

# SEAN KELLY

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## Star-Telegram

Exhibit review: Kehinde Wiley's spectacular mid-career retrospective at the Modern



Artist Kehinde Wiley stands in front of Santos Dumont — The Father of Aviation II, 2009. Joyce Marshall Star-Telegram

The last time Kehinde Wiley was at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, it was 2008 and he was here for a Focus show, one of those small three-gallery installations introducing artists who are tracking to be the next big noise.

Wiley proved to be a symphonic crescendo, as can be seen seven short years later at his mid-career retrospective — where approximately 60 paintings, sculptures, videos and stained-glass works take up the entire second floor of the museum.

Simply put, "Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic" is spectacular.

The exhibition includes the paintings that brought him to national attention, where he inserted young African-American men dressed in their own clothes into historical portraits. The men mimic the pose of emperors, kings and saints, right down to the haughty stare of the privileged.

These paintings immediately highlighted the lack of black subjects in the canon of art history — and most certainly, their absence from depictions of heroes and persons of power — and the works were quickly bought by museums and savvy collectors. The Modern was fortunate to be one of the earlier acquirers. The piece, Colonel Platoff on His Charger, 2007-8, in the first gallery, is among several of the huge portraits of men mounted on horses, including a commissioned portrait of Michael Jackson.

Some of the first paintings used the same backgrounds as the historic originals. But Wiley found that the figure and background spoke of a timeline, with the figure representing the present and the background the past — often depicting conquered lands or ownership.

"The background was always the forgotten character," Wiley says.

In his work, he wanted something more present-tense. He began using the decorative floral patterns and filigree of the fabrics of the time — such as baroque brocades and Rococo fleurs-de-lis as backgrounds to his portraits. Tendrils of vines will release from the background and cross the figure. Breaking the traditional plane of foreground and background renders the figure and the pattern equals, and this has become a signature of Wiley's.

The twining branches also act as a caress. They reach out and gently wrap around the chest, thigh or leg — accentuating the tenderness and beauty with which Wiley paints these young men.

It is a form of the male gaze, but in this case, the gay gaze. Wiley objectifies the male model as a thing of beauty. He recognizes that there is a sexual component to all portraiture, and when a male artist solicits the participation of a male model, it is a form of hyper-homoerotic exchange.

“Within art history there is a type of sexuality that exists when people talk about portraiture,” he says. “The idea of female beauty is a facile notion. The idea of male beauty in painting is represented by strength, and domination with ease.”

In his series titled “Down,” he paints the young men on the ground as if they are fallen soldiers or dead religious figures. These, too, are tropes of the art canon, but Wiley’s series proved to be prescient. As shooting incidents such as the Trayvon Martin murder began mounting, Wiley found that these paintings became misconstrued. They were very much of their time, but as current events overrode the historical narratives, he moved on.

He has taken his team of assistants, videographers and translators to other countries for the “World Stage” series. He has been to Nigeria, Israel, China, India, Jamaica, Brazil and Sri Lanka. The “World Stage” paintings are similar to his early ones. The young men are wearing merchandise with American logos, with only the backgrounds or the carved frames indicating the subjects’ national identities.

He uses patterns from Judaica for backgrounds, or places a Torah on the top of the frame in the series from Israel. From Nigeria he used the traditional fabric designs for his background, or he placed his models in poses particular to their folk art practices.

“What you see in the show are paintings from all over the world,” Wiley says. “My subject matter becomes the way the world sees America. It’s a mirror image. These are portraits of individuals and portraits of society ... and the ways they communicate being young, alive and in the world. One of our biggest exports is our culture. Hip-hop and its look is a huge export. Much of this is the globalization of the American hip-hop aesthetic.”

## **Real models**

Wiley casts his characters by scouring the streets, looking for people who have an attitude or a way of dress that he thinks will translate as the immediate present. He admits he is turned down more often than he is accepted. But if passersby are willing, he takes them to his studio and lets them look through art history books to find a pose or a person they want to emulate.

In the early years it was a hard sell.

It wasn’t until 2012 that Wiley began painting women. He had, of course, reason to paint them during his studies at the San Francisco Art Institute and Yale University, but now, in the series “An Economy of Grace,” he was using them in his signature themes of African-American bodies and riotous backgrounds.

The women are often in evening dresses designed by Riccardo Tisci, currently the creative director for Givenchy. The evening gowns should look like red-carpet wear, but as they are diaphanous and white, they look more like the slips and lingerie little girls use to play dress-up as brides.

There is something not quite right — the dresses don’t fit as well as they should and there are no stiletto ankle-breakers on their feet. Without the complete package of accessories, the contemporary fashion message is misread.

Better are the women painted in their own clothes. For instance, in Portrait of Mary Hill, Lady Killigrew, the pierced and tattooed model wearing a sheer black bodysuit with snagged and patterned fishnet hosiery looks far more authentic.

All the women have a similar look, though, and one that is more challenging than the men’s. They look fierce.

Wiley is very attuned to the fashion dateline and he seeks out models who seem equally aware. He marvels that the sell-by date on fashion expires so quickly, citing the velour tracksuits by Sean John he painted in 2006 that look so dated today.

## In-demand artist

This exhibition includes sculptural portrait busts along with pieces he calls stained-glass paintings. The latter are not paintings at all. Instead, they are traditional stained glass, made by stained-glass workshops in central Europe that have been making them for generations. These glass window portraits are in a black chapellike gallery, and his black and brown men are depicted as saints, heroes and martyrs.

“Society portraits don’t give you the oomph that religious ones do,” Wiley muses.

The glass portraits glow, as is the nature of stained glass, but they are not as luminescent as his painted men.

With all of his new mediums and world travels, Wiley is stretching himself thin. His popularity has created an enormous demand for his work, both from institutions and the very wealthy who want commissioned portraits. His travels have exposed him to more demand, and he tries to give back by opening studios in the poorest countries.

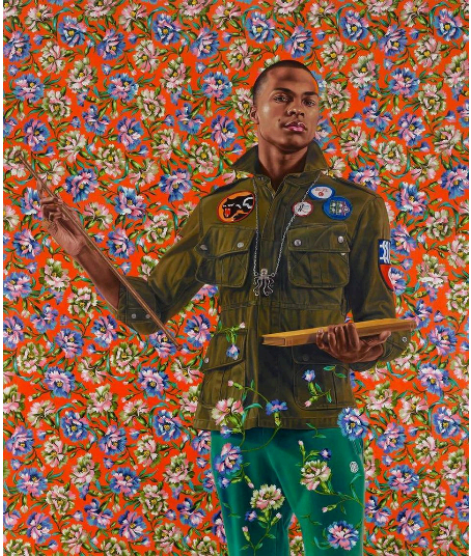
Wiley has a huge phalanx of assistants who paint his labor-intensive backgrounds. Lately, however, it looks as if he is expecting them to paint the bodies, too, and the results are obvious in one of the very last paintings, one that features two young girls. Their arms look like those of mannequins — plastic and unyielding.

The assistants can’t imitate his touch. His inimitable style has created a problem. Even with assistants, he cannot keep up with the demand.

Now a national treasure, Wiley has a definitive style and a singular touch. The amount of work he has created in just 14 years, the breadth of this exhibition, is astonishing. At this rate, the 37- or 38-year-old (he won’t admit to either, although he was born in 1977) should be able to have several mid-career retrospectives.



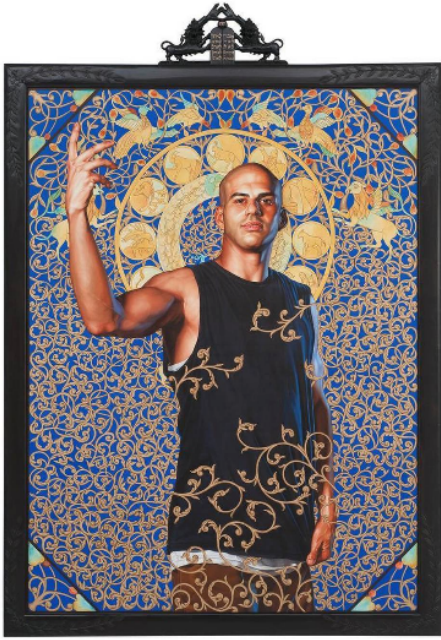
Colonel Platoff on His Charger, by Kehinde Wiley 2007–8, oil on canvas, owned by the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth Courtesy of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth



"Anthony of Padua," a 2013 oil on canvas by Kehinde Wiley. From the Seattle Art Museum. Photo by Max Yawney Courtesy of Roberts & Tilton, Culver City, California



"The Two Sisters," a 2012 oil on linen by Kehinde Wiley. From the collection of Pamela K. and William A. Royall, Jr. Photo by Jason Wyche Courtesy of Sean Kelly, New York



Leviathan Zodiac is in the "World Stage" series. Robert Wedemeyer Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth



Houdon Paul-Louis, by Kehinde Wiley, 2011. Bronze with polished stone base Courtesy of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth



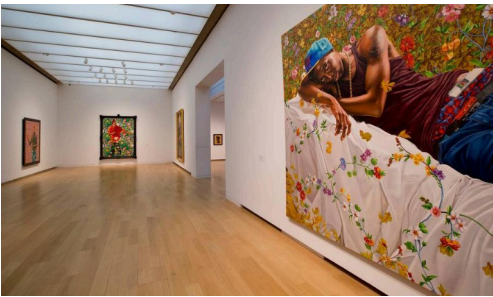
Morpheus, by Kehinde Wiley, at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth. Joyce Marshall Star-Telegram



Cameroon Study, by Kehinde Wiley, bronze, 2010. Joyce Marshall Star-Telegram



Kehinde Wiley's series "Iconic" on the left and on the right, one from the "Down" series, at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth. Joyce Marshall Star-Telegram



In Wiley's more attention-getting portraits, the subjects are dressed in modern clothing. Joyce Marshall Star-Telegram