

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Time Out

Time Out says 4 out of 5 stars

Eddy Frankel

26 February 2020

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Image: © 2019 Kehinde Wiley. Image courtesy of Stephen Friedman Gallery. Photograph by Nicola Tree.

Going from the White House to Walthamstow may seem like a bit of a step down, but it's a move which makes a lot of sense to American artist Kehinde Wiley. He painted the official portrait of Barack Obama, and now he's painted portraits of women and girls from the streets of Dalston and hung them in a big listed building in east London. In both of these endeavors, he's had to the same intention: to celebrate, elevate and explore black identity.

The works here are based on a short story from the nineteenth century by Charlotte Perkins Gilman about a woman diagnosed with hysteria and driven mad by the yellow wallpaper in the room she's locked in. That yellow wallpaper courses through these works, twisted into bright re-imaginings of William Morris's own designs. Against the lemony, sunny, eye-searing backgrounds stand defiant, stern, fierce women – all real people met on the streets of Dalston. Two hold spear-like poles, one sits with her kids. All wear the same unfuckwithable expression.

Yes, these are strong pictures of strong black women. But these portraits are also a process of reclamation and appropriation. Painting these black women and girls from the streets and placing them in the lush, decorative context of British design history, you're forced to think about their cultural context and role in society. You're forced to think about the world around them, about British design, about fashion, about history, about blackness.

Wiley is saying that these people won't be driven crazy by the wallpaper – or the restrictions of an unjust society – they're going to own it and make it their own.

Look, you can dislike the paintings, you can find them dull and a little conservative (I definitely didn't love them aesthetically), but on my visit there were three young black kids with their mums in there, talking about the portraits and sketching them in their notebooks. I go to galleries every single day, and I've never seen young people as engaged or excited about art. Dislike it all you want. It's reaching out to people that art often fails to reach out to, and that's a really, really, really good thing.