

Stephen Friedman Gallery

The Observer

Artist Kehinde Wiley: 'The new work is about what it feels like to be young, Black and alive in the 21st century'

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Image: Kehinde Wiley photographed in New York City by Ali Smith for the Observer.

The US painter is famous for reimagining the western portrait tradition with Black protagonists – and for his painting of Barack Obama. Now he aims to refresh the Romantic landscape canon for his new show at the National Gallery in London.

Kehinde Wiley has a love-hate relationship with western art history. “There’s something glorious about the portraits that you see of aristocrats and royal families. Something beautiful in those expansive imperialist landscapes.” But there’s a dead end. Such paintings, from the baroque, rococo, renaissance and Dutch golden age eras, are ultimately displays of European power, wealth, and beauty. “What I wanted to do was to take the good parts, the parts that I love, and fertilise them with things that I know to be beautiful – people who happen to look like me.”

Wiley, 44, beloved by hip-hop superstars, signed to a Hollywood talent agency, and the first Black, gay artist to paint a US president’s official portrait, rose to art world fame in the 2000s for reimagining such classic European paintings with Black protagonists. His brightly coloured work is easy to identify: glowing brown skin, statuesque poses, richly patterned, often floral, backgrounds and a roster of unfamiliar but photogenic faces. His subversion of the conventions of the medium often involved creating pastiches that foreground Black youth and hip-hop culture and fashion; his works include remakes of Napoleon Crossing the Alps, by Jacques-Louis David, Jacob de Graeff by Gerard ter Borch and The Dead Christ in the Tomb by Hans Holbein the Younger. While he is famed for painting celebrities and cultural figures, from Spike Lee to LL Cool J, Questlove to Ice-T (his best known work is his 2018 portrait of Barack Obama, sitting relaxed on a wooden chair and surrounded by an abundance of leafy flowers), his work is just as likely to feature ordinary Black people he has found by scouring the local neighbourhoods.

In a similar way to other African American artists such as Kerry James Marshall, Amy Sherald and Jordan Casteel, Wiley’s work inserts Black faces into historical white spaces and thus also into the canon of painting. “It’s an opportunity for people who traditionally have had very little relationship to museums and to what’s on their walls, to feel themselves included,” he says.

“Wiley draws out complex historical and contemporary issues – race, identity, climate – with such power and poignancy”. Christine Riding, National Gallery

Speaking over Zoom from New York, Wiley appears in a good mood. He’s at the SoHo Grand Hotel and has just finished his Observer photoshoot. There’s a sense of urgency in the air as he’s conducting several interviews back to back. “[I’m] busy but good,” he says, sounding exhausted but smiling widely.

We are on the call to talk about Wiley’s move into landscape painting for his latest show, The Prelude, which opens at the National Gallery next month. Inspired by Romantic landscapes and seascapes in the gallery’s collection by painters including Claude Lorrain, Caspar David Friedrich, JMW Turner, and Claude-Joseph Vernet, six new works (five paintings and one film) will still feature the emblematic Black figures, but the style will mark a dramatic departure from his kaleidoscopic portraits, with their lively brocade backdrops and vibrant pigments. Set in the fjords of Norway, these new paintings are muted in tone and hue. Sombre, but still arrestingly grand.

Christine Riding, head of the National Gallery’s curatorial department, believes the institution is the perfect forum for Wiley’s work. “I so admire how he draws out complex historical and contemporary issues – race, gender, identity, climate – with such power and poignancy,” she says, “while giving us the opportunity to look afresh at the gallery’s celebrated paintings.” Riding first encountered Wiley’s “exhilarating” work at the

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Brooklyn Museum in 2015. Determined to work with him, she led the acquisition of his *Ship of Fools* (2017) for the Royal Museums Greenwich, the first work by the painter to enter a UK public collection.

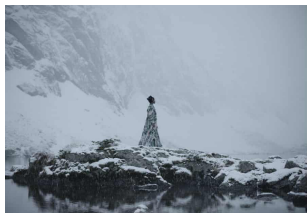


Image: Production shot for *The Prelude*, 2020, to be shown at the National Gallery, London. Photograph: © Kehinde Wiley.

Courtesy of Stephen Friedman Gallery and Galerie Templon.

Wiley's interest in remaking historical European paintings has everything to do with searching for a sense of belonging in places that feel alien. "We know that museums and institutions, like art, have to respond to the world that they're in, in order to stay current, in order to survive, in order to correspond to the society that surrounds them," he says. "It's an exciting opportunity to take a stodgy old language and breathe into it the vibrant now."

The models for the new paintings were cast on London streets. This way of working began when Wiley moved from Los Angeles to New York after finishing his studies in 2000, and began to approach strangers he met on the streets of Harlem, bringing them back into his studio and making preparatory images of them in poses they chose from an art history book. "Los Angeles is so mitigated by car culture," he says. "In New York, everyone was in the streets. You can see how everyone is dressing and the peacocking that goes on every Saturday afternoon in Harlem. That was something I wanted to capture. It was magical to live in that new type of Black community. I thought it was really cool and translated really well to painting and portraiture specifically."



Image: Kehinde Wiley's *Portrait of Melissa Thompson*, 2020. Photograph: Mark Blower/Courtesy Kehinde Wiley/ Stephen Friedman Gallery

There's much to admire in Wiley's flâneur tendencies – they have led him to pick up many people in places not normally classed as hotspots for model-scouting, such as Ridley Road market in Dalston, where he spotted Melissa Thompson in 2019. He painted her sitting on a Regency-style chair against a backdrop of William Morris wallpaper in a work that has now been acquired by the V&A. For the new show, he did an open call and street casting in south London. This time, instead of taking preparatory photographs of the models in his studio, he flew them to Norway and shot them in the fjords against snow-covered mountain backdrops.

Why Norway? I ask. "Mountains have always been figured and imagined as being closer to God," he says. There are also political currents running through these images, including climate change as well as colonialism. "When we look at landscapes, we're also thinking about domination and annexation. In my opinion, while the work is critiquing that it's also imagining a new way of looking at the landscape in the 21st century. We have to reconsider some of the questions surrounding sustainability. Do we want to hold nature at arm's length? We have to perhaps think about it as something a lot more fragile, a lot more vulnerable."

Wiley was born in South Central Los Angeles in 1977. He is one of six siblings, a twin, and was raised by an African American mother, Freddie Mae Wiley, who encouraged his artistic talent. He beams at the mention of his mother. "She was a constant inspiration for me from day one, principally by leading by example," he explains. "Her interest in languages, in linguistics, allowed me to understand both language and art as a series of systems that can be understood and dismantled."

What seems certain is that without her sensing his talent early on, Wiley would not have had a career as an artist. "Essentially, I didn't have a choice, I was sort of trapped into this," he says laughing. His mother put him into Los Angeles County High School for the Arts, a public, tuition-free school, when he was 11. "I think so many kids just want to be able to be good at something, to be recognised and to be singled out as special. I was considered

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special for my drawings and I have held on to them, all these years later. My way of looking at the world, my way of painting was informed by the things that surrounded me."



Image: Kehinde Wiley photographed in New York City by Ali Smith for the Observer.
Photograph: Ali Smith/The Observer

Some of the things surrounding him were the objects in his mother's thrift shop, known locally as Freddie's Store. It sold secondhand art books, picture frames, figurines and knick-knacks and these offered Wiley his earliest encounter with creativity. "The decorative filigree on so many of the tchotchkes [trinkets] that my mom was selling when we were kids, that is a way of looking at the world that comes from someone who was part of a marginalised community," he says. "The work that I ultimately made was informed by a type of empathy that comes from an outsider's sensibility."

At the age of 12, Wiley was sent to Russia on a free art programme for 50 American schoolchildren in a forest outside St Petersburg. The experience was transformative. "It opened my eyes to a community of artists and young people outside of what I knew in South Central. It represented a break from seeing what was immediately around me, and made me see that there were so many different ways to live. So many traditions to see. And so, as someone who was interested in art, I started digging directly into other histories, and seeing the histories of others as being perhaps something that belongs to me as well. So it almost created a kind of global citizen out of me." It also made him fervently aware of his good fortune in receiving a creative education. He saw that the arts could give young people, especially those from under-served communities, "not only a creative outlet, but also a sense of mastery in the world ... a confidence and grace that come from being able to fast-form your ideas into objects, into words, statements, images. That shouldn't be for the privileged, that should be for the people."

As a youngster, Wiley would visit the Huntington Library and Botanical Gardens collection in San Marino, California (the museum recently commissioned him to reimagine a 1770 painting by Gainsborough in their collection, Blue Boy). He recalls they had a great repository of British portraiture, but it was Kerry James Marshall's De Style (1993), which depicts a scene at a barber shop, that really took hold of his imagination. "There was something absolutely heroic and fascinating about being able to feel a certain relationship to the institution," he has said. "The fact that these people happen to look like me on some level."



Image: Winter Landscape, 1811, by Caspar David Friedrich, one of the Romantic landscapes in the National Gallery's collection that have inspired Wiley's new work. Publicity image.

Museums, says Wiley, need to appeal to all of society. "Their number one goal is to look at culture and society, and to say: this is our best. This is what we stand for. This is what we as a civilisation choose to put out there for eternity. And what happens when that responsibility is expanded to include people who come from different walks of life? It enriches us all." For a brief moment, his pride jumps out. "So far I've been blessed because for every one of my shows, the number of people who attend that museum skyrockets."

Wiley oscillates between institutional and commercial exhibitions. His first solo show was in Chicago in 2002, and since then, he's had more than 20 shows across the US from New York to Seattle. His paintings have made a lot of money – in 2020, his Portrait of Mickalene Thomas (The Coyote), 2017, broke his previous auction record, selling for \$378,000 – and he has had mainstream success through several high-profile commissions (including one from Michael Jackson, who is depicted in 2010's Equestrian Portrait of King Philip II, which Wiley started just months before the singer died). Such is the demand for his art that he has a group of assistants in a Beijing studio to help with the creation of new works. When New York magazine asked him about having a team based

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in China, his answer was somewhat prickly: "I don't want you to know every aspect of where my hand starts and ends, or how many layers go underneath the skin, or how I got that glow to happen."

It's understandable that Wiley might prefer not to reveal the mechanics of what is essentially a profitable business. Though he isn't the first artist to use assistants (he follows Michelangelo and Damien Hirst, to name just two), few artists want to be viewed as sales tycoons. As Anish Kapoor said: "If everything's for sale, how is it possible to find anything that's radical?" I ask Wiley how much an awareness of collectors and buyers seeps into his art-making. "The commercial success of the work allows the work to get that much larger and that much more exciting," he says. "It allows me to have a bigger reach and an ability to say more complicated things in more complicated structural ways." However, thinking too much about a work's place in the world has its limits. "I think it's important to strike a balance and to understand oftentimes it's not necessary to use brute force in order to create an image that appeals."



Image: Wiley's Napoleon Leading the Army Over the Alps, 2005, based on Jacques-Louis David's 1800 painting Napoleon Crossing the Alps. Photograph: © Kehinde Wiley

Wiley seems committed to giving back financially and supporting other artists. In 2019, he founded Black Rock, a residency programme based in Dakar, Senegal. Inspired by his own early experience of an international programme, it aims to give others "the ability to go outside of your own country and personal experience, allowing you to grow as a thinker, as a creator". Some of the artists who have visited include Amsterdam-based Nigerian artist Tyna Adebawale, who portrays queer bodies, and film producer Abbesi Akhamie, whose work focuses on African and diasporan cultures and experiences.

"For many people, living and working in Africa is a complete mystery," he explains. "To be able to work side by side with other creative people in an international context allows everyone to grow, not only African artists, but artists from all over the world"

Why does he think there's been such a surge in interest in art and culture from Africa? "Africa is hot right now," he says. "But Africa has been hot for hundreds of years, because of our labour pool, our mineral resources and our habitable climate, and now we're slowly starting to realise that there are people there. People with histories, and ways of looking at themselves and traditions of beauty. Unlike a fad or something that is simply a temporary shift, this is a thing that represents a whole new way of looking, not just at Africa but at the west."



Image: President Barack Obama shakes hands with Kehinde Wiley at the unveiling of his portrait in Washington DC, February 2018. Saul Loeb/AFP/Getty Images

Wiley was at Black Rock last year when the Black Lives Matters protests spread across America after the murder of George Floyd. The distance from the US gave him a new perspective on Black America's impact. "I saw that what smoulders in the United States catches fire in the rest of the world as well," he says. "You start to see the advent of social movements – End SARS [a protest against police brutality] in Nigeria, young South Indians deciding to talk about colour issues and class issues... It's a sort of global reckoning with power imbalances, and specifically with racial imbalances."

Wiley tells me he's working on sculpture next, for a major show in Italy. He's made bronze busts in the past, but it's thrilling to imagine someone with such an established "brand" and identity exploring a new medium. His debut film work, *Narrenschiff* (2017), reveals Wiley's ability to tell stories as extravagant as his paintings. A three-channel digital film, it features a group of young Black men at sea struggling to reach land. It is a metaphor for

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migration and social dislocation and was inspired by the idea of the “ship of fools” –an allegory for the problems that arise when political governance is not supported by expert knowledge that was very popular in European culture from the late 15th century. The new National Gallery show builds upon these themes. “A show that opens in a British museum needs to be aware of the history of empire,” says Wiley.

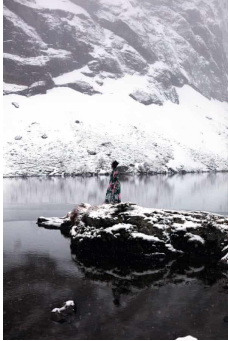


Image: A production shot of The Prelude. © Kehinde Wiley

The models in the new landscapes are connected by African ancestry. “It was interesting to create a global narrative in this new work,” Wiley says, “so that it becomes [about] more than the motif of western European painting, but a question of what it feels like to be young and Black and alive in the 21st century.”

Though race, Blackness, and identity are clear themes in Wiley’s works, his paintings aren’t overtly political. In the past, he’s even described them as “atheists”: the last thing he wants to do is preach, he wants to give us something to celebrate. His portraits feel something like posters for Black excellence, his subjects in positions of power, idealised and commanding respect. There’s another side to the coin, though. The attempt to challenge stereotypes through fantastical aspirational imagery can sometimes feel hollow. Must Black people assimilate into white-constructed displays of regality, wealth, authority and class in order to be seen as valuable? Can’t we be ordinary, exist in ordinary conditions, and still matter? That’s not a question Wiley is trying to answer. “I hope my work doesn’t do harm,” he once said, “but I don’t necessarily design it to do good.”

That the work has a social impact is “a good thing”, Wiley says. “But sometimes to do that so consciously doesn’t make the best work. To make the best work you have to make it intensely personal. You have to have faith in the fact that everything that you do as an artist can be seen through a political rubric.”

In the past, Wiley himself has made some not-so-subtle works that have caused controversy, most notably Judith Beheading Holofernes, a 2012 painting which depicts a tall Black woman in a long blue dress. In one hand, she holds a knife. In the other, she swings the severed head (which was the head of one of Wiley’s assistants) of a white woman. Conservative media outlets, not knowing it was a play on Caravaggio’s painting of the same name, based on the Bible story, blasted it as racist.

So what advice does he have for young Black artists, who might feel a pressure to make “timely” work that fits a cultural landscape which has a fetish for a singular (often traumatic) Black narrative? “The best way to do it is to get really small and look at the details of your life, and to zoom in and find the beauty in the mundane,” says Wiley. “The beauty in that person who was just walking by you, who the world is ignoring. That is ultimately the most personal thing you can do and one of the most political things you can do.”