has always played a role in Mr. Wiley’s work—his subjects are frequently swaddled in the international brands of corporate cool—but never more so than in the “World Stage” series. His subjects’ poses, no longer tied to vamping on specific works by Ingres or El Greco (“They’re all up here,” Mr. Wiley said, tapping his head), are now more of a pastiche of classic painting, so elements of Brazilian posture are echoed in China and Israel. This brings him full circle, in a way, since his earlier works drew attention to how similar the poses in Old Master paintings are to the primping you see on the covers of magazines like Vibe and, in their reference to a sentiment rather than a body position, his new poses are closer than ever to the magazine version.

“I think you have to allow your style to evolve slowly over time,” Mr. Wiley said. “There are no major rips in the fabric, necessarily; there’s the slow departure from one habit to another.”

Mr. Wiley grew up in South Central Los Angeles, one of six children raised by a single mother who encouraged Kehinde and his brother Taiwo to take art classes at a local college, to keep them out of trouble, though it’s difficult to imagine a man whose apartment now features a stuffed albino peacock ever had the possibility of going that way. From there it was the San Francisco Art Institute and an MFA at Yale, where he quickly made a name for himself with portraits of African Americans with hair styles so impossibly large they devolved into abstraction. After graduation he was offered a fellowship at the Studio Museum of Harlem, which was where Mr. Deitch met him and offered him a show.

Mr. Deitch, now director of the Museum of Contemporary Los Angeles, said he was drawn to Mr. Wiley’s technical skill as a painter, and his eye for irony.

“He has something else that many of the best artists have,” Mr. Deitch said, “and that’s the aesthetic issues that are so strong they’re embodied in his own persona as well as the work. So you have that with Andy Warhol, Jeff Koons, Keith Haring—they actually embody the work, and there’s a world that they create around the actual paintings.”

For one opening at Deitch, Mr. Wiley wanted an 80-person high-stepping band to perform in the street outside gallery. He held an opening party for an exhibit at the Studio Museum at a vogue hall in association with the House of Extravaganza. “We could have done a whole book documenting all of these performance events that Kehinde created around his exhibitions,” Mr. Deitch said.

“I’m not one of those artists who fetishizes being socially maladroit,” Mr. Wiley said. At one of the photo shoots for “The World Stage: Israel,” his hosts slaughtered a lamb and everything went Middle East house party in a hurry.

It’s this rich social life—he’s famous for his fish fry-ups at Art Basel Miami—and the subtle details in his large works that have led him to hire assistants who aid in his painting. He doesn’t put out a want ad, he said. Rather, he asks friends if they know anyone who’d like to help on his more ambitious fare, like “Down,” his last show at Deitch that had hooded Harlemites in Renaissance death throes. That show probably had between five or eight assistants, he said. “The World Stage Israel,” being relatively smaller, required fewer.

“The last major show I did had paintings about 20 feet in length. That was a huge undertaking—there were all these little tiny flowers,” he said. “This is sort of à la Rubens, à la Titian—anyone who’s made any sort of great artistic effort has had a studio that is affiliated with assistants.”

Mr. Wiley enjoys the healthy market you'd expect from someone who makes large, colorful Pop paintings that aren't that difficult to understand but may be more subversive than the people handing over $80,000 for them at auction (his average recent price, according to Artnet) realize. His auction record, achieved at Phillips de Pury & Co. last September, is $122,500; and a portrait from "The World Stage: Beijing," *Learn From Comrade Wang Guofu*! (2007), ranks number two, $116,030 at Phillips' London branch in 2010.

Next up, Mr. Wiley said at his apartment, is a project with the Louvre that has him using the museum's collection as inspiration for a series about the former French colonies. For it, he'll travel to Tunisia, Algeria and down into the Congo. Africa from the point of view of the colonizers? Isn't that a little … ?

"Fucked up?" he asked. "Well, in order to come to terms with how we create stories and narratives, how we start talking about what it means to be a citizen of Cameroon—that nation didn't even exist prior to colonial presence."

He leaned forward in his chair as he described what he might explore there. "The only way that we talk about these nation states—and oftentimes there's a lot of strife within these nation states, because they're not naturally supposed to be together—is through the lens of the colonial project. What does that say about those nations? Are they all necessarily basket cases? What does that say about France in its desire to control and to annex? Sure it's fucked up," he leaned back. "That's the way the world is."

dduray@observer.com

"Kehinde Wiley's 'The World Stage: Israel' On View At The Jewish Museum,"

The Huffington Post, March 5, 2012.

HUFFPOST ARTS

Kehinde Wiley's 'The World Stage: Israel' On View At The Jewish Museum

Kehinde Wiley, "Alos Itzhak (The World Stage: Israel)," 2011, oil and gold enamel on canvas. The Jewish Museum, New York; Purchase: Gift of Lisa and Steven Tananbaum Family Foundation; Gift in honor of Joan Rosenbaum by the Contemporary Judaica, Fine Arts, Photography, and Traditional Judaica Acquisitions Committee Funds, 2011-31.

Kehinde Wiley's paintings challenge our conventional views of portraiture by featuring black men in a mix of regal and street poses, using the brightest palette imaginable. The subjects are dressed in their own clothes, but the backdrop is anything but normal.

For his new exhibition at the Jewish Museum in New York, Wiley turned his focus to Israeli youth from a range of ethnic backgrounds and religious beliefs. Inspired by the traditional Jewish papercuts in the museum's collection, Wiley integrated ritualistic patterns and designs into the 14 new large-scale paintings that make up the "The World Stage: Israel" series.

Wiley created a unique fusion of the orthodox and secular to serve as the catalyst for the paintings. Referencing traditions of Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East, the paintings suggest a variety of influences, but the artist's desire to focus on those on the periphery of all of these regions is the defining characteristic of the series.

The impressive scale of the work becomes Wiley's comment on how we measure power historically and his desire to tip the scales in favor of those who are typically overlooked and unheard. For an artist who has experienced such a meteoric rise (as evidenced by his work for the new Santigold album), Kehinde Wiley's focus remains laser sharp and as his new exhibition suggests, his point won't be dulled anytime soon.

View a slideshow of "The World Stage: Israel" below and let us know what you think of these portraits in the comments section. If you'd like to see it in person, "The World Stage: Israel" will be on display at the Jewish Museum from March 9 - July 29, 2012. You can also check out Wiley's website, where his "World Stage" series features youth in India, China, Lagos, and beyond.

"What's On: Kehinde Wiley," *The Art Newspaper,* March 2012.

THE ART NEWSPAPER

What's On

Event details

Kehinde Wiley

Until 29 Jul 12

NEW YORK. The US artist-provocateur Kehinde Wiley revisits his favourite themes of globalisation, cultural hybridity and the displacement of diaspora populations in his "World Stage: Israel" series, on show at the Jewish Museum in New York.

Wiley's 14 large-scale paintings show striking Israeli youths of diverse ethnicities against backgrounds inspired by Jewish ceremonial art.

Lean young Ethiopian and Ashkenazi Jews and Arab Israelis are among the individuals depicted. A nine-minute video shows the artist searching for his subjects in the bars, marketplaces and sporting venues of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem.

Wiley's Kalkidan Mashasha (The World Stage: Israel), 2011

"I entered Israel as a provocation," the artist told Flaunt magazine. "Many of the reasons why I choose certain sites have to do with a level of curiosity, but it also has to do with their broader, global political importance strategically for America and the world community at large." Ancient Jewish imagery, such as the Lion of Judah, and texts in Hebrew, are incorporated in the hand-carved, dark wooden frames of the portraits.

The Ten Commandments, for instance, accompany Wiley's Jewish subjects while the plea of Rodney King, whose videotaped beating by police led to the 1992 riots in Los Angeles, is etched in the frames of the Arab Israeli paintings.

The Ten Commandments, for instance, accompany Wiley's Jewish subjects while the plea of Rodney King, whose videotaped beating by police led to the 1992 riots in Los Angeles, is etched in the frames of the Arab Israeli paintings.

King famously asked reporters: "Why can't we all get along?" Karen Levitov, the museum's associate curator, says: "Wiley is from Los Angeles and the plea of King resonated with him." The show also includes ten examples of Jewish ceremonial art from the permanent collection chosen by Wiley, including a 19th-century silk Torah ark curtain and a Moroccan papercut dating from 1900. Painting on a grand scale still remains important to Wiley.

"From the time he was a child visiting museums, Wiley was struck by large portraits of royalty and nobility and others wealthy enough to commission large-scale portraits by the most significant artists of their day," Levitov says. Categories: Contemporary (1970-present)

SEANKELLY

2011

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Landi, Ann. "In With The Old." *ARTnews*. September 2011. Print.

IN WITH THE OLD

With portraits of men of color in trendy ghetto gear posed in attitudes copied from the Old Masters, **Kehinde Wiley** aims to 'make paintings that matter in the 21st century'

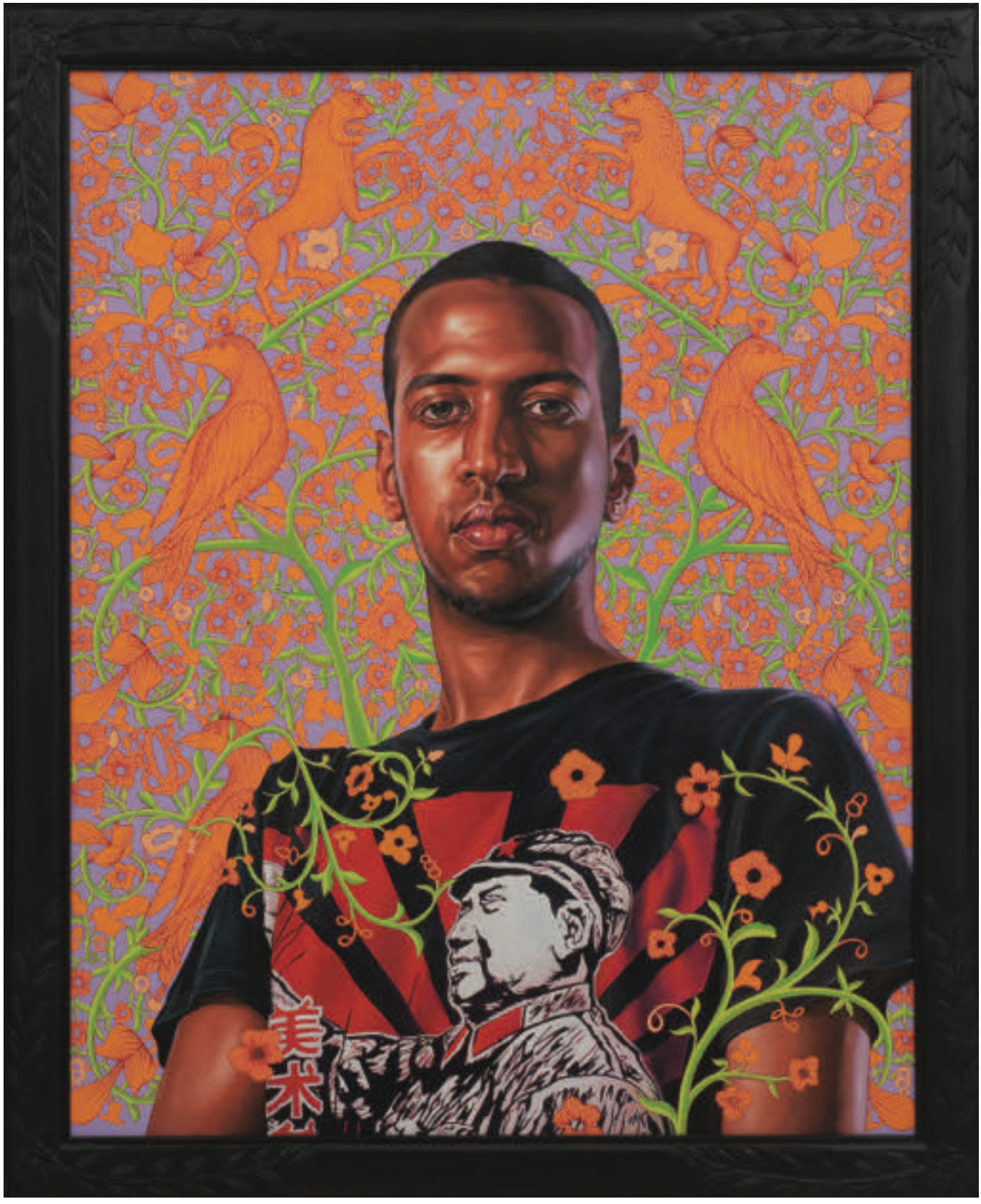
BY ANN LANDI

In the course of less than a decade, Kehinde Wiley has come to enjoy the kind of art-world acclaim most young artists can only dream of. He operates out of three studios around the globe (in New York, Beijing, and Senegal). His large-scale portraits sell for up to $250,000 and have been bought by major collectors as well as such institutions as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Brooklyn Museum, and the Walker Art Center. He has had nine solo shows and major overviews at the Brooklyn Museum and the Studio Museum in Harlem—all before he reached the age of 33.

The next sentence should read something like, "For all this acclaim, Wiley is surprisingly modest and unassuming." But that wouldn't quite be true. This is, after all, a man who posed in an ornately embroidered greatcoat, astride a white horse, for *House & Garden* magazine and arranged for the drag queen and opera singer Shequida to appear, dressed in a Venetian gown, at his 2004 opening at the Brooklyn Museum. In person, the baby-faced artist is friendly and collected, and he is both astute and articulate about his accomplishments and his goals.

In the midst of moving his studio from Greenpoint, Brooklyn, to the garment district in Manhattan, Wiley meets me in the library

Ann Landi is an ARTnews *contributing editor.*



OPPOSITE **Kehinde Wiley.** ABOVE ***Shmuel Yosef*, 2011, from the "World Stage: Israel" series.**

***Three Wise Men Greeting Entry into Lagos*, 2008, from the "World Stage: Africa" series.**

of his New York gallery, Sean Kelly, in Chelsea, which will host his solo show next May. (He is also represented by Rhona Hoffman Gallery in Chicago and Roberts & Tilton in Los Angeles.) He is dressed in a style that might be described as Wall Street meets hip-hop: a three-piece dark-blue suit replete with watch chain, a dark shirt and tie, and worn black sneakers. But when he takes off his jacket, he exposes on the lining a full-color photo-screenprint portrait of one of his proud and handsome subjects, this one discovered on the street in Senegal. (It goes without saying that Wiley designs his own clothes.)

The outfit seems a perfect metaphor for Wiley's art, in which the worlds of tradition and power collide with those of disenfranchised minorities to explosive effect. From the beginning of his career, his portraits have featured young men of color in trendy ghetto gear—football jerseys, do-rags, baseball caps, diamond-stud earrings, flashy watches and chains—posed in attitudes copied from the Old Masters. The images refer back to the aristocratic subjects of Titian, Rubens, Velázquez, and Van Dyck (and occasionally to saints, martyrs, or Christ himself), and until recently the figures were set against decorative backdrops of swirly patterns that weave behind and around the sitters. All of this is accomplished in a highly polished realist style that has caused more than one critic to marvel at the sheer technical proficiency of his epic-size work (*The Dead Christ in the Tomb*, 2007, showing a muscular black youth laid out on a cloth-draped slab, is 12 feet long).

Wiley's beginnings scarcely presaged art-world fame and fortune. His Nigerian father left the family shortly before he was born, in 1977. He and his five siblings were raised in South Central Los Angeles at a time when gang violence and hip-hop music were becoming touchstones of black culture. "We found ways of surviving," Wiley recalls. "We would pick up old furniture in the streets and refurbish it and sell it in a resale store. I learned Spanish in the streets of L.A., selling secondhand clothes." But his African American mother, a graduate student in African linguistics, found opportunities for her children. "My twin brother and I would go to a predominantly Jewish summer camp," he recalls. "They had a scholarship program for lower-income families. I guess they never assumed that two black kids from the inner city would apply."

Wiley developed an early aptitude for drawing and painting. "I could make a car that looked like a real car," he recalls. "I was sort of awkward as a kid. Painting became my security blanket, something that made me cool as

***Santos Dumont, The Father of Aviation III*, 2009, from the "World Stage: Brazil" series.**

an overweight, nerdy boy." When he was eleven, his mother sent him and his brother to an art school, where Wiley learned a few basic skills and discovered a world beyond the ghetto. The teachers took their students to museums, including the Huntington Library, which has a world-class collection of 18th- and 19th-century British portraiture. Wiley felt an immediate affinity for the accoutrements of these aristocratic likenesses; he was fascinated by "the powdered wigs and the lapdogs, the pearls and the jewels."

At twelve, he went to an art school in Russia. "This is not your normal story about urban blight," the artist wryly notes. "My mother was ambitious and well educated. But we were also in the hood. You've got this weird imbalance between a hypersensitivity to global culture, but at the same time you're in economically impoverished and depressing circumstances. The disparity threw all our lives into sharp focus."

A few years later, Wiley found himself at the Academy of Art University in San Francisco, far enough from Los Angeles for him to establish his independence but close enough to maintain family ties. "It offered a very classic art training," he recalls. "I learned how to paint from life, to draw the figure from life. With this material understanding came a second level of education that began in San Francisco, and that was about all of the conceptual strategies within painting." He gained a "way of making a beautiful painting" but also began to have an "engagement with the evolution of contemporary culture—a concern with gender, color, and class."

While still an undergraduate, at the age of 20, Wiley set out to find his father. He boarded a plane to Nigeria with no clear idea of how to track the man down nor any sense of what he looked like, because his mother had destroyed all photos of him. His father had studied architecture, so Wiley checked all the universities to see if he had pursued that calling in Africa. Finally, Wiley was advised to go to the ethnic center for Ibido culture, in the region where his father's name was most prevalent. There he found that his father had become head of the architecture department at the University of Calabar in Cross River State, Nigeria. Wiley won't talk about their meeting.

After earning his degree in San Francisco, Wiley headed straight for the M.F.A. program at Yale. "I didn't want to get lost out there," he says. "It's so easy to take a break and then one year turns into five and before you know it, you're someone's short-order cook." Yale offered a stellar faculty that included Kerry James Marshall, Mel Bochner, and Peter Halley, along with a "smorgasbord of ideas," he says. "You're looking not only at art history but

social history and anthropology, the ways that people have solved essential questions as to who we are and what are our passions." His goal, he adds, was "to be able to paint illusionistically and master the technical aspects, but then to be able to fertilize that with great ideas."

Next came a residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem. "It's a kindergarten in the truest sense of the word," Wiley says. "You've got a place to work, a small stipend. It was there that I started losing all the trappings and pretensions of Yale and the obsessions with getting it right and perfect that I'd learned in San Francisco. I wanted to engage with the people of 125th Street."

Wiley began to make what he describes as "casting calls," venturing out into upper Manhattan to find the subjects for his work—a practice he still follows, though now he heads out with a camera crew, studio assistants, a lighting expert, and "beautiful women who do the first introduction." He also has examples of his paintings on hand, and sometimes discovers kids who are already familiar with his work. "A lot of guys do know who I am and have an understanding of contemporary art," he says.

In the neighborhoods and clubs he visits, Wiley looks for "people who have a certain self-possession, alpha characteristics. It has nothing to do with scale or size. Certain people will just look great in a painting." In the studio, wearing clothes of their own choosing, his subjects are invited to decide on poses from preselected reproductions of Old Masters.

"There's a certain type of hubris involved here," Wiley notes. "It's about my taste in art history, certainly, but at the same time these models are choosing how they want to be presented." (The celebrity rapper Ice-T, for instance, opted for Ingres's image of Napoleon, saying, "If anyone deserves to be Napoleon on the throne, it's me.") Wiley works from photographs—in themselves striking character studies—painting the figures himself with assistants filling in the decorative details.

For the "World Stage" series, which has preoccupied him over the last few years, Wiley has scoured for subjects in Africa, China, Brazil, and most recently Sri Lanka and Israel. "We're talking about hip-hop clubs where you find Ashkenazi, Sephardic, or even Palestinian Jews. We set up a photo studio in the back of the club and all the photographs we take become source material," he explains. "This segment of the population is something you rarely see in the media coverage of Israel. All we see in the mainstream media are the problematic aspects, the guns and bombs and riots."

***Equestrian Portrait of King Philip II (Michael Jackson)*, 2010, inspired by Rubens.**

Wiley typically spends about three months in each place, and his forays occasionally give rise to harrowing moments. In Rio, a cab carrying him and some friends through a rough neighborhood was pulled over by a cop. "He peered down at us, three young black men, sitting in the backseat of a taxi," his friend, the novelist Brian Keith Jackson, later recalled in a catalogue essay. "The taxi driver explained he'd picked us up at one store and was taking us to another. . . . The officer remained skeptical, but after another assessing glance, he let us go. Though we needed no explanation, the driver told us the policeman had assumed we were buying drugs."

Wiley was in that Brazilian neighborhood looking not for models but for seafood to use as bait, because fishing is his favorite off-hours activity. "Angling is something that will get me to do a speaking gig before anything else," he says. "If there's great fishing, I'll come." He is partial to both deep-sea and river fishing and does it all over the world, and every year he heads down to Santee Cooper Lake in South Carolina for the catfishing.

Wiley is keenly aware of some of the ironies of his life. His paintings of young men from the poorest neighborhoods around the world sell for top dollar to a privileged elite of largely white collectors. A gay man, he paints images of a culture that is stereotypically viewed as exaggeratedly heterosexual ("There's an interesting anxiety to what's possibly queer about them," he notes.) He selects his subjects from the hotspots of rap and hip-hop culture, but his own musical tastes tend toward classic jazz.

"I remember blasting Miles Davis when I lived in Oakland," he recalls, "and the black kids screamed, 'Turn that fucking white music off!'" As attuned as he is to the inequities of the global village, even his beloved Italian greyhounds—four in all, divided between his homes in Beijing and New York—are of an elegant and expensive breed he discovered in Old Master paintings.

Though his art could easily slip completely into the realm of social commentary, Wiley shies away from any overt message. "My work is not concerned with creating political correctness," he says. "That sort of didactic stuff is quite boring, honestly. No one wants to be preached to. I just want to see a rapturously gorgeous picture that happens to be about contemporary social issues. A lot of people can make stuff look like stuff. I think the trick with art is to be able to make paintings that matter in the 21st century." ■

ABOVE ***The Chancellor Seguier on Horseback*, 2005, based on a 17th-century painting by Charles Le Brun.**
BELOW ***After Jean-Bernard Restout's Sleep*, 2009, ink-jet print based on an 18th-century French painting.**

TOP: ©KEHINDE WILEY/COURTESY SEAN KELLY GALLERY, NEW YORK; ROBERTS & TILTON, CULVER CITY, CALIFORNIA; AND RHONA HOFFMAN GALLERY, CHICAGO; BOTTOM: ©KEHINDE WILEY/COURTESY ROBERTS & TILTON, CULVER CITY, CALIFORNIA; AND RHONA HOFFMAN GALLERY, CHICAGO

SEAN KELLY

2010

475 TENTH AVE NEW YORK NY 10018 T 212.239.1181 SKNY.COM

Siverio, Ida. "Kehinde's R-Evolution," *944.com,* October 2010.

944

by IDA SIVERIO

PROFILE

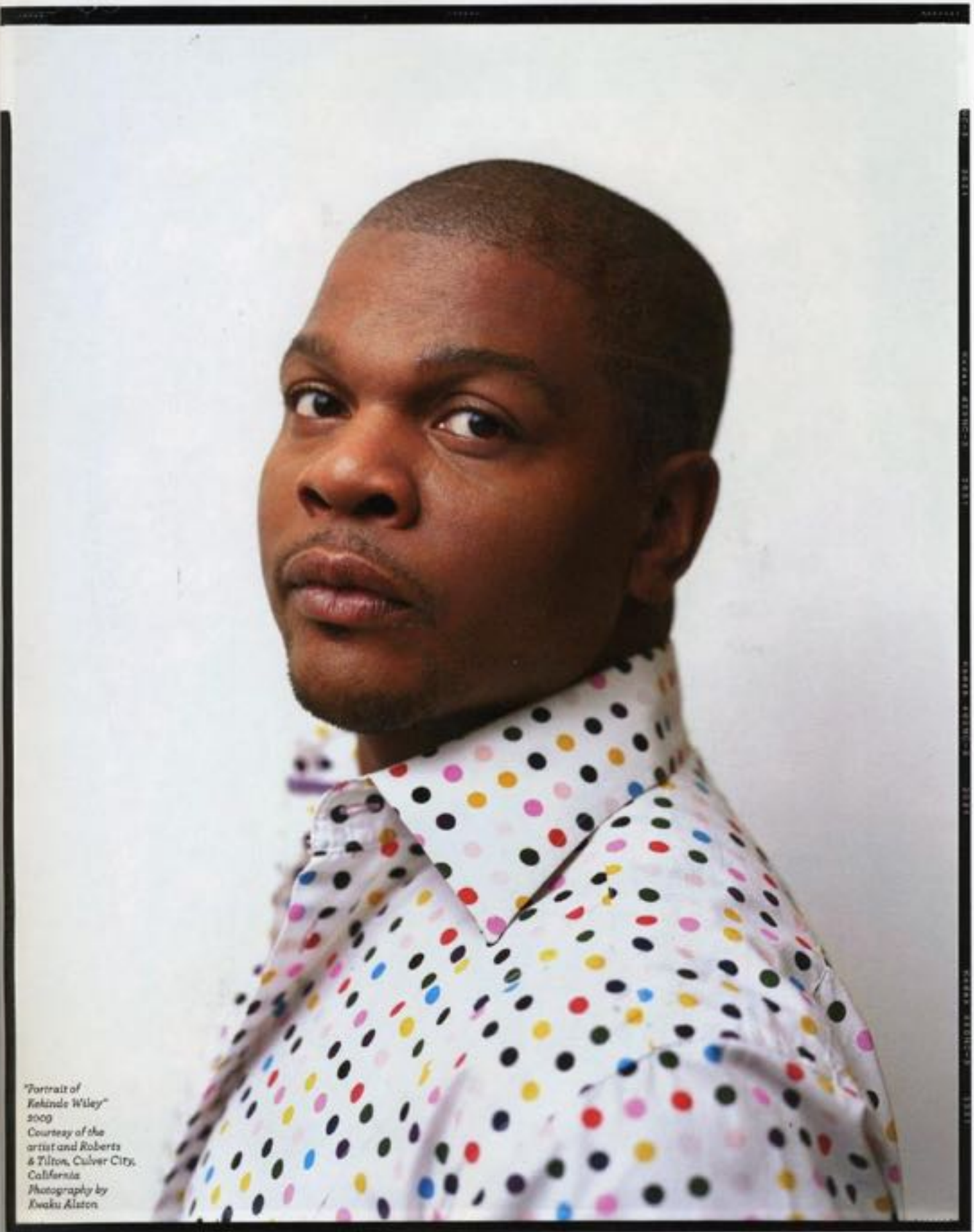
KEHINDE'S R-EVOLUTION

KEHINDE WILEY HAS COLLABORATED WITH VH-1, PUMA AND THE KING OF POP FOR A CAREER THAT MOST ARTISTS CAN ONLY DREAM ABOUT.

"Kehinde Wiley in Old City Jerusalem," July 2010
Courtesy of the artist and Roberts & Tilton, Culver City, California
Photography by Ann Cecker

At 24, Kehinde Wiley had earned his MFA from Yale University. Three years later, Wiley had his first solo museum show *Passing/Posing* at the Brooklyn Art Museum. In 2005, he was commissioned by VH-1 to create portraits of recording artists for their Hip-Hop Honors Show. And a year later he embarked on his multinational *The World Stage* series, where he travels, lives and works abroad, creating satellite studios in different countries. This year, Wiley collaborated with Puma on the project Legends of Unity: 2010 World Cup.

Wiley is known for depicting young urban African-American men that he discovers on the street. He casts them in large-scale portraiture in poses reminiscent of historic paintings with heavily patterned backgrounds. There's an intentional struggle



"Portrait of Rekinds Wiley"
2009
Courtesy of the artist and Roberts & Tilton, Culver City, California
Photography by Kwaku Alston

"Untitled," oil on canvas, 2010, courtesy of the artist and Roberts & Tilton, Culver City, California

between the setting and the subject. Wiley's aesthetic is a result of the tension between his art's context and content.

Art connoisseur Ida Siverio sits down with the man himself to discuss the revolution and evolution behind his work.

IS: What is the most common misconception made about your work?

KW: That these pictures are simply beautiful pictures of beautiful black boys. I think these pictures have a very strong conceptual and sociological interest that should be seen as more than just simple portraiture with a decorative source. It's an engagement of the broader evolution of culture.

IS: Could you talk a bit about the roots of your work?

KW: It began with studying art back in LA as a young kid; I first went to art school when I was about 11 and went to big museums in Southern California. I was looking at portraits from 18th and 19th century Europe and I thought it was about cause and circumstance. It was about grand gestures. And it was about empowering the people that wanted to be portrayed in those pictures.

IS: You just had the opening of *The World Stage: India-Sri Lanka in Chicago*. How is this show different?

KW: *The World Stage* series has been a huge education. What I really love is being able to go into the American city streets and see how people dress, how people swagger and go through the ornate processes of really announcing who they are to the world. Boys want to be hot to girls and girls want to be hot to boys. People give a sense of what their taste is and that changes in every society.

IS: How do you select the countries in your *World Stage* series?

KW: *The World Stage* is comprised of what I believe are countries on the conversation block in the 21st century. There's a reason why I chose Nigeria, America's sixth largest oil producing country, also the place where my father comes from. My last trip was to Israel. I set up a photo studio outside a hip-hop dance club in Tel Aviv and found people who allowed us to document things with their families. I found one of the hottest Ethiopian hip-hop stars who then introduced me to his community.

IS: What if you had not become an artist?

KW: As an art student, I was concerned about whether I was going to feed myself and survive, so I really got into cooking. I wanted to be a chef, a day job to satisfy my art habit.

IS: Dream collaboration?

KW: A dream collaboration already happened, which was with Michael Jackson. I got a call from someone saying, "Michael Jackson wants to have your phone number — can he have it?" I said, "get the fuck out of here."

IS: What is a question that you have always wanted to be asked in an interview and never have been asked, until now, of course?

KW: That one!

Kehinde Wiley's The World Stage: India - Sri Lanka is currently showing at Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago
rhoffmangallery.com

The World Stage: Israel will be exhibited next year at Roberts & Tilton in LA
robertsandtilton.com

"Mark Shavers," oil on canvas, 2010, courtesy of the artist and Roberts & Tilton, Culver City, California

SEAN KELLY

2008

475 TENTH AVE NEW YORK NY 10018 T 212.239.1181 SKNY.COM

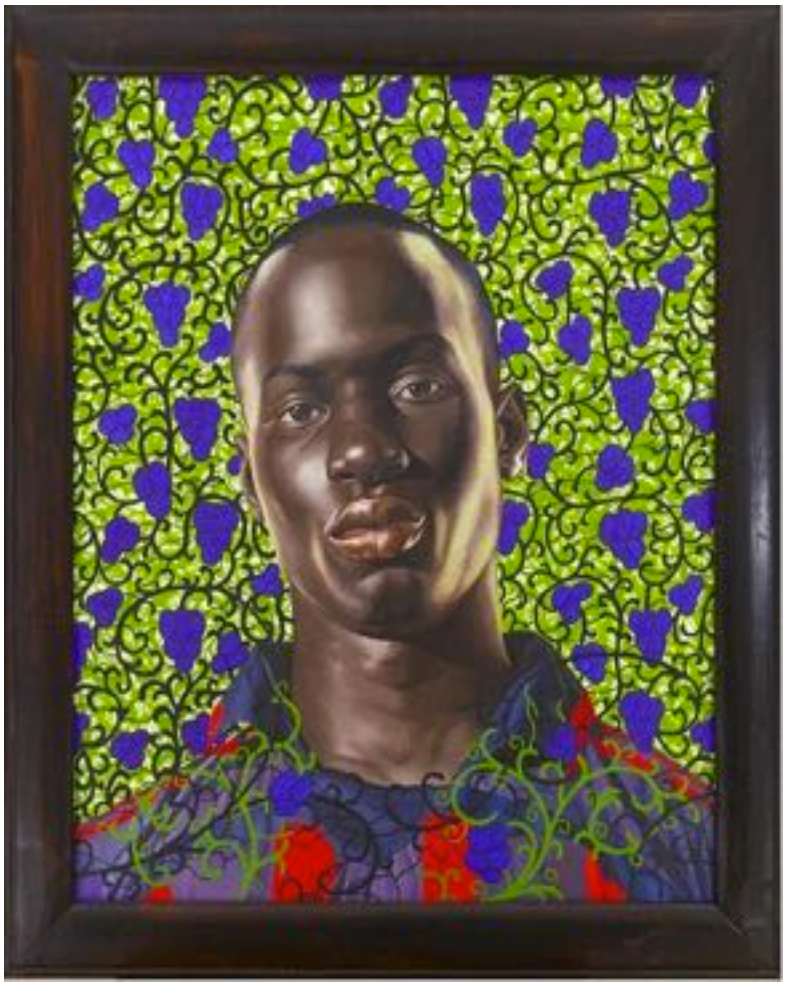
Smith, Roberta, "A Hot Conceptualist Finds the Secret of Skin," *The New York Times*, September 4, 2008.

The New York Times

A Hot Conceptualist Finds the Secret of Skin

Is Kehinde Wiley a Conceptual subversive who happens to paint or yet another producer of pictorial fluff that makes him our latest Bouguereau? Do his big, flashy pictures of young African-American men recast as the kings, dandies, prophets and saints of European portraiture subvert the timeworn ruses of Western art and its hierarchies of race, class and sex? Or are they just a passing art-market fancy, with enough teasing irreverence, dollops of political correctness and decorative punch to look good for a while above the couches of pseudoliberal pseudocollectors?

The answers to all these questions may be, Try again. “Kehinde Wiley, the World Stage: Africa, Lagos-Dakar,” a show of 10 of his most recent paintings at the Studio Museum in Harlem, proposes another possibility: Mr. Wiley is a young artist whose intellectual ambition and Photo Realist chops have allowed his career to get ahead of his art.



Courtesy of Kehinde Wiley and Deitch Projects. Kehinde Wiley, the World Stage: Africa, Lagos-Dakar at the Studio Museum features 10 recent works, including “Matar Mbaye.”

His stats include 15 solo shows in galleries and museums around the world since 2003, studios in New York and China and assistants who help him turn out scores of paintings that sell briskly. And yet at 31 Mr. Wiley is only now beginning to make paintings that don’t feel mostly like campy, gaudy shams. This show — which would be more appropriate in a commercial gallery than in a museum, by the way — could mark the end of his first 15 minutes of fame and the beginning of his second, with an option to renew.

Until now the Conceptual rationale behind Mr. Wiley’s paintings has tended to overpower their visual presence, which helps reduce them to illustrations. Like Norman Rockwell’s paintings they look better in reproduction than in reality.

His portraits initially depicted African-American men against rich textile or wallpaper backgrounds whose patterns he has likened to abstractions of sperm. Some of the subjects were famous (rap and sports stars), others not.

Their silken running suits, carefully creased jeans and bling reflected the sartorial codes of hip-hop, but their poses and props (thrones, scepters, rearing horses, religious attributes) were lifted from the portraits

of Velázquez, David and Gainsborough or Renaissance images of saints. The substitution of black for white faces and low for high culture created all kinds of mind-bending twists and turns, especially since Mr. Wiley, who is gay, often brought out the homoeroticism implicit in much European portraiture and used it to undercut the machismo bluster of his subjects.

Courtesy of Leslie Hewitt. Leslie Hewitt's "Riffs on Real Time (2 of 10)," at the Studio.

But the paintings' slick surfaces usually felt dead and mechanical, despite having been painstakingly handmade; their compositions were often fussy and unstable, and the men's posturing, however undercut, could seem defensive, if not misogynistic. Mr. Wiley's work also seemed overly indebted to artists and photographers working with issues like identity and celebrity, including Andy Warhol, Barkley L. Hendricks, John Ahearn and Rigoberto Torres, Robert Mapplethorpe, Annie Leibowitz, Catherine Opie, Kerry James Marshall, Yinka Shonibare, Malick Sidibe, Yasumasa Morimura and Seydou Keïta.

A lot of these problems are receding in the Studio Museum show because Mr. Wiley is doing what all painters have to do: developing a surface of his own. To do so he is starting where most figurative painters have started, at least since the invention of oil paint: with the rendering of human skin. He is beginning to paint skin in ways you can't stop looking at. And other things are falling into place too. The compositions are consistently calmer, and the spatial play between the figures and their backgrounds is more tightly controlled.

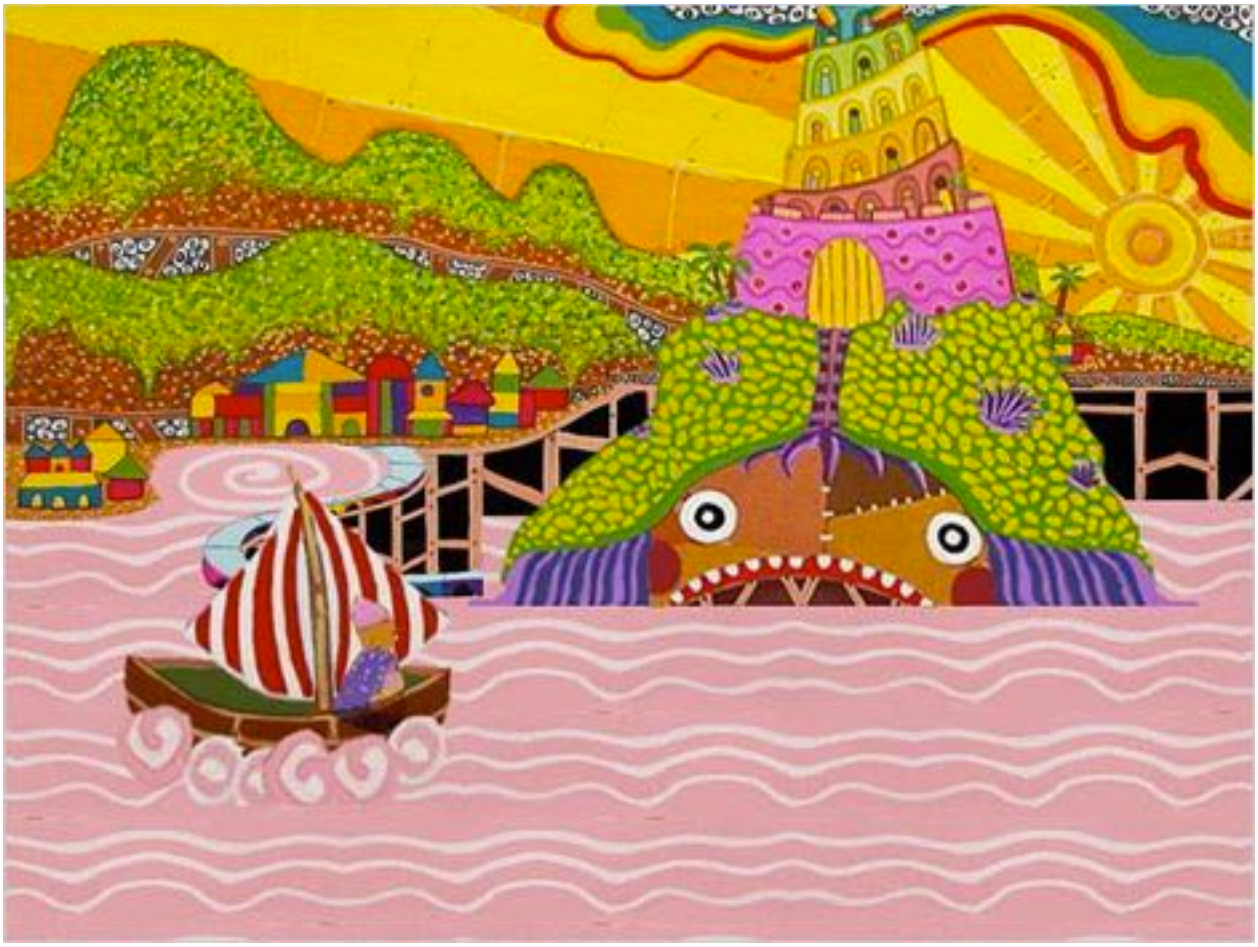
Whether these differences are traceable to the fact that for the first time Mr. Wiley's subjects are African rather than African-American men is an interesting subject for discussion. The young men here are more simply dressed and often more open in their expressions. Their poses are based on precolonial tribal figures and postcolonial public sculpture, which may not invite as much vamping as the more realistic poses and personalities of Western painting. And the skin of these men is consistently darker, which may present a greater range of chromatic possibilities and challenges. In any event, the figures seem more carefully worked and less rote and filled in.

The backgrounds, based on indigenous Dutch wax-resist fabrics once produced in Africa for European export, are also used to sensational effect, especially in the red flowers and indigo patterns that embrace the stalwart young man in "Benin Mother and Child." The textiles continue their sly asides: in this painting and others here, the vinelike patterns that break free of the backgrounds and coil across torsos are dotted with x's and o's that add up to the female chromosome symbol.

The small portraits have a special emotional directness and visual power. "Ibrahima Sacko" and "Matar Mbaye," in particular, have a wonderful balance between skin as paint and as flesh. In addition, in the Mbaye portrait, the background is two distinct layers: carefully painted purple flowers over a loose green pattern that seems painted freehand. It appears to have no photographic source, which is something of a departure for Mr. Wiley.

The shows surrounding the Wiley exhibition are especially lively. "R.S.V.P.: Senga Nengudi With a Response From Rashawn Griffin" initiates a series of project shows of only two works: one from the museum's collection and one by an invited artist inspired by it. On view in the museum's new downstairs

galleries are a lively show of art from the collection and the equally lively “Eye Notes,” which mixes photographs of Harlem by teenagers with vintage images by the great James VanDerZee.



Courtesy of Saya Woolfalk and Rachel Lears. An image from “Ethnography of No Place,” a video by Saya Woolfalk and Rachel Lears.

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On the second floor new work by the museum’s most recent group of three artists in residence is on view. It maintains this program’s impressive record and as usual offers insights into the nature of artistic development.

Leslie Hewitt, the best known of the three, continues to blend postminimal sculpture and photo appropriation in ways that mine different levels of black experience — public and private, emotional and intellectual. Her sculptures here emphasize a weakness: They often suffer from dryness and obscurity. But her photographs of arrangements of found photographs and books laid out on the floor continue to be hauntingly evocative.

Saya Woolfalk, who is a whiz in several mediums (starting with sewing), makes environments that veer too close to kindergarten, and her current one is no exception. Yet it contains a video, “Ethnography of No Place” (made with Rachel Lears), that could move more quickly but is otherwise a little tour de force of performance, animation, born-again Pattern and Decoration, soft sculpture and anthropological satire.

Tanea Richardson presents three bulky wall pieces made of various stuffed and bound fabrics, pieces of net and sometimes tree branches. Initially they seem overly familiar, but they gradually become extremely particular and rather sinister.

All her forms have a twisted, writhing quality, and the titles — “In Protection of Our Bodies,” “The Painting Escapes” and “Untitled (Loom)” — indicate Ms. Richardson’s willingness to push this in very different directions. She is the least known and perhaps the least developed artist here, but she has a basic faith in the communicative power of form that all the others — Mr. Wiley included — could learn from.

“Kehinde Wiley, the World Stage: Africa, Lagos-Dakar,” “New Intuitions: Leslie Hewitt, Tanea Richardson and Saya Woolfalk,” “Eye Notes” and “R.S.V.P.” are at the Studio Museum in Harlem, 144 West 125th Street, (212) 864-4500, studiomuseum.org, through Oct. 26.

SEAN KELLY

2005

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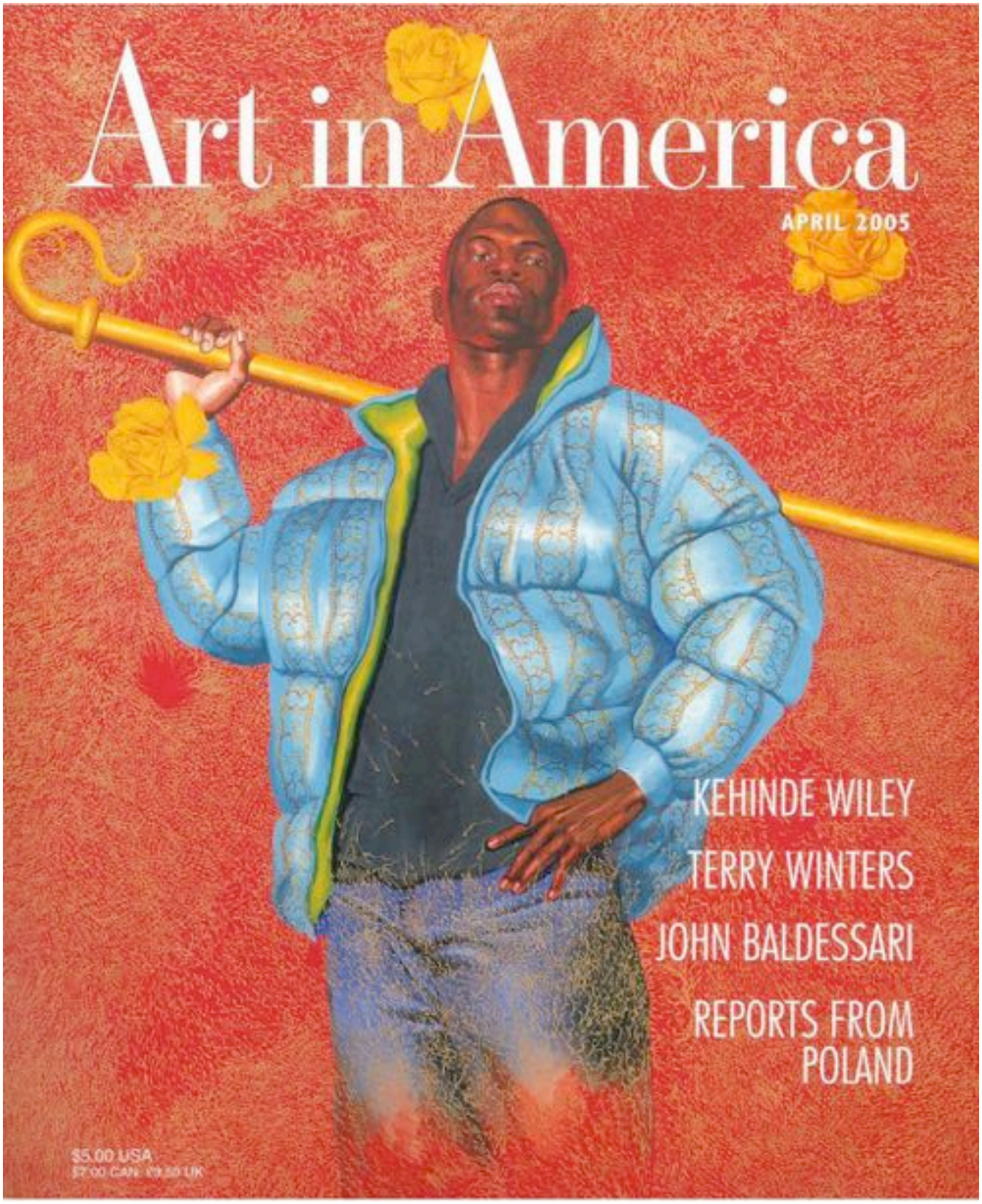
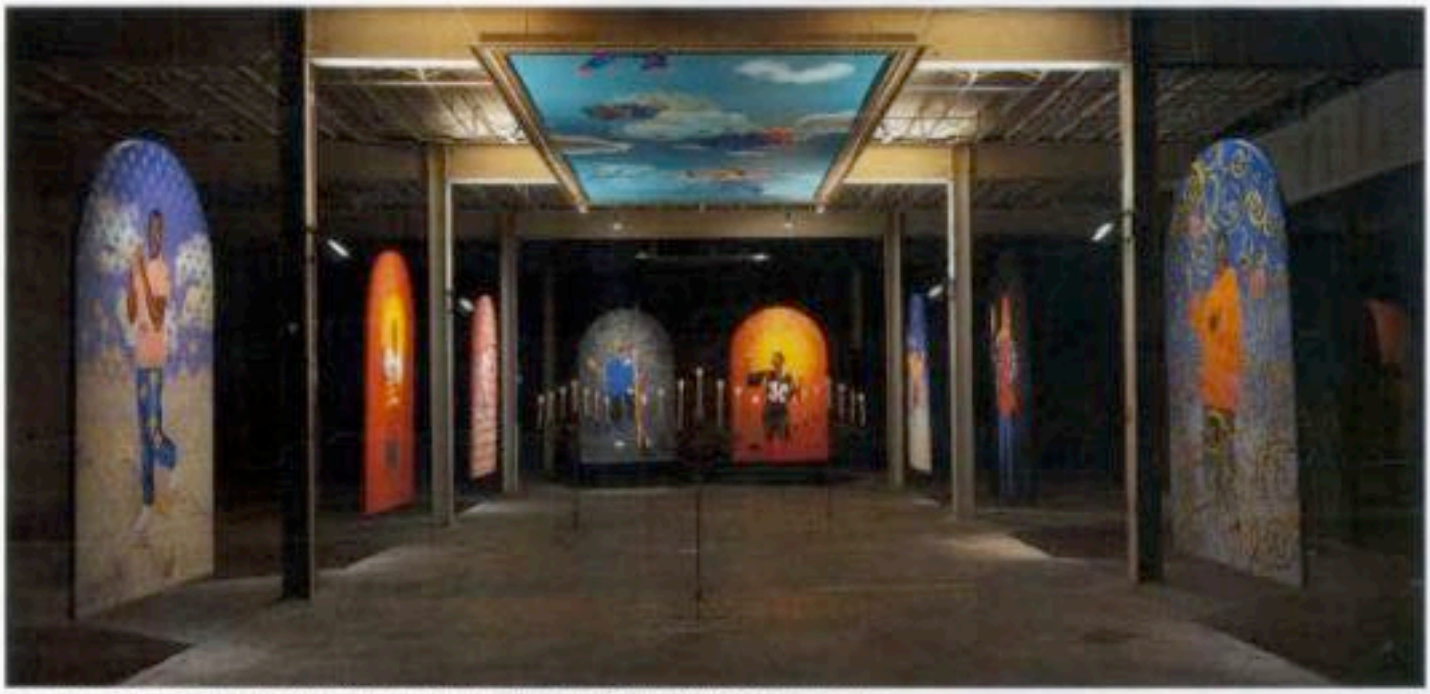
Lewis, Sarah. “De(i)fying the Masters,” *Art in America,* April 2005.



De(i)fying the Masters

Creating anonymous, heroically scaled portraits of contemporary African-American males, Kehinde Wiley explores many grand precedents of European painting, while offering a wry critique of today's media version of black masculinity.

BY SARAH LEWIS



View of Kehinde Wiley's installation "Faux/Real" at Art Basel Miami Beach/Deitch Projects, 2003.

Opposite, Female Prophet Deborah, 2003, oil on panel, 90 by 60 inches. Brooklyn Museum. Works this article from the "Passing/Posing" exhibition.

Depicted life-size on an ample arched panel, a young African-American man wearing a red T-shirt, a red baseball cap turned backwards, a puffy blue winter jacket and blue jeans seems to float in a deep night sky. An elaborate ornamental filigree, composed of gold-colored sperm forms arranged in big, lacey configurations, covers part of his body and also creates a pattern behind him, collapsing the distinction between foreground and background. A cross hangs from a delicate gold chain around his neck. At waist level, his left hand points to an empty space in the pattern. With his right hand at the level of his face, the palm turned outward, his pinky finger awkwardly outstretched, he has clearly struck a symbolic pose.

The image, cryptically titled *Female Prophet Deborah* (2003), is part of the ongoing "Passing/Posing" series by 28-year-old Kehinde Wiley. For these large-scale paintings, 18 of which were shown in a recent solo exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum, the artist renders casually dressed African-American men standing in the postures of prophets, saints and angels from Renaissance paintings, or of male subjects from later European portraits. Wiley thus inserts black males into a painting tradition that has typically omitted them or relegated them to peripheral positions. At the same time, he critiques contemporary portrayals of black masculinity itself.

Visitors approaching the exhibition were greeted by an insistent hip-hop beat from a video monitor placed directly outside the entrance. Music and the sound of Wiley's voice from a taped interview—components of an "Infiniti in Black" auto ad from a corporate campaign that pays homage to African-American artists—permeated the galleries. The first room contained the foundational elements of Wiley's portraits: four framed photographs of his models posing, a selection of books on European portraiture and Renaissance painting, and a single portrait, *Jean de Carondelet* (2004), accompanied by a thumbnail reproduction of its identically titled source painting, a ca. 1530 work by Jan Cornelisz in the collection of the Brooklyn Museum.

These items hint at Wiley's artistic process. In preparing the series, he approaches African-American men passing by him in Harlem and shows them images of his work. If they are pleased with his paintings, he asks permission to make a portrait of them imitating a figure in a painting of their choice by artists such as Raphael, Titian, Tiepolo, Gainsborough, Ingres and Sargent. At the studio, the volunteer flips through monographs to select a character to imitate, and Wiley takes a photograph that

Strategic omissions of pictorial elements, in effect deflating the power of the source image, become as important as Wiley's appropriations.

Mercury After Raphael, 2003, oil on canvas mounted on panel, 96 by 60 inches. Private collection. Courtesy Deitch Projects, New York.

becomes the guiding image for the figure in his painting. While staying faithful to the appearance, facial expression and clothing of each participant, he establishes a size and format of his own and strategically suppresses or alters the remaining elements of the source painting, often adding intricate background decoration executed with the aid of assistants. The treatment of the figure, however, Wiley reserves for himself, working sometimes from projection, sometimes freehand.

Wiley's figures are presented in graphic photorealistic detail, while the backgrounds are relatively painterly. Omissions of pictorial elements, in effect deflating the symbolic power of the source image, become as important as the appropriations. Wiley customarily titles his work after the source image he has altered, while his portrait subjects remain anonymous. "Everyone is treated as a type," the artist told me in an interview in his studio. This approach results in what he calls "anti-portrait paintings."

As organized by assistant curator Tumelo Mosaka, the exhibition included a few images based on secular works but concentrated heavily on those that reference saints and angels. The second gallery gained formal coherence through the structural similarities of the five pieces on view. Each is a vertical painting with an intense orange-red field against which the model imitates a religious figure such as St. John the Baptist or St. Symphorian. The pictorial illumination is eerily artificial. Wiley bathes his figures in a vibrant red glow, as if the background color were actually radiant. The dizzying optical illusion is further enhanced by the repetitive patterning that surrounds each character. In *Morfene* (2003), which is atypically titled with the model's stage name (a misspelling of "morphine" that the rapper has tattooed on his abdomen), a grid of electric blue fleurs-de-lys, set against an equally bright red, creates a vibration of the sort generated by Bridget Riley's Op art paintings. Meanwhile the figure, as the only part of the canvas free of this movement, becomes a site of heightened visual focus.

The next small room, unified by the square format of the paintings and their palette of light green and blue, served as an antechamber to the final gallery. Two of the paintings in this threshold space were designed to be hung diagonally. As if echoing this rotation, the eight-pointed rosette in *Easter Recluses No. 5* (2004) is rotated off its axis slightly to the right, behind a figure duplicating the pose of the Madonna at prayer. This room also continued Wiley's use of uniform framing. With one exception, each work in the first three galleries bore an ornate gilded frame with scalloped, two-tiered patterning.

The final room was a faux chapel installation: eight large vertical works, sharing an

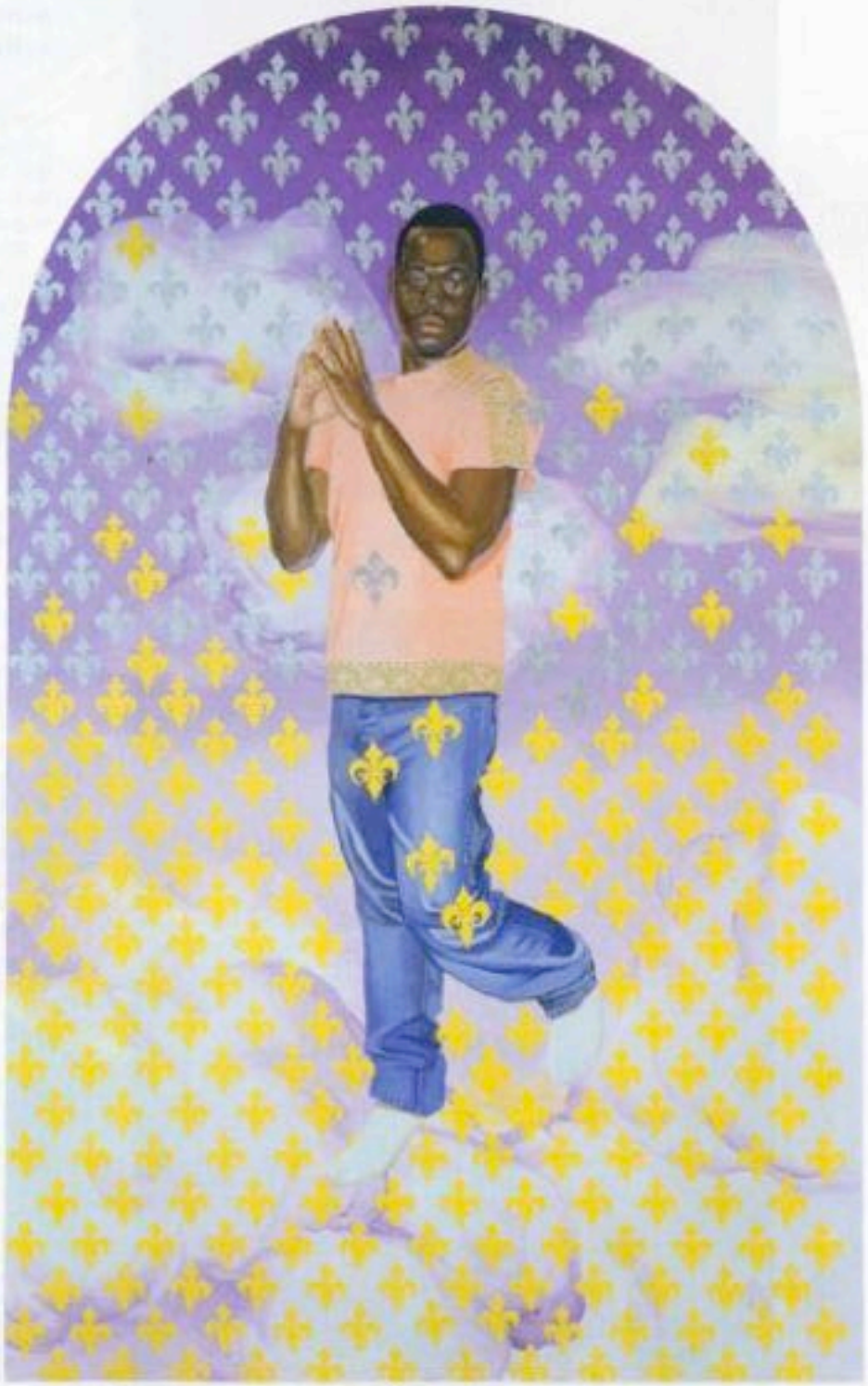
identical arch-shaped format, were hung on the walls beneath a 9-by-20-foot ceiling painting titled *Go* (2003). Peering upward, viewers could contemplate, in place of the customary religious worthies in ascent, young African-American men breakdancing in a sky with billowing clouds. All are garbed in casual street wear, their perspectivally large feet clad in brand-name boots or sneakers. Some of the accompanying wall paintings imply buoyancy by fading out the figures' legs up to the knees. But several others emphasize the model's lower extremities, recalling the highly attentive treatment of angels' feet in Renaissance paintings.

Two works placed at the end of the room, in the position of an altarpiece, feature a spiritual iconography not only of gesture but also of light. In *St. Clement of Padua* (2004), after a stained-glass window by Ingres, a halo of gold encircles the model's head while his arms are held partially outstretched in a sign of religious wonder. Although there might seem to be discord between the chapel-style presentation and the driving rhythms that echoed throughout the gallery space, the self-mythologizing that undergirds hip-hop culture makes Wiley's mimicry of religious works apt.

A trip to Italy originally prompted the "Passing/Posing" series, and Wiley's work in some ways recalls that of Fred Wilson at the 2003 Venice Biennale—a presentation in which Wilson explored historical depictions of Africans in that once-powerful multicultural city. In his use of figure substitutions, Wiley also manifests a thematic affinity with Yinka Shonibare, who posed coolly as the eponymous hero of "Diary of a Victorian Dandy," his 1998 photo series of elaborate period vignettes.

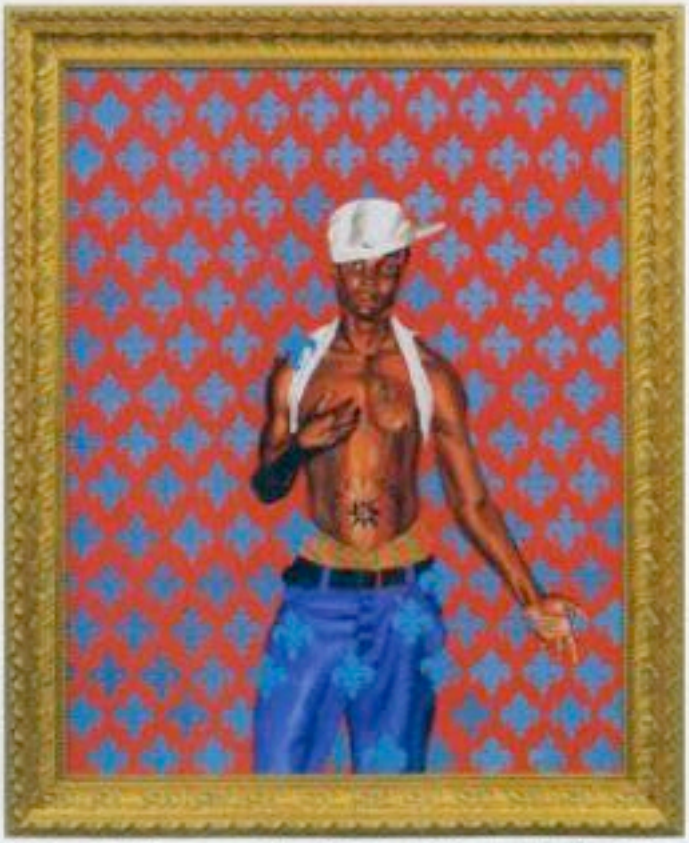
In addition to placing black models in European paintings, Wiley often engages with these source works in a far more transformative way, undertaking both a close examination and a critique of Europe's grand tradition. "What's most important in my work, to my own mind," the artist says, "is that the history of Western European painting is the history of Western European white men in positions of dominance." So in *Decoration of the Sacrament in the Chapel of Udine, Resurrection* (2003), he has taken away the flag featured in the original Tiepolo painting but kept the pole, adding a bulb at the bottom to convert it into a staff. Wiley alters the pole's orientation and design to signify a cultural shift: slung over the black model's back, the staff becomes a potential weapon.

Wiley's borrowings also create a surprising vehicle for commentary on hyper-masculinity in black culture. "Black masculinity has been codified in a fixed way," he remarks. "I'm not trying to provide a direct corrective, but I am trying to point to a history of signs as they relate to black people in the media. . . . There is a certain desire in my work to tie the urban street and the way it's been depicted with elements that are not necessarily coded as masculine." What he calls "floration"—ranging from Islamic to Baroque to Rococo design—overflows onto the figures in telling ways. In *Investiture of Bishop Harold as the Duke of Franconia No. 2* (2004), after Ingres, the confident figure is accompanied by floating yellow roses, and could as well be the recipient as the generator of the sperm teeming around him. (Wiley describes this much-used



Immaculate Conception, *2003, oil on panel, 96 by 60 inches.*
Courtesy Brooklyn Museum.

Female Prophet Anne, Who Observes the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple, 2003, oil on canvas, 82 by 72 inches. Sam and Shanil Schwartz, California.



Mustang, 2003, oil on canvas, 60 by 48 inches. Collection Hart Family, New York.

Pictorial illumination here is eerily artificial. Wiley bathes his figures in a vibrant glow, as if the background color were actually radiant, and surrounds each character with repetitive patterning.

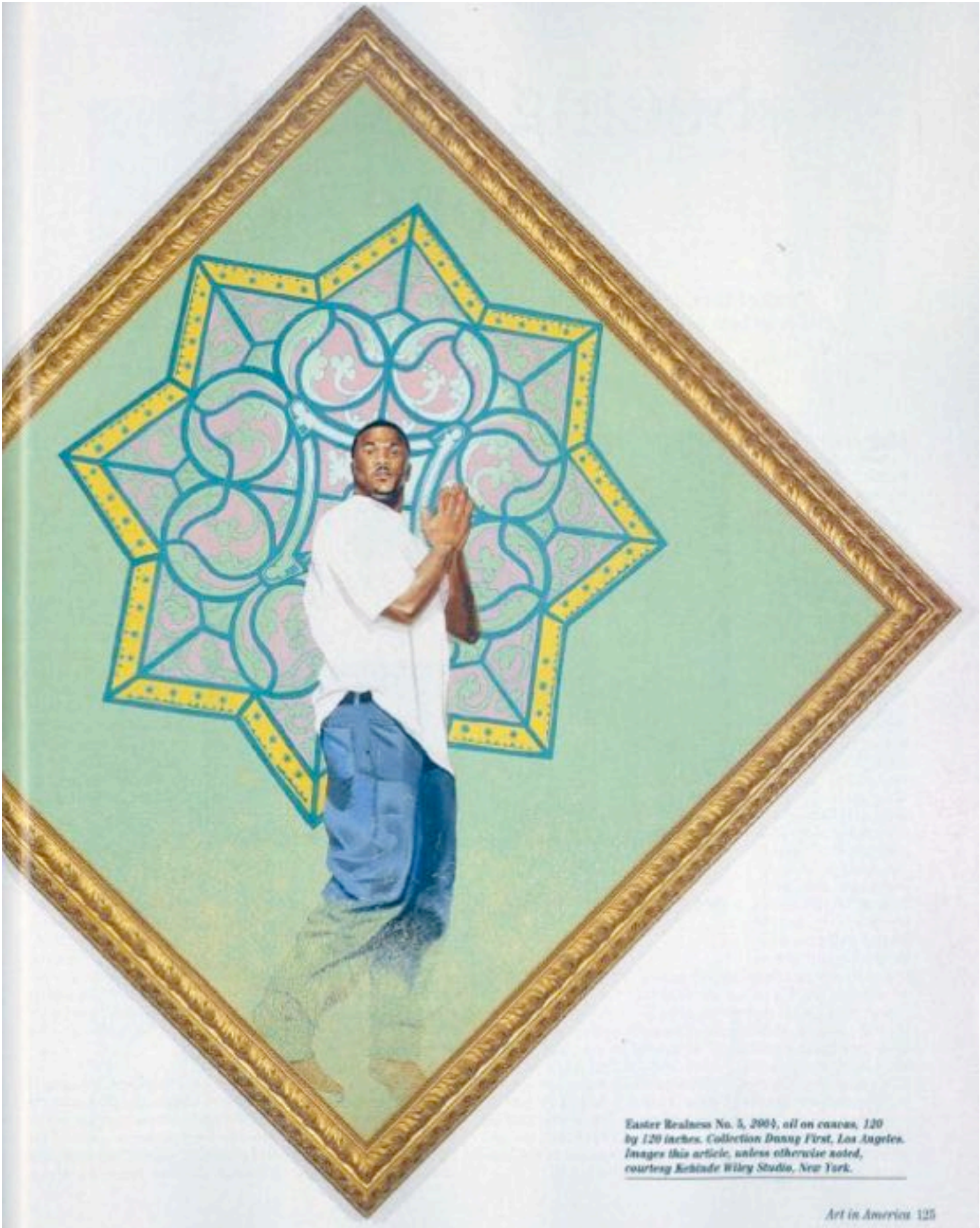
device as "a send-up of old master painting as the ultimate cum shot.") And for all of the machismo that Wiley's figures exude, he frequently labels them with female names or descriptors from the original image.

Wiley's most humorous double-edged commentary came on opening night, when he arranged for the appearance of the drag queen and opera singer Shequida, dressed in a Venetian gown. Along with black male performers classically trained at the Juilliard School of Music, Shequida performed hip-hop hits in the faux chapel. In such a context, "passing" can be read as more than a heavily loaded racial term. It also points to sexual posturing within masculine identity itself, and to the striking difference between open gayness and life "on the down low."

Wiley's engagement with art history is as ambivalent as his take on gender conventions. His first solo museum show coincided with the Brooklyn Museum's John Singer Sargent portrait exhibition. Both artists look to European precedents for an authoritative template for their American subjects. But Wiley—who admits to being "in awe" of the technical command of his source artists—nevertheless asserts that he is "interrogating this tradition and, at the same time, emptying it out." He systematically takes a "pedestrian" encounter with African-American men, elevates it to heroic scale, and reveals—through subtle formal alterations—that the postures of power can sometimes be seen as just that, a pose. □

"Passing/Posing: Paintings by Kehinde Wiley" appeared Oct. 5, 2004–Feb. 5, 2005, at the Brooklyn Museum. The exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue consisting of a bound set of 15 reproductions and a brochure with texts by organizer Tumelo Mosaka and critics Franklin Sirmans and Greg Tate. Works by the artist will appear in the group shows "Maximum Flavor" at the Atlanta College of Art Gallery (May 28–Aug. 7) and "Neo-Baroque" at the Bybloe Art Gallery, Verona, Italy (October 2005). Wiley also has upcoming solo exhibitions at Conner Contemporary Art, Washington, D.C. (May 6–June 11); Deitch Projects, New York (October 2005); and the Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus, Ohio (2006).

Author: Sarah Lewis is a curatorial assistant in the painting and sculpture department at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.



Easter Realness No. 5, 2004, oil on canvas, 120 by 120 inches. Collection Danny First, Los Angeles. Images this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy Kehinde Wiley Studio, New York.