

SEANKELLY

Singh-Kurtz, Sangeeta. "10 Minutes in Miami With Kehinde Wiley." *The Cut*, December 4, 2021.

THE CUT



Photo: Bryan Bedder/Getty Images for American Express

It's tough to know where to begin when you've got only a few minutes with someone like Kehinde Wiley, the legendary artist best known for his 2018 portrait of Barack Obama. We're sequestered in the corner of a very dark and very loud bar at the Miami Beach Edition, a packed and expensive hotel situated on the beach next to the Faena. Art Basel is always a bit of madness, but this year, it's taken on a kind of fever pitch, with a mess of art parties and fashion parties and NFT "activations" running from the crack of dawn until four in the morning.

Wiley has taken a quick break from the chaos for interviews and, in spite of looking a bit worn out, humors me with an apparent interest in my questions. He has a full, fruity laugh and an expansive presence, made even more vibrant with a bright-red-patterned suit he "picked up in Senegal." Known for his naturalistic paintings of Black subjects in dense, botanical settings or against majestic backdrops characteristic of old masters, he's at Basel with American Express, for whom he's designed a new version of the company's exclusive Platinum Card. He spoke to the Cut about his collaboration, early influences, and his thoughts on the NFT of it all.

How has your time at Art Basel been?

SEANKELLY

Well, I spent the morning looking at art, so that was better. I don't know — there are competing types of influences that get me going. Some of the work I love might be a bit surprising.

What's a surprising influence?

I've been deeply influenced by the conceptual work of Bas Jan Ader. He spent most of his time in California before dying tragically in his 20s while trying to cross the Atlantic in a boat for a project he called *In Search of the Miraculous*. Many years later, I created something based on that. I think he pulled more from the California side than the Dutch ... Yeah, I think he came to the States and lost his shit.

Ever seen a piece of art that stopped you in your tracks?

Very early on, there was the Kerry James Marshall painting in the barbershop, and the other is *The Blue Boy*. I would say *The Blue Boy* was the one — it's like this society portrait of this kid, who's not quite an adult, but not quite a child, and he's been painted as this kind of future aristocrat. The clothes are over-the-top, the landscape is over-the-top. And it's kind of a coming into power that someone from his social class is expected to perform. But I wasn't thinking about that all those years ago. I was just thinking that it was really well-painted, technically.

***The Blue Boy* is a work that's doing something not unlike what you do, but back then ideas around representation and social commentary weren't in your head at all?**

They weren't — I didn't know anything about the history, about the social impact, about the fact that so much of that art was part of some pretty dark forces in our world. But I was also in love with that art. I was in love with the ability of artists to take some colored paint and a hairy stick and to coax something into being.

But it still must have been a complicated journey, to realize as you were reimagining these old masters and other western works have a lot of nasty implications.

There is a lot there, yes. So much of what I try to do is travel the world and find complete strangers at random and pull their histories into these paintings, and using that as a part of the background that they're depicted in. I think that's the point — that it's not someone who's famous or powerful, it's just someone that's minding their own business trying to get to the train or to work, and here's this random guy asking them to pose in a painting and next thing you know, they're in a museum somewhere. There's a kind of magic to that that I think adds meaning to the work, so it's more than just a pretty picture.

That's basically what you did for your upcoming exhibition at the National Gallery, right?

Well, I found models and took them to the fjords of Norway. I had this idea in mind — just from looking at paintings — but none of us knew what we were doing; we just jumped on a plane and made it happen. I think part of it comes

SEANKELLY

from looking at paintings in the naturalist school — looking at Caspar David Friedrich's work, looking at the ways in which mountains are seen as at once closer to God and also kind of highly sexualized in a way that kind of reinstates patriarchy and a sense of domination. And I thought it would be interesting to cross-wire that with a collection of people who are exploring this landscape with a sense of mystery, a sense of play. People who are embraced by the landscape and alienated by it as well.

You've been working on this, but also have this partnership with American Express. I can imagine you get thousands of invitations for corporate partnerships; I'm wondering why you chose to work with this company?

My inbox is full of a lot of stuff that doesn't make sense. But their relationship with the Studio Museum of Harlem, their desire to create engagement with artists of color, with the institution that literally made my career, that's something that I can be proud of. That said, there's something highly aspirational about museums, about blinged-out gold picture frames ... And the language that I use, this aspirational language, is part of the way that Amex sits in popular culture. It's a little bit of a trickster move for me.



Kehinde Wiley's American Express Platinum Card design. Photo: Courtesy of Amex

Can you tell me about your card design?

Well, it's coming from actual paintings, but sort of deconstructing parts of it. I wanted something that felt like you could almost live with it, but that you might get the feeling that it's creeping up on you. And I also wanted to allow each person to sort of react to it in their own way, so that it's less like, *Oh, that's a Kehinde Wiley painting*, and more like, *You know, that reminds me of something, but I can't quite put my finger on it*. Kind of an intimation rather than beating you over the head.

SEANKELLY

Before I let you go, I just have one more question. Everything at Basel this year seems to be about NFTs and the metaverse. What the hell is an NFT, and what do you think about them?

I'm staying away from all of that. I can't quite wrap my mind around some of the ownership and copyright issues around them, and what are you actually buying and whether there's going to be some sort of correction later on. But it is incredibly heartening to see so many people get excited about something that seems to be just invented. I mean, it seems to be this big conceptual art practice that just got invented out of nowhere. I'm sure years from now somewhere in an American studies program, they'll be talking about how the whole world became some sort of Warholian project.