

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Architectural Digest
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Phoebe Hoban
30 September 2019

Art + Auctions

Kehinde Wiley Makes a Statement With New Sculpture in Times Square

Titled *Rumors of War*, Wiley's first-ever public art installation shines in the heart of New York City before moving to its permanent home in Virginia later this year

Kehinde Wiley is a maven at making a major statement. Barack Obama's official portraitist (he was the president's personal choice for the painting that hangs in the National Portrait Gallery) has just created another first: a larger-than-life public art work—a towering bronze equestrian statue—that was spirited into New York's Times Square in the wee hours of the night, shrouded in a silver drape until its unveiling, complete with a marching band, on September 27.

The eight-ton, 29-foot-high sculpture of a proud black man astride a rearing horse, entitled *Rumors of War*, is Wiley's bold and blasting call to arms against the army of Confederate statues that still populate Southern states, particularly Va., which boasts the most Confederate monuments, with 10 in Richmond alone. The statue's Broadway appearance, between 46th and 47th Streets, is a collaboration of Times Square Arts, the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, and the Sean Kelly Gallery. In December, the sculpture will be permanently installed at the entrance to the Virginia Museum, just a stone's throw from Richmond's infamous Monument Avenue, lined with its enormous Confederate statues. Significantly, it will stand on the recently renamed Arthur Ashe Boulevard, which intersects Monument Avenue, creating a new, historical crossroads.



Kehinde Wiley speaking at the statue's unveiling in Times Square.
Photo by Spencer Platt. Image courtesy of Getty.

Wiley found his inspiration for *Rumors of War* in 2016, when the museum was exhibiting a retrospective of his work. Coming down the avenue and looking up at the huge statues honoring those dark days filled him, he told the crowd gathered at the unveiling, "with dread and fear." Using his signature motif of repurposing

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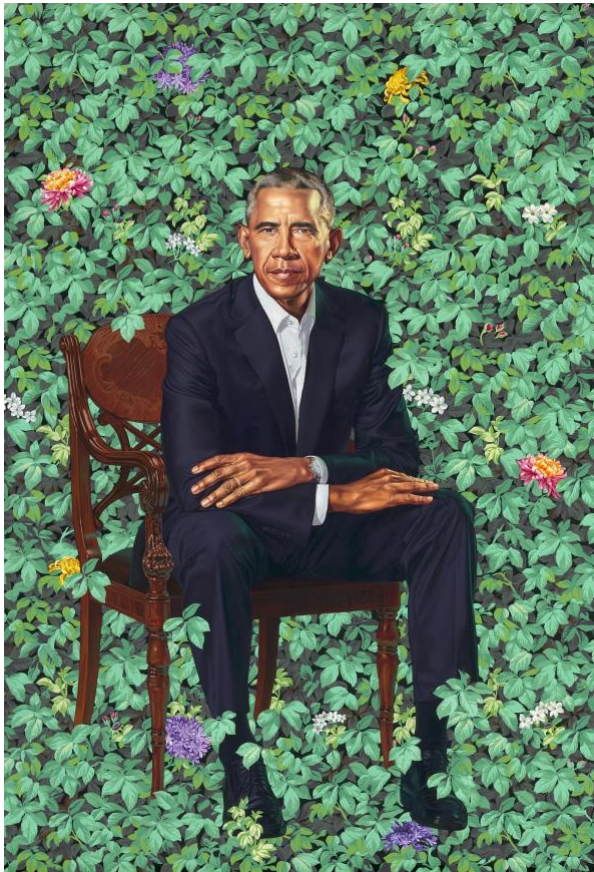
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art-historical images (the sculpture's title comes from a series of paintings he did in the early 2000s also called *Rumors of War*), Wiley based his massive new work on Richmond's statue of General J.E.B. Stuart, copying both the scale (including the 16-foot-wide limestone base) and pose of its rider and horse.

But instead of a Southern soldier, Wiley's rider is a young black man, dressed, hip-hop style, in a hoodie, with earphones around his neck, his head crowned with a short bundle of dreads: the contemporary anti-image of a Robert E. Lee. Too far up for the viewer to see, hidden below the horse's bridle, is a heart, with the letters K.H., the artist's initials (his full name and the year are carved into the base).

The brightly garbed Malcolm X Shabazz High School band from Newark, New Jersey, provided the percussion, as a series of speakers welcomed the monumental statue to the square. "We invite artists to come to this place, this chaotic, diverse, and democratic space, to help see ourselves and our society in new ways, to ask difficult questions and in this place of free speech, to speak to the issues of our time," said Times Square Alliance president Tim Tompkins. "So it's fitting and an honor to be here today with Kehinde Wiley, one of the greatest artists of our time, to unveil this work, which among other things speaks to the intersection of beauty, power, privilege, and violence in our society." During its stay in New York, a team of docents armed with iPads will answer questions and engage the public, making the installation an interactive experience.



President Barack Obama, painted by New York-based artist Kehinde Wiley.

Photo: Mark Gulezian/NPG

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Alex Nyerges, director of the Virginia museum, said that the plan was to have the statue mark the 400-year anniversary of the arrival of the first slaves in America in 1619; its installation in December 2019 will make it just under the wire. “We are all about inclusivity, accessibility, and relevance,” he told the crowd. “And Kehinde Wiley...through a grand, majestic work of art...is changing the conversation today, 400 years later, making this day a day of rebirth, so that we can work through and eliminate racism, hatred, all the things that bring our world down.”

But the last word belonged to Wiley. “What does it feel like physically to walk a public space and to have your state, your country, your nation say, ‘This is what we stand by’? No! We want more. We demand more.... And today we say yes to something that looks like us. We say yes to inclusivity. We say yes to broader notions of what it means to be an American.... Are we ready?” the artist asked just before the drape came down to reveal his colossal sculpture. “Let’s get this party started!”