

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Evening Standard

Kehinde Wiley: Prelude at the National Gallery review - Changing the landscape of art history

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Image: Kehinde Wiley

The artist, famous for his portraits, has turned his attention to the landscape of art history.

Perhaps no other contemporary artist has so self-consciously mined the history of Western painting than Kehinde Wiley. Wiley, who is now perhaps most famous for his portrait of Barack Obama, has made paintings before directly in response to the National Gallery's masterpieces – he cast fellow African American artists Sanford Biggers and Rashid Johnson in a reworking of Holbein's *The Ambassadors*, for instance. So he's a natural fit for the National's ongoing engagement with living artists.

You might think, then, that Wiley's new exhibition at the gallery would bring together canvases that tell the story of his now two-decade long project to take the kind of grand-manner and equestrian portraiture that graces the National's walls and replace its royal, noble and ecclesiastical subjects with ordinary black people that Wiley has encountered on the street in various locations around the world, including Dalston.

But while there are direct responses to historic works in this two-room show, there are only five canvases. The centrepiece is a six-screen video installation, which gives the show its title. The works continue a project that has preoccupied Wiley in the last few years: riffing on the history of sublime landscape and seascape. Three of the works are seascapes from a series which picture contemporary figures from Haiti and Dakar, Senegal – where Wiley has a home and studio – on turbulent seas. In recasting the marine pictures of JMW Turner, Winslow Homer and others with black protagonists from those specific locations, he inevitably reframes that field of art history, so that these paintings conjure past and present injustices: the global south's historical traumas of slavery and colonialism and the contemporary fate of refugees.

Ship of Fools II is partly based on Hieronymus Bosch's painting of the same name, which takes a satirical pop at the follies of powerful 15th-century figures by casting them adrift, lost at sea. But the Senegalese people Wiley depicts are the victims of political folly. Two of the figures are in the water, amid swelling waves, while the others appear to shout and signal beyond the painting's frame – a cry for help that clearly alludes to Theodore Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa*, a tale of people abandoned following a shipwreck. Turner's chilling *Slave Ship*, once shown in these very rooms, was also on Wiley's mind.



Image: Kehinde Wiley

All of this is powerful and fascinating stuff, but I struggle with Wiley's technique in these works. They're clearly deliberately artificial – stage sets for their subjects, the colour amped up perhaps in reference to American sublime painting, the light falling as it never would in studies from nature. But it means that they don't settle as compositions, which interrupts their believability. They just don't sit right.

More convincing are two pictures inspired by the key historic painter haunting the show – the German Romantic Caspar David Friedrich. Wiley reinterprets Friedrich's most famous works – *Wanderer*

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on the Sea of Fog and Chalk Cliffs on Rügen – and by placing Black people in Friedrich's compositions, he consciously subverts the imperial and colonial context and the spirit of patriotism in which they were made. In other words, Wiley argues that while nature is awe-inspiring in Friedrich's vision, they are also paintings about white man's conquest of nature.

To emphasise Wiley's contention that these are as much paintings about power as they are about landscape, he vastly expands their scale, so that they're the size of great history paintings rather than intimate landscapes. Friedrich's canvases were not even a metre tall – Wiley's reinterpretations are almost four metres high, stretching almost to the limit of the National's wall space.

In contrast to Friedrich's original painting, in which the figures, including the artist himself, are at the periphery of his composition, looking out to the majestic land and sea that dominate the picture, in Wiley's version of Chalk Cliffs his two figures stand playing a clapping game at the centre of the painting, and one of them looks directly at us. It's a look of defiance: I am here.



Image: Prelude (Ibrahima Ndiaye and El Hadji Malick Gueye) / Kehinde Wiley

Clapping games also feature in a charming sequence in the video installation, *The Prelude*, as four of Wiley's protagonists pat-a-cake in the wilds of snowbound Norway, their laughter and slapping constantly shifting across six screens. That sense of innocence amid nature is taken from another key cultural inspiration: William Wordsworth. Wiley's title alludes to Wordsworth's poem of the same name, but it's another poem, *Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*, which reflects on the child's ability to respond to divine nature, that's particularly relevant here.

There are beautiful shots of the performers' hands as they play, and Wiley explores that contrast, of black skin against white landscape, throughout the film. In the catalogue accompanying the exhibition, he describes the "the weight and volume of the whiteness" and this is one of several metaphors in the film – Wiley says he connects the white Norwegian wilderness, the snow blizzards that overwhelm and brutalise these black bodies, to white supremacy. "The whiteness becomes a metaphor for a cage," he says.

I watched the film through twice, and was transfixed both times, but there is one glaring flaw: the overwrought score by Niles Luther. It too often confuses the mood, and feels more suited to David Attenborough's natural history films. It's too bombastic for the subtleties of Wiley's installation. I'd love to see the work without it.

Still, quite unexpectedly, with this and his previous film *Narrenschiff*, Wiley is proving a distinctive and poetic film-maker. You might be disappointed by this show's relative lack of paintings, but you might also come away with your appreciation of the artist enhanced.