

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Widewalls

Kehinde Wiley Explores the Western Landscape Tradition at the National Gallery London

Balasz Takac

10 December 2021

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Image: Still from 'Prelude', 2021 by Kehinde Wiley. © Kehinde Wiley. Courtesy of Stephen Friedman Gallery, London, and Galerie Templon, Paris

After the portrait of the former American president Barack Obama was revealed back in 2017, the work of painter Kehinde Wiley gained wider attention and so he became sort of a celebrity. Nevertheless, throughout his career, this artist has searched for ways to reclaim the traditional European Old Master canon, and to do so he is producing vibrant portraits that feature contemporary Black subjects. This kind of intervention aims to address issues surrounding identity, privilege, and power by illuminating the absence of Black figures within European art.

This month the prestigious National Gallery in London will present Wiley's latest exploration of the Western landscape tradition through the mediums of film and painting with the exhibition titled The Prelude.



Image: Still from 'Prelude', 2021 by Kehinde Wiley. © Kehinde Wiley. Courtesy of Stephen Friedman Gallery, London, and Galerie Templon, Paris

The New Work

The same year the artist presented the Obama portrait, he also produced his first film installation, Narrenschiff as a response to the Ship of Fools allegory. Wiley captured several young Black men at sea struggling to reach the land as a direct metaphor for both historical and contemporary migration, isolation, and displacement.

The upcoming show will come as a sort of an extension of these themes. Five paintings and one six-channel digital film will showcase the artist's exploration of European Romanticism and its obsession with nature and will reflect the current issues related to migration and climate crisis.



Image: Production photo from on-location filming in Haiti for Narrenschiff, 2017. © Kehinde Wiley

About The Prelude

The centrepiece of the exhibition will be a recently produced film. Wiley cast Black Londoners and took them on a trip to Norwegian glacial landscapes. Those women and men are presented as alienated subjects who practically disappear in the landscape while contemplating nature in a respectful and dignified way. This particular imagery refers to the iconic figure of a Romantic wanderer in search of spirituality or self-discovery.

Another relevant source for Wiley was the marine painting genre which essentially celebrated the European colonial supremacy by featuring voyages of exploration and other endeavours. The artist perceives the oceans as irrational and unreliable forces that also symbolize trade routes, escapes to a better life, and the non-functioning empire.

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Kehinde Wiley at The National Gallery

Wiley's works will be presented at the centre of the Gallery's collection to establish a relationship between his practice and the historical landscapes and seascapes by artists such as Turner, Claude, Friedrich, and Vernet. Dr. Gabriele Finaldi, the director of the National Gallery Director, stated the following:

The National Gallery's paintings and the themes they explore have archetypal status and seem to demand constant reconsideration and reinterpretation. Kehinde Wiley's response has been to define a new kind of sublime, one that is strong and distinctive, that reflects on artistic and poetic tradition, but confronts urgent contemporary questions of identity, migration, and marginality.