

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Vogue
Portraits of Power
Emma Brockes
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VOGUE

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FORCES for CHANGE

Portraits of POWER

From his trailblazing painting of Barack Obama to his reworking of Old Masters, strength of character defines the art of Kehinde Wiley.

Now, for a new exhibition at The National Gallery, he is turning his attention to the great Romantics, finds Emma Brockes.

Photographs by Andrew Jacobs. Styling by Patrick Mackie

Kehinde Wiley has a very particular way of speaking, which is both precise and superabundant. The 44-year-old artist, casual in flip-flops and a paint-splattered vest, is sitting with a cup of tea in his studio in Brooklyn, New York. Outside it's 32 degrees, but in here – a garage-like space lit by a single skylight, with huge canvases propped against every wall – there is a cool, almost underwater gloom. Wiley is talking about the role of artists in 21st-century America – specifically, what they have in common with former US president Donald Trump. "I think artists, more than any other group, demographic, community," he says, running through word options until he arrives at his meaning, "have had a very Trumpian relationship with history." A slow smile spreads across his face. "We f*ck with tradition as our call to arms!" And he bursts into laughter, his gappy teeth only adding to the impression of merriment.

Upending tradition is what Wiley does. In 2017, he became the first black American to paint the official portrait of a sitting president – a depiction of Barack Obama that, on its release, became instantly iconic. Power and its representations have always interested the artist – unsurprisingly, perhaps, given his rise from a kid growing up in South-Central Los Angeles to one of the most successful artists in the world. Prior to the Obama portrait, Wiley's most famous works addressed the narrowness of Western portraiture by taking tropes of the Old Masters – man on horse, with sword; woman in front of swathes of complicated upholstery – and substituting the rich, white, formally dressed European subjects with young black Americans in street clothes. These paintings were teasing and funny, eye-poppingly colourful and lush, opening a dialogue with history that was simultaneously affectionate and completely exposing. Above all, they were joyful – the word that, after spending an afternoon in Wiley's company, I would most quickly use to describe him.

We are talking about his much-hyped forthcoming show at The National Gallery in London in December. To imagine Wiley in conversation with such an institution is, on the face of it, to imagine two artistic traditions colliding. Wiley: irreverent, subversive, effortlessly modern; The National Gallery, by reputation at least, none of these things. However, says Wiley, as partners they were "completely and surprisingly receptive". The theme of the show is landscapes, and it will include film and paintings. Although secrecy surrounds much of the new work, Wiley says he will be engaging with traditional Romantic landscape painting – Turner, Claude-Joseph Vernet, Caspar David Friedrich at al – in a way that draws attention to the things it excludes. It's a critique born of reverence, one that The National Gallery recognised. "Their relationship with history is deeply rooted in traditions, and because of my love affair with those traditions, they recognise the seriousness with which I take that history," adds the artist. "We have a kind of understanding that people could find surprising."

It's a love affair that goes back to childhood. His mother, Freddie Mae Wiley, who raised Kehinde and his five siblings alone and went on to become a teacher, would make ends meet by running a sidewalk thrift store outside their house. His father, Isaiah D Obot, who returned to his native Nigeria when the children were still young, was a city planner. For Kehinde, art was initially a way to show off: as a kid there was nothing that he couldn't draw. He grins. "The ability to make something look like something else was cool! It was a stage trick." When he was 11, his mother enrolled him in an art class to keep him occupied after school, and his relationship with his own talent changed. Wiley spent hours in LA's art museums, gazing at portraits by the Old Masters and nurturing a new ambition that went beyond "simply impressing your buddies". He wanted to make art that made people feel the way these paintings affected him.

Needless to say, there were not many people of colour in the grand 18th- and 19th-century portraits he idolised. As a child, says Wiley, >

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this absence barely registered. He was ignited purely by wonder – “a type of innocent participation” – unsoured by feelings of exclusion. That changed as he got older. “There comes a corner you turn,” he says. “I’m talking about being age 12, 13, and coming of age in South-Central LA, when you recognise that the contours of your identity don’t align with those being pictured in the paintings you so love. There’s a strange kind of cleavage when that happens, a tearing away from your first love. You recognise there’s no space for you in that place you admire.”

Wiley’s answer to this exclusion was – like all true visionaries – to fix it. After attending art school, first in San Francisco, then at Yale, he eventually moved to New York in 2001, and started working on huge canvases that focused on black American subjects. *Napoleon Leading the Army Over the Alps*, his 2005 portrait, is a take on the 19th-century original by Jacques-Louis David, in which Wiley replaces Napoleon, on a rearing horse, with a young black man in a bandana, camo print and Timberland boots. The model gazes coolly out against a wildly decorative background, both elements that, says Wiley, “demand to be seen”. His aim for his paintings is to be “unabashedly beautiful; at once vulnerable and powerful. That’s the opening shot.”

Things latterly hidden is something Wiley thinks about a lot. For the shoot today, he has chosen to wear West African designs, prints of extraordinary power and beauty created by, among others, Adeleke Sijuwade and Sarah Diouf. Along with his studio in Brooklyn, and another on the outskirts of China’s capital, Beijing, Wiley keeps a studio in Dakar, Senegal, where he spent much of the pandemic. “West Africa has been defined by war, disease, famine, disaster,” he says. “And during the 20 years that I’ve been going there, my experience has been defined by love, friendship, surprise, talent and beauty.” By choosing West African designers today, he “wanted the world to see how powerful this new aesthetic is. It deserves to take its rightful place.”

These days, says Wiley, one of the hardest aspects of his work is persuading strangers he spots on the street to come back to the studio to pose for him. This was particularly true in London, during casting for The National Gallery show. “If we compare casting in London versus casting in Brooklyn,” he gives a long, low laugh, “in Brooklyn there’s a kind of expectation of fame.” In London, on the other hand, “there’s a sense of shame”. Yes, embarrassment is our defining national characteristic, I point out. Wiley searches for another word to describe the Londoners he encountered. “Furtiveness?” I suggest. “Right!” he says. “A strange kind of timidity, both in the poses and in the magic in the eyes. I think that’s precious and hope it doesn’t go anywhere.”

When he painted Obama, Wiley faced the opposite problem to the one he encountered in London. He had to audition to get the job. The president invited him to The White House for a chat, and Wiley

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was so nervous that he went in “all guns blazing. ‘And I can tap dance, too!’” Obama outlined for Wiley why this gig would be hard. “He said to me that my work had been very good at taking the little guy and placing him within a field of power to make him visible. And he said, ‘Quite frankly, I’m the leader of the free world. How are you going to deal with me?’” Wiley eventually answered with a portrait that looked at the interplay between the president’s vulnerability and power. “Everything in that portrait has to do with power,” he says, “but you may notice, most of it has to do with the releasing of power: the lowering of the colour; the leaning forward, the listening. What Obama is saying in that portrait is that his power is a much more participatory power, which historically we’ve coded as female.”

Wiley’s own self-definitions are interesting. He has said in the past that he has had relationships with both men and women, but that it is important for him to define himself as a gay man. “I don’t want to be yet another person who says, ‘Well, you know, I’m just fluid!’” he says, now. “It felt like a cop out, almost. If you ask who I have sex with, that’s a much more complicated question than how I define myself. The contours of my sexuality are deeply personal, but I would say that I’m a gay, queer, questioning – I don’t know – constantly changing and evolving person, who likes to have as much fun and spontaneity, growth, celebration in his life as anyone else.” He smiles. “It’s a really tough one to answer.” To be gay, perhaps, is as much a sensibility as a sexuality? “Yes, an aesthetic; that’s interesting. But when I say I’m a gay man, I mean it.”

He continues to defy boundaries. A recent collaboration with American Express saw Wiley design its new Centurion credit card, with an illustration referencing his 2012 painting *Princess Victoire of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha*. It’s the kind of partnership he knows some artists frown upon. This strikes him as ludicrous. “It’s an opportunity for art to come out of the ivory tower,” he says, besides which, business and art aren’t mutually exclusive. Artists would be much better served if they were taught about business at art school. “It took me years to figure out how to properly arrange my studio, and deal with workflow and distribution. I’m not uncomfortable with the marketplace. I find it fascinating.”

Commerce, wealth and power are, of course, all themes of Wiley’s work. In his new projects for The National Gallery – some of which are on canvas, some on film – the question was how to take traditional landscape painting with its “solitary white, male figure in the foreground” and “an expanse of land that he has been able to dominate” behind, and allow it to “breathe life”. The answer, “without giving away too much of the show, is that it’s a story of black skin on ice. I went to Norway specifically to shoot and to engage this question of what blackness looks like in a stark, white landscape.”

It’s the urge of every artist: “having something to rub up against” as a vehicle for grace and beauty; a “punch in the gut”; and also, perhaps, outrage. Wiley’s displacement of the white man on a horse for a parade of black subjects is a joyful corrective to history. “But Jesus Christ,” he says, “where have they been?” ■

Kebinde Wiley is at The National Gallery, WC2, from 10 December



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