Okoro, Enuma. “Artist Kehinde Wiley: ‘I wanted to interrupt the history of these paintings’.” *The Financial Times*, January 28, 2022.

FINANCIAL TIMES

The American portraitist on race and representation, casting models on the streets of south London — and his audience with Barack Obama

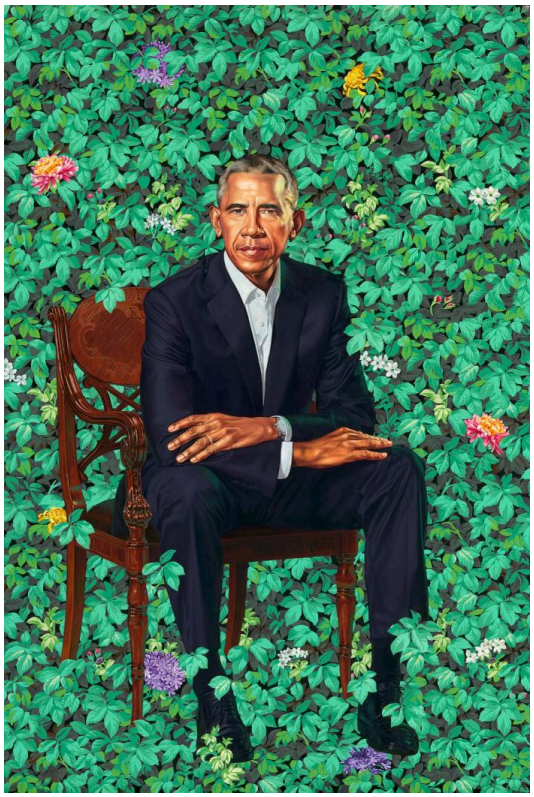
I remember the first work I saw by Kehinde Wiley. Wandering through the Brooklyn Museum several years ago, I turned a corner and came right up against a 9ft-high painting, ornately framed, from which a black man astride a rearing white horse locked me with his stare. Connoisseurs of art history would recognise the painting as a take on Jacques-Louis David’s famous portrait of Napoleon crossing the Alps. But along with a cape and sheathed sword, Wiley’s man was dressed in modern-day streetwear: camouflage fatigues, Timberland boots, a bandanna knotted around his head.

Wiley has been unabashedly challenging the narratives of European masters such as David in a career spanning 20 years, highlighting the empty spaces and pages of art history where people who look like him should be represented. “There have been moments in which black bodies have been pictured in western painting, but the intention is radically different,” Wiley tells me. “The empathy that’s had for the sitter, you know? I think you can feel how I feel about the people in my paintings by looking at the paintings.”

Whether they are celebrity portraits or images of friends and artistic peers, the images can feel extravagant, brazen and at times almost parodic. But they have brought Wiley the kind of art-market recognition that means his work sells for six-figure sums, allowing him to maintain studios in New York, Senegal and Beijing. He was the first black artist to paint a presidential portrait, with his 2018 image of a seated, pensive Barack Obama against a riot of elaborately woven greenery, a

picture that brought him to global attention. When we meet he's about to open an exhibition of painting and film at London's National Gallery.
Wiley's conspicuous works pack such a lavish visual punch that I do not expect the soothing voice that lulls and calms as the 44-year-old speaks about the exhibition. "The National Gallery in London is a big deal," he says. "For someone who has such a deep engagement with art history and the tradition of western European easel painting, to be able to play in the same garden that so many of these master painters have been exhibited in is a real joy and a privilege."

We've arranged to have lunch in the Club Room at the Soho Grand Hotel in Manhattan. I take in the ink-blue velvet sofa, leather club chairs and a large chartreuse and royal blue mural of two peacocks preparing to preen. As we settle in to wait for our sushi delivery, Wiley sits on the edge of his seat, legs apart and feet rooted firmly on the floor. He appears posed, ready to be indulged and to indulge himself, just like one of his sitters. He is dressed casually but stylishly in a white button-down shirt and distressed khaki jeans with one knee ripped.



Official presidential portrait of Barack Obama by Kehinde Wiley (2018) © Kehinde Wiley/ National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution/AP

'Prelude (Babacar Mané)' by Kehinde Wiley (2021) © Kehinde Wiley. Courtesy of Stephen Friedman Gallery, London and Galerie Templon, Paris

For the National Gallery show, Wiley found his subjects as he often does: walking the streets and casting strangers of African descent to sit for him. Sometimes he asks former sitters to choose new subjects for him — "It's a whole sort of interactive thing in which the machine talks to itself after a while . . . I like the sense of mystery, of never really knowing what you're looking at."

Wiley's original stamping grounds were the streets of New York, though he has since found models around the world; this time, the sitters were cast in south London. "But then I put them all in a plane and we went to the fjords of Norway," he says. "So we're high up in these extremely white, tall, sharp cliffs, echoing the language of a [Caspar David] Friedrich painting, creating something that echoes the concerns of the transcendentalists, the naturalists, where they have this desire to go off into nature to find themselves and to find answers, or to engage with native people to find the answers."

The results are sublime sea- and mountain-scapes. But, Wiley adds, "there's something deeply problematic and imperial in that dynamic. But I think I'm scratching another itch there. I'm trying to think about that conflict visually: how this sharp white background and this decidedly almost blue-black dark skin collide in those spaces."
A signature of Wiley's paintings is to cut away the rolling hills and country estates that might form a backdrop to an 18th- or 19th-century portrait of European

gentry, replacing them with richly ornamented backgrounds patterned with repeating motifs. “So much of the history of these paintings is that they are powerful white men, often landed gentry, pointing to their possessions, [be they] wives or children or cattle. . . I wanted to interrupt that . . . These decorative backgrounds are forcing their way into the foreground and becoming in metaphorical ways co-conspirators in the desire to be seen and the desire to take up space.” It’s all part of creating new realities that demand to be reckoned with.

At the National Gallery, though, Wiley wanted to further engage with the grand tradition of landscape and seascape painting, the work of Friedrich, Claude Lorrain and JMW Turner. “What we wanted to do was to look at this broad tradition of romanticising nature as a character but as an ‘other’. Nature has always stood at arm’s distance, something for either fear or for conquering.”

For Wiley, this has an additional resonance “in this age now in which we’re destroying everything. The ocean itself is rising and it’s polluted, and we have to sort of refigure the way we’re thinking of nature as ‘over there’.”

Just as our food arrives, muffled music starts thumping, as if a band has started rehearsing next door. Wiley has ordered the chef’s choice from Nobu Fifty Seven, one of the two NYC locations of the well-known Japanese restaurant and sushi bar. There’s a plate of translucent pink and pearl slabs of yellowtail, toro and mackerel sashimi with thin slices of fresh ginger on the side. Tuna wrapped in seaweed, and raw salmon, tuna and whitefish over little twin beds of rice. As we slide food on to our plates, Wiley launches into a small lesson about the base broth of miso soup, *dashi*, which comes from the bonito fish after it’s been fermented and smoked. It reminds him a little, he says, of the flavours of the smoked fish he’s familiar with in Nigeria.

Wiley grew up in South Central Los Angeles, raised by a mother who encouraged his artistic talent. His parents had separated before Wiley was born, and his father had returned to Nigeria. As a young adult, Wiley felt compelled to travel there to understand his lineage. “Having never known my father, it was a big mystery, it was a huge personal challenge, a gaping hole in my identity. There was a sense of abandonment and bittersweet longing and resentment that needed to be addressed. So I jumped on a plane at 18 to go find him, [and when I did] I just kept going, wanting to be there a lot more.”

In the decades that have followed, Wiley says he’s “had a very tight relationship with the country, its evolution, seeing the change, seeing friends and cousins and aunts and uncles. It expanded my relationship with the place. My father passed away two years ago but I feel blessed to have been able to develop a relationship before he was gone.”
Wiley says that going to Nigeria awakened a new understanding of his place in the larger world. It gave him an “internationalist engagement, and presence, the sense of seeing myself beyond just where I happened to have grown up”.

After he returned from Nigeria, Wiley picked up his studies at the San Francisco Art Institute before attending Yale School of Art and being accepted into the coveted Studio Museum in Harlem residency, whose alumni include some of the most prominent artists of recent decades, the likes of Njideka Akunyili Crosby, Titus Kaphar, Julie Mehretu and Kerry James Marshall (one of Wiley's heroes).

But he is always drawn back to west Africa, and in 2019 he established Black Rock, a multidisciplinary artist-in-residency programme on the shores of Dakar, Senegal, where he spent much of the pandemic. "I really do consider it a social movement that started with something very personal and really grew out from there. I wanted to create a generous space for artists from all over the world. I wanted to create something where when you think about west Africa, you're thinking about excellence."

Such experiences have affected the way he thinks about culture and creativity far beyond the canvas. "When I'm in Senegal I go out [fishing] three times a week. A lot of it I throw back because there's only so many fish you can eat. But it's really the joy of doing it. We're actually training the staff at Black Rock to make sushi and merge it with some traditional Senegalese cuisine. It just feels like an opportunity to expand the conversation. Because it's always like, European food in relation to Asia."

He's trying to eat between questions, pausing to comment on how good the fish is. He's planning to start an "exchange programme for food" at Black Rock, "bringing in chefs-in-residence to work with Senegalese chefs, exchanging these teaching moments and sharing traditions [and geared towards] 'how can those two create conversation with each other?' — and then of course create meals for artists every day".

I look down at the table and see we've worked our way through our meal fairly quickly, and there's no dessert coming. So I pick up my bowl of miso soup and keep sipping. I want to ask about the Obama portrait, in which the former president is shown sitting on a chair, the background woven with leaves, chrysanthemums, blue lilies and jasmine flowers. Wiley's approach was formed after a visit to the Smithsonian, where portraits of every president hang. He was struck by the "stodgy" sea of pictures, the "lack of vibrancy . . . lack of scale".

I ask Wiley what surprised him most about the experience of painting Obama's portrait. He smiles. "It was such a thing that I wanted so badly for so long, and I just knew I was the perfect person for it . . . And at a certain point, there was a moment of sadness because I felt like the clock was ticking and it just wasn't going to happen. Then sure enough, without me having anything to do with it, I get the call."

Wiley went to Washington and was ushered into the Oval Office for what he describes as an “audition . . . I’m in there and just nervous as all hell. One of the things I did not expect was the power his charisma commands, and the immediacy of it. He has this ability to sort of disarm and make you feel comfortable immediately . . . ” He trails off for a few seconds. “With Obama it feels less about you and more about him. I think the charisma surrounding Obama is one in which we project ourselves on to him. He’s whatever we want him to be. And I think that’s actually how he was able to capture the American presidency, because he could become anyone to everyone.”

Wiley was promised 40 minutes with Obama; in the end the sitting lasted three hours. I ask if the charisma Wiley is talking about felt authentic to him. He affirms strongly, nodding his head. “Certainly, because it was. I was authentically myself because of him, because of what he allowed. He was at once taking up all the oxygen in the room and giving me the ability to set the tone for how the conversation went, surrounding what his portrait looked like, surrounding how I’m going to do something different than what I’d done before. So much of my work had been about the powerless, and to transform that moment into something visible. For him, he says to me, ‘I’m literally the most powerful man in the world . . . ’ ” — Wiley then breaks into the most perfect Obama impersonation, and finishes the sentence — “What you gonna do?”

Although Wiley says he is “flirting with film” at the moment, portraiture remains at the heart of his work. Who would he most like to paint? “Someone who’s been a muse for so many interesting artists over the years — Grace Jones . . . Tina Turner, Naomi [Campbell] — there are a whole set of legends.”

What keeps drawing him back to the portrait form? “The great thing about portraiture is it allows you to see yourself through the rubric of someone else’s skin. Empathy is sort of presupposed in every portrait that you look at . . . People often ask why I don’t paint myself. I think that in the long run, I am. It’s me out in the world.”

Kehinde Wiley: The Prelude is at the National Gallery, London, until April 18