Thomas, Mickalane. “Kehinde Wiley,” *Interview Magazine,* May 22, 2017.

Interview

KEHINDE WILEY

KEHINDE WILEY IN NEW YORK, MAY 2017. PORTRAITS: MYLES GOLDEN.

Kehinde Wiley's latest body of work is an ode to community, an embrace of insecurities, and an art historical declaration. Titled "Trickster" and currently on view at Sean Kelly gallery, it sees the painter depict fellow contemporary black artists, including Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Kerry James Marshall, and Carrie Mae Weems, in large-scale scenes full of historical citations (a portrait of Rashid Johnson and Sanford Biggers serves as a spare reference to Holbein's 16th-century work *The Ambassadors,* for example, while Hank Willis Thomas appears in a setting reminiscent of Goya's *La Romeria de San Isidro*). "One of the things that has inspired me so much is knowing that I felt like I could never measure up," admits Wiley of making his peers into subjects. "A big portion of the subject matter of this exhibition is about how you feel you measure up in relationship not only to your heroes, but the people who are around you," he continues. "The elephant in that room, in that exhibition, is this highly insecure guy who is trying to figure out his place in the world, and using art history and using the best of our tools, both logically and irrationally, to arrive at some sort of meaning."

Here Wiley speaks to one of his "Trickster" subjects: Brooklyn-based artist Mickalene Thomas. The friends discuss their shared alma mater, having an empathetic eye, their mothers, and more.

KEHINDE WILEY: My first question is this, and it takes us back, because as you know, you and I first met at Yale when we were both [MFA] students there. In fact, before you were a student there, I was a student helping

out with the admissions process. I remember meeting your mom and you. Your mom was incredibly helpful with the process and you were incredibly nervous about the process, and I saw your work and I knew immediately that you would become one of my fellow students. I remember sitting outside in the hallway while you were inside the interview room, and I felt in my mind that, "She not only walked into a room, but she walked into a new chapter in her life. Her life is about to change in this moment." How do you feel that the experience at Yale has either, for bad or worse, made you the person you are today?

MICKALENE THOMAS: Once I got to Yale, my experience was more about the friendships that we had. Forget all of what happened and what didn't happen to each of us individually; it was more the formative years, our bond that we developed, that space of love and expression and growth and creativity, that support system, that "we're all here together" and this is an extremely exciting moment in time that we're all experiencing, and we will all be making or doing something great. [*laughs*] That was an exciting time because also, that same year, once I got in, I met Titus Kaphar. I know, without going into detail, your experience was extremely different than mine. You were by yourself as an African American student for a long time, and [there was] all of that weight and the prescribed condition of how you were treated, and the response and criticism of your work. And there were some instructors, without naming them, who were unwarrantedly saying things that they shouldn't say. I don't know if my growth as an artist would have shifted in the direction it had had I not been there with you and Iona [Rozeal Brown], because we had an intense dialogue—we did everything together. You know the conversations we had.

WILEY: Right, which brings me, I suppose, to the crux of this exhibition, which is about community, and it's about hero worship in as much as it is about recognizing your peers and the people that you rely on and the people you grew up with. So much of my work has to do with this difference between the way that the outside world sees a black body and the way that you inhabit it yourself, that cognitive distance between two-dimensional stereotypes versus the flavor in my mouth, the feel in my skin, the way that someone looks at me, the shock or the surprise or the welcome that appears in another human being's body. It's a very corporeal thing, it's a very ideational thing, and I think at its best it's something that we have to come to terms with as viewers, as Americans, as art consumers. It's not abstract and it all starts with the families that we have as creative people.

THOMAS: Also recognizing that with each other, within that community, and allowing that space. The exciting part is knowing that there's room for all of us at the table. What I like about this show is how you have taken each of us and put us in these lights, as you will, and allowed an essence of ourselves to come through painting, through the formalities of painting but also through the history of painting. It's interesting because as I was walking through it just now, I can understand while we're each in those positions. [*laughs*] And a lot of them, you hit the nail on the head, thinking of the Goya paintings with Derrick [Adams] and Hank [Willis Thomas]. It starts to make sense when you start thinking about those particular artists, and who they are, and not only their trajectories, but their practices and how they navigate the world within their own communities. You see it in the work, and I think that's a really beautiful thing, to start to align and build that conversation within each painting.

WILEY: Well, I think the pairing of your material practice with your subject is something that is the constant concern of every artist for time immemorial. One of the things that I really particularly love about your work has to do with that sense in which the subject or the person in the painting exists in direct relationship to paint or canvas or jewels or the televisual or the photographic. Some of the early work that I remember, back when we were both students at Yale, had to do with you, yourself the subject of the work, and those works became much more about shape-shifting, and about exploring the contours of the self by virtue of certain types that exist in the culture.

THOMAS: And performativity in those spaces, trying to understand that, those stereotypical notions that are put on you, like, "What is that really? What does it really mean? They're saying this, but I don't really know what that means." To understand that, I felt like I had to put myself in these positions to really comprehend what those definitions were.

WILEY: That's something I think you and I have in common in many ways, is that sense that we need a sharp white wall to throw ourselves up against in order to know what the full impact or the full content of the identity is. It's almost like the way that you see small children testing who they are, how strong their legs are, how they can dance out in the world, and slowly getting a sense of self-confidence. Undergirding so much of the heroism

many people see in your work, and I suspect mine, has to do with a deep insecurity about who I am and how I'm seen and, "Am I doing it right?" and "Do they really see me?" One of the things I wanted to talk to you about was not necessarily the chest-beating, the opulence of it, but sometimes I know I'm doing something really good and impactful when it scares me, when I don't feel secure, when I don't feel like, "I've got this."

THOMAS: I always talk about that when I teach students. They always ask, "How do you know?" It's always the underlying question: "How do I know when it's good?" I say, "Because it scares you." [*both laugh*] It's not just this overwhelming physical and spiritual thing; it's almost to the level of embarrassing yourself.

WILEY: Is there a limit?

THOMAS: No, there's no limit, because where you're at that position, where you're at that crossroad, you want to put it out in the world, but you're afraid to. It's insatiable but it's frightening. It's always these polar opposites and it's this visceral feeling of, "I may fail, but I'm going to do it anyway." That's the point where you know you're doing something great without knowing. You're taking that chance and the risk to push it forward even though it's challenging and mystical, because you don't know, and that's the place when the ingenious or the power or something shifts. We're always looking for an answer, and unfortunately the reason why we need creativity and theories and thoughts and all these isms is because we don't know. It's the search, the discovery, and as an artist, that's what excites me. As I shift through the practices of my work and ideas and concepts, I'm always searching for my own answers, because I don't know and it's frightening. I'm like, "I'm going to do it anyway. I'm going put it out there and I'm going to have these challenges presented, so that hopefully the answers can come from the viewer," because I don't always want to complete the sentence, and nor should we as artists.

I think that shift in your work, for me, of when you decided to work with women, was that. It was, "You know what, I'm going to do something that is completely unexpected, and allow myself this new realm of seeing and a new sense of power for a particular platform of people that may not be expected of me." That's what was exciting for me with you working with women, because there was this expectability of a sense of the black male, and I think when you enter into that realm of using the black female, it's like, "Okay, now there's this play that's happening."

WILEY: Right. For me, it was always that I number one, was dealing with my own sexual orientation and my own set of desires about what I wanted to see in a painting. The erotic and the art historical imagination is something that gets very little play when people talk about my work, and when they rarely do, they try to problematize it. I think that's one of the most interesting things about the work, that it's been sort of constructed from a point of view of the non-heterosexual, black male, American gaze. Then to move out into either the depiction of other genders or other nationalities or other spaces requires a type of empathy. The empathetic gaze is something that can at once be really exciting, because it throws you off of your balance and allows you to shake things up and see things from other perspectives, but it also institutes a kind of doubt from not having this be your own personal experience. I'll project that out into experiences such as going into the state of Israel, and I started to create these bodies of work that really investigated cultures where I don't have uncontested access to their cultural and aesthetic tradition. By doing so I was pointing very much to who they are, but also pointing back to a very American tradition of going out world.

THOMAS: And how we see them.

WILEY: That's right. And then who was it really about? It's a hall of mirrors in the end. This type of looking, this type of voyage, this type of empathy that one needs to have when looking at others and expecting some sort of art object to be coming out of it, is something that I see very strongly in the work that you did with women, but strangely enough I see it with your mother. There's this type of intimacy and distance at once. Much of the writing about that body of work has a lot to do with the intimacy between you and your mother. But I think I see a type of artifice, I see a type of performance there and the trappings of the wigs and the makeup. It's like, "Where is she? Where are you?" The question I always wanted to ask was, is that the point? Is it a dance about how you come to terms with intimacy and the mother-daughter relationship? Is it about her at all? Is it about the material practice of painting and her as a type of muse? What is it?

THOMAS: I think it is all of those things, but more importantly, it is about me. It's about a discovery and search of who I am and who I am to become, and looking at my mother, that sense of validation, and gaining that sense of agency, of self.

WILEY: That's fascinating. So you're using your mother as a rubric through which you create a kind of self-portraiture.

THOMAS: Absolutely, and thinking of notions of Lacan philosophy. The mirror, the sense of validation of who you are, is through how others see you. Therefore if I'm looking at my mother, and I'm supposed to be, I'm from this cloth, and so how do I become the person that I am if I don't look at where I came from? I think it had to do with, going back to what you were talking about in reference to sexuality, really trying to understand my own sexuality through how I see her. Because as a woman in the world, who am I supposed to be? What sort of foundations or footsteps am I supposed to walk within from her to become the person she perceives me to be, I want to be, I'm supposed to be? All of these things in the world that are put upon you.

WILEY: Which brings me to [W. E. B.] Du Bois. You were talking about Lacan, the Story of the Eye draws a strong analogy there as well, but I think this sense of the double consciousness, the idea that the Negro self, the then-Negro self, can never access itself authentically, it has to go through, "Well, what do white people or the dominant society think of me?" Then you translate it into the way I think, the way I dress, the way I make love, the way I self-analyze.

THOMAS: I think you did that early in your career. You tapped into that, the notions of who you are, how you are perceived. I had a conversation with a friend before about Du Bois, and the notion of double consciousness as performativity within blackness, of how we're always performing.

WILEY: Black people get this without any degrees. Black people get this sense of code-switching, this sense of being one way in this room and one way in another. My mother introduced to me as a child the world of language, the way in which translation can be a system by which you can understand others. She was studying linguistics back in the 1970s, late '60s, when Ebonics was being constructed, and so she was very familiar with Western African language systems and trying to figure out how black people in America spoke as opposed to Western Standard English. What she found was that you can communicate some of the highest aspects astrophysics in Ebonics, but at the same time there are certain features within each of these language systems that are so unique to their experiences that they give you the contour or essence of something within their cultural understanding. Time, for example. The signature for time in Black American English is very unique, and it's an active sense of time, it's being within time. It's almost the way that people create jazz write music and perform music at once. The way that she said it, back then in American Standard English, was, "You've had that dress for a very long time," and black people would say, "You been had that dress," to have and to be at once. It's a major revolution in terms of language structure. In art there has to be something there, that crossroads at which people deal with the known and the unknown world, being and thinking about it, and again it comes back to that type of knowledge, that bedrock knowledge, that all black people—and I hate to create these broad sweeping categories, but it's something I feel on a very gut level—the music we listen to, the food we cook, the movement and sway of a mother's hips when she carries her child, which then gets imparted into the way she or he moves in the world, improvisation is in there. And improvisation is the moment that inspired this body of work.

THOMAS: What's next for you after this? And I remember after you brought this to each of us, I wondered why you felt very strongly, one, to use your artist friends, and two, how did you begin to select the specific artists friends that are in each painting?

WILEY: A lot of them are friends, and a lot of them are heroes, and a lot of them are both. What happens is you try to figure out who's in town, and so what you're looking at is a sort of indexical diary of my New York life, but then you also try to figure out what's impossible. There were certain artists that are known recluses who you want to go to anyway, and I had this idea of creating a type of wish list of possibilities. I thought to myself, "If you really take this project seriously, you should try to move in there for the jugular, and try to get the artists that make the most sense of a grouping. Does the group speak to itself?" Much like when you organize an exhibition of paintings, trying to figure out which painting hangs next to the other. It's not about one individual artist in the show; it's about how they all shine and gleam together. The group of artists that you see in this exhibition is not the entire list of artists that were asked or photographed. I consider this to be an ongoing process that necessarily must exist in an institution, one much larger than this gallery under its first iteration. But it's a provocation, it's the first spark of a fire that I think is going to be quite profound.

You know how each idea leads to another? This exhibition has been incredibly fruitful and fertile, and I can't tell you what my next step is, to answer your first question, because my job is to surprise myself and, to get back to one of our earlier conversation points, to make myself uncomfortable, to push myself into unknown territory, to give myself a moment to pull it together, have my little breakdowns behind closed doors, me and my boo telling me, "It's going be okay."