

# Stephen Friedman Gallery

The American  
Kehinde Wylie: The Prelude  
Michael Macy  
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## Kehinde Wylie: The Prelude



Image: Production photo from on-location filming in Norway for Prelude, 2020. © Kehinde Wiley

Kehinde Wylie is an ambitious man. I don't mean that he is after fame or fortune. I have no idea if those things interest him, though he is well known and his paintings sell well. His ambitions are more than just personal, he wants to change how we see art and to encourage us to experience and celebrate the sublimity of nature and our place within it.

These are big ambitions and Wylie is working on them, as evinced by his new show, *The Prelude*, which opened at the National Gallery on December 10.

Wylie has been the subject of many articles, interviews and analyses. His paintings have been exhibited in galleries around the world and acquired by major museums. He became famous beyond the art world for the official portrait of President Barack Obama. He may well be one of the most profiled painters on the planet. Many erudite people have written about Wylie's work and he, himself, is very articulate about it. So, the way to understand his newest exhibition may be to go past the noise and submerge yourself. The exhibition has five paintings and a film that's roughly 30 minutes long. The catalogue is 57 pages – don't read it before you go; just go.

Perhaps one would go just for the nostalgia. The paintings reprise 18th and 19th century art forms, adding a new element – the black person – to each scene. They are masterfully executed. Wylie has complete control over this medium and while drawing upon the past, each painting revitalizes the form. The film is reminiscent of mid-20th century experimental films that used multiple screens with little dialogue. Wylie uses film well, letting the images create a world that draws in the viewer. All of this is soon to be subsumed by the 21st century's virtual reality technology. If, as some believe, these are the waning days of these art forms, Wiley has made them new for the age of Black Lives Matter.

There are many other compelling reasons too to see this exhibition. I found that by introducing the specific form of the Black person into classical art, Wylie makes the classics accessible. He touches upon the universal. By using ordinary people as models, he democratizes art. His versions of classical masterpieces reclaim these for all of us. I encourage you to go; experience the paintings. What do they say to you? What memories do they awaken? What feelings do they arouse? Allow yourself to be surrounded by the film, immerse yourself in the images.