The Economist
Kehinde Wiley reimagines "The Yellow Wallpaper"
S.H.
28 February 2020

The Economist

Sprawling flamboyant patterns

Kehinde Wiley reimagines "The Yellow Wallpaper"

The painter of Barack Obama's presidential portrait turns his hand to the women of east London

In "The Yellow Wallpaper", Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story of 1892, the narrator is confined to bed following the birth of a child. Her husband, a doctor, has diagnosed her with "temporary nervous depression" and forbids her from reading, writing or working. With so little stimulation, the woman becomes increasingly obsessed with the wallpaper in the attic where she is stuck. She spends hours each day observing how it changes in the light and scanning its ugly, confusing patterns. Then she thinks she sees the figure of a woman moving behind the paper—perhaps a "great many" women. She wants to set them free.

The discomfiting fiction lends its name to a new exhibition of Kehinde Wiley's work at the William Morris Gallery in London. The American artist—who has said that he has been inspired by the 19th-century textile designer for whom the gallery is named—is best known for his portrait of Barack Obama. The painting depicted the former president sitting in front of a thicket of leaves and flowers, symbols of Kenya, Indonesia, Hawaii and other places of importance to Mr Obama.

The art works in this exhibit have a similar style to that painting, with photo-realistic figures, fanciful floral backdrops and bold colour—but their subjects are black women whom Mr Wiley approached on the streets of east London and asked to sit for him. "So much of my work in America has been about black masculinity," he says in an accompanying video. "So how do we talk about women within the same logic of construction?"

Kehinde Wiley/Friedman Gallery

The six women (one is accompanied by two children) assume statuesque poses. Each stares out of the frame in a serious, almost stoic, way. Dorinda Essah and Mojisola Elufowoju adopt the stances of Amazonian warriors in their portraits, with a tool resembling a spear in their hands. Quanna Noble has her hand on her hip and holds a red bag over her stomach, subverting maternal imagery. Melissa Clark sits in an ornamental chair and spreads her legs wide, her ripped jeans showing portions of her thighs and knees. Amid the bright patterned backdrops, certain items catch the viewer's eye: brand names, T-shirt slogans, bright shoelaces, large earrings, traces of eyeshadow. Mr Wiley draws attention to the quotidian, making these things gleam.

All the subjects are entangled in foliage, trapped in a wallpaper of their own. Tendrils and flowers snake around their legs and waists; they resemble both decorative garlands and chains. After a while, the intricate patterns have an almost hypnotising effect. The flowers can begin to look like other things—as they did to Gilman's narrator—such as a skull or a dagger. Vines start to resemble blue veins of blood. Subtly, Mr Wiley asks the viewer to look at the backdrops closely enough to see their darker possibilities.

Keep looking, though, and these menacing symbols may disappear, and the wallpaper become attractive again. The artist has said that he hoped to explore the correlation "between the sense of powerlessness and the sense of invention that happens in a person who's not seen, who's not respected and whose sense of autonomy is in question". On canvas, most duly seem stiff and awkward. In the exhibition video, on the other hand, the women laugh and joke with Mr Wiley as they pose or chat with him on the street.

Mr Wiley sought "to use the language of the decorative to reconcile blackness, gender, and a beautiful and terrible past". His portraits are visually stunning, mixing the everyday with the classical and elevating his subjects. But this visitor wishes he had been more inspired by the woman at the heart of Gilman's story and less by the wallpaper.