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KEHINDE WILEY'S ANTI-CONFEDERATE MEMORIAL



On a rainy morning in December, Kehinde Wiley climbed onto a grandstand set up outside the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, in Richmond, to unveil a statue. Wiley, an African-American artist, who is forty-two and short, wore black Converse sneakers and a suit patterned like stained glass, which set him apart from the local officials who preceded him onstage. "I think we all have to do a big bow and a 'thank you' to whatever powers brought us here today," he said. The plaza of the museum, where the ceremony took place, faces the headquarters of the United Daughters of the Confederacy. So-called flaggers gather here most weekends, at the corner of Grove Avenue and the newly rechristened Arthur

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Ashe Boulevard, to wave the Confederate standard. A few blocks away is Monument Avenue, a mall of Lost Cause iconography, where five giant statues of Confederate leaders loom. Activists, city-council members, and the mayor have been pushing for years to have these monuments removed or edited, and, in recent years, the city has spent at least sixteen thousand dollars cleaning angry graffiti off the statues. “There’s something moving in the culture,” Wiley remarked.

Wiley’s new statue, “Rumors of War,” stood beneath a tarp in the middle of the museum’s plaza. It had made its première in Times Square, in September, and was now arriving at its permanent home. “Rumors of War” is an equestrian figure standing on a stone podium; the whole thing stands roughly three stories tall and weighs nearly thirty tons. Like much of Wiley’s work, the statue is a quotation of centuries-old styles. It draws principally on militaristic statues that appeared in Italian city-states in the early Renaissance. But its immediate model was a statue commemorating the Confederate general J. E. B. Stuart, which was among the first to go up in Richmond during the rise of Jim Crow, at the turn of the twentieth century, when Southern cities started building such tributes. Wiley’s bronze makes some tweaks to the original: on its rearing stallion sits a young black man dressed in a hoodie and Nike high-tops.

Onstage, Wiley discussed the first time he saw the Confederate monuments in Richmond. “When I came here, all those years back, and I saw Monument Avenue, and I saw some extraordinary sculpture,” he said. “People took a lot of time to make something powerful, beautiful, elegant. And menacing.” He noted that art has always depicted what people value, even in paintings of ruffled collars or bowls of fruit. The monuments in Richmond point to a century of white supremacy. He hoped that, by using the visual language of memorialization to depict the people who were oppressed, he could show that the city’s values have changed. “This work of art is not about honoring one particular individual,” Wiley said. He said, “I hired someone, and I said, ‘Please, hold this pose.’ ” Despite the dreary weather, the city welcomed him with a ceremony that hit like a parade. More than thirty-four hundred visitors huddled in the plaza, many under umbrellas. The governor, the museum director, and Richmond’s mayor made speeches. The All-City High School Marching Band supplied pomp. Wiley might as well have been a returning hero. “He’s riding a horse here,” Justin Fairfax, Virginia’s lieutenant governor, quipped as he shook hands with people in the crowd before Wiley’s arrival.

Wiley is probably most famous for having painted [Barack Obama’s official portrait](#), which depicts the former President sitting in front of a wall of jasmine, lilies, and chrysanthemums. Many of Wiley’s paintings place African-Americans against elaborate Baroque backdrops. “Rumors of War” is also the title of a series of exaggerated portraits that Wiley created in the early two-thousands, featuring ordinary black people, most of whom he met on 125th Street, in Harlem, painted in the style of court portraits from the ancien régime. In

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“Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps,” from 2005 (by way of an 1801 painting by Jacques-Louis David), Wiley depicts a black man astride a horse, wearing both a magnificent cape and Timberland boots.

I spoke with Wiley after the ceremony at the museum, and he described equestrian art as a kind of fantasy. In addition to the obvious braggadocio of the form, there is a sleight of hand involved in the composition. If you paint a man on a horse with accurate proportions, he will look puny. To make him look heroic in this posture, an artist must stretch out his torso, broaden his shoulders, and lengthen his legs. “I recall trying to re-create some Velázquez paintings in which men were on horseback,” Wiley said. “I actually hired Hollywood horses, so they could deal with the flashes”—when he took photographs—“and not bolt. It turns out, the artists were lying. No man-to-horse is that ratio.” Wiley designed the sculpture with suitably incorrect proportions, and then hired an international workshop called U.A.P. to cast and fabricate it.

Wiley is working in step with other contemporary artists who are puncturing the fables of the Civil War. The artist [Mark Bradford](#), for example, based “Pickett’s Charge,” a four-hundred-foot-wide painting, from 2017, on a nineteenth-century cyclorama that depicts the Battle of Gettysburg, though only fragments of the battle can be seen in Bradford’s shredded abstraction. In 2005, Kara Walker, who creates fantastical and traumatic antebellum scenes using cut-paper silhouettes, produced a series of prints based on “Harper’s Pictorial History of the Civil War,” a popular illustrated portfolio published in 1866. Wiley told me that these artworks explore the lies that America tells itself about its own history, and the consequences of that fragmented record; he sees his work as trying to capture “that rupture, that tear, that incompleteness of identity.”

The historian Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has described the resurgence of white nationalism in the Trump era as a politics of “Neo-Redemption”—a reference to the period after the Civil War, when the Ku Klux Klan and other bands of white Southerners used terroristic violence to scuttle efforts at Reconstruction. With its immense scale and magical proportions, “Rumors of War” feels like a defiant response to white reactionary politics, but it also encapsulates a precarity that many Americans feel. The rider, who is just a guy in ripped jeans, has been thrust into conflict. The sculpture is more tender than resolute. Throbbing veins on a raging steed are warlike, but the rider’s exposed knee, framed by the frayed denim threads of his pant leg, seems vulnerable, even in bronze.

For the people in Richmond, the statue seemed to be taking part in a local conflict as well as a national one. “As a lifelong Richmonder, born and raised, I am overwhelmed with what this means,” Chelsea Higgs Wise, the host of a local radio show called “Race Capitol,” told me. “To see somebody with the shoes that look like people of Richmond, the hoodies that look like people of Richmond, to be such a contrast. I’m excited. I’m terrified.” The week before the unveiling, Michael Jones, a member of the city council, announced a resolution to ask the

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state's General Assembly to grant the city the right to decide what to do with its Confederate statuary. This is the third time that he has introduced such a measure, but it's the first time since Democrats gained control of the state legislature, in November. Another council member, Kimberly Gray, announced a proposal to launch a memorial for the United States Colored Troops who fought at the Battle of New Market Heights, in 1864. When we spoke, Wiley seemed to endorse the approach of building new statues rather than removing old ones. "I say don't tear down the house," he said, "even though it's ridiculous, even though all this chest-beating is symptomatic of a broader illness. We can compose poetry of broken bones."

Many people at the ceremony worried that protesters would disrupt the proceedings, and there was a heavy police presence. In the end, no flaggers showed up. But the event didn't go off without a hitch: as the museum's staff tried to unveil the statue, the silver tarp caught on a bronze knot of dreadlocks on the horse rider's head. For a long time, the veil could not be removed. A couple of locals remarked that this blunder was a metaphor for Richmond's brand of progress. A brave art handler climbed a ladder and unsuccessfully tried to free the rider; eventually, firefighters were summoned. It took a while. The marching band's stalwart drum line kept playing. As the sun set and the rain intensified, the crowds stayed put, unwilling to miss the moment.