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Kehinde Wiley Paints The Formative Black Artists Of Our Time

KEHINDE WILEY COURTESY: SEAN KELLY NEW YORK
Kehinde Wiley, “Portrait of Mickalene Thomas, the Coyote,” 2017, oil on canvas

In mythology, the trickster is an archetypal character that takes many shapes — animal, human and divine — distinguished by intellect, cunning, a penchant for mischief, and an aversion to rules, lines and norms of all kinds. In African folklore, the trickster takes shape through Anansi the spider; in America, Brer Rabbit; in France, Reynard the Fox. In pop culture, you’ll recognize trickster tendencies in characters like Bugs Bunny, Felix the Cat and Bart Simpson.

In each case, the character uses questionably moral tactics and a generous helping of wit to subvert the natural order of things, tip-toeing over boundaries and shaking up power dynamics to turn the world topsy-turvy. They are clowns, jokers and provocateurs, able to outsmart traditional hero archetypes through their ability to camouflage, think on their toes and step outside traditional moral frameworks.

Outside the realm of myth, in contemporary life, artists often embody the trickster ethos, pushing buttons and testing limits in a world that, quite often, doesn't quite know what to make of them. This was, at least, painter Kehinde Wiley's understanding when he embarked upon his most recent painting series "Trickster."
"Artists are those people who sit at the intersection between the known and unknown, the rational and irrational, coming to terms with some of the confusing histories we as artists deal with," Wiley said in an interview with HuffPost. "The trickster position can serve quite well especially in times like this."

KEHINDE WILEY COURTESY: SEAN KELLY NEW YORK
Kehinde Wiley, "Portrait of Rashid Johnson and Sanford Biggers, The Ambassadors," 2017, oil on canvas

The series consists of 11 paintings, all depicting prominent black contemporary artists who, according to Wiley, embody this trickster mode of being. There's Mickalene Thomas, known for her bedazzled portraits of glamorous black women, as the Coyote, portrayed with feathers in her hair and a hand on her heart. And Nick Cave, whose boisterous "sound suit" sculptures are ecstatic cyclones of matter and sound, assumes the role of famous portrait subject Nadezhda Polovtseva, wearing a beanie and high-top sneakers while beckoning to the viewer with an umbrella.

Wiley described his subjects as his heroes and peers. "These are people I surround myself with in New York," he said. "Who come to my studio, who share my ideas. The people I looked up to as a student, as a budding artist many years ago." He savors that intersectionality, using his brush to peer into art's past, present and future.

Since 2001, Brooklyn-based Wiley has painted grandiose, large-scale portraits of black subjects, injecting them into the largely pasty halls of Western portraiture. Riffing off traditional Renaissance imagery canonizing kings, nobles and saints, Wiley gives his contemporary subjects a hybrid sense of regal aplomb and swagger, a nod to the performative gestures that communicate youth, blackness and contemporary, image-saturated life.

Wiley's painted figures are most often swallowed up by his sumptuous textile backdrops that creep meanderingly into the foreground. The serpentine vines and decorative flourishes usher Wiley's typical human subjects — whom he plucks from sidewalks and shopping malls — out of their previous existences into the

realm of paint, timeless and eternal. Over the past 15 years, Wiley's artistic style has become immediately recognizable, if not iconic. And yet the artist believes his much of his practice remains, to a degree, misinterpreted.

"So much of my work has not been fully investigated," he said. "Many people see my early work simply as portraits of black and brown people. Really, it's an investigation of how we see those people and how they have been perceived over time. The performance of black American identity feels very different from actually living in a black body. There's a dissonance between inside and outside."

KEHINDE WILEY COURTESY: SEAN KELLY NEW YORK
Kehinde Wiley, "Portrait of Yinka Shonibare, Reynard the Fox," 2017, oil on canvas

Wiley perceives his current series, too, as an exercise in careful looking. "It's about analyzing my position as an artist within a broader community," he said. "About an artist's relationship to history and time. It's a portrait of a group of people coming to terms with what it means to be an artist in the 21st century dealing with blackness, with individuality."

Those familiar with Wiley's work might do a double take upon seeing this new work, which does away with lavish, cloth-like backdrops in favor of phantasmagorical scenarios. "This show is about me being uncomfortable as an artist," he said. "When I'm at my best, I'm trying to destabilize myself and figure out new ways of approaching art as a provocation. I think I am at my best, when I push myself into a place where I don't have all the answers. Where I really rely on instinct."

While Wiley's earlier works have drawn comparisons to Barkley L. Hendricks, Jeff Koons and David Salle, this current series calls upon the spirit of Francisco de Goya, specifically, his "Black Paintings," made toward the end of the artist's life, between 1819 and 1823. The most famed work in the series, "Saturn Devouring His Son," depicts Saturn as a crazed old man — bearded, nude, eyes like black beads — biting into his child's body like a cut of meat.
"I'm interested in blackness as a space of the irrational," Wiley said. "I love the idea of starting with darkness but ending up with a show that is decidedly about light. There is a very self-conscious concentration on the

presence and absence of light — tying into these notions of good and evil, known and unknown. There is a delicate balance that comes out of such a simple set of metaphors."

The trickster, like Goya, alternates methodically between these notions of light and darkness. Yet the practice extends beyond the metaphorical and into all too real life when black artists navigate the hegemonic and largely white institutions of the art world. "The trickster is an expert at code switching, at passing and posing," Wiley said.
"In African-American folklore, the trickster stands in direct relation to secrecy," he continued. "How do you keep your home and humanity safe from the dominant culture? How do you talk about things and keep them away from the master? These were things talked about in slavery that morphed into the blues, then jazz, then hip-hop. It informs the way young people fashion their identities."

Just as a young man hanging out at the mall performs black masculinity through his look, walk and speech, artists like Kerry James Marshall, Wangechi Mutu and Yinka Shonibare are cast in the role of "black contemporary artist" — a role they pilot with dexterity and finesse. "It's about being able to play inside of it and outside of the race narrative at once," Wiley said. "It's difficult to get right."

KEHINDE WILEY COURTESY: SEAN KELLY NEW YORK
Kehinde Wiley, "Portrait of Kerry James Marshall, La Lectura," 2017, oil on canvas

Wiley's paintings are visual folktales littered with clues — a rifle, a leather-bound book, a slew of dead foxes — that, like Goya's 19th-century canvases, reject certain understanding. Instead, they place viewers in an indeterminate space of in-between: between past and present, dark and light, classical and contemporary, reality and myth.

"I am painting with this romantic idea that portraiture tells some kind of essential truth about the subject," Wiley said, "but also with this modern suspicion of any representation to tell the truth about an individual. It's about being in love with a tradition that is inclusive of so many possibilities, but still contains so much absence."

Indeed, portraiture has historically served aristocrats and elites, leading critics like Vinson Cunningham to question whether such a medium can ever transcend its chronicled prejudice. "How can Renaissance-descended portraiture, developed in order to magnify dynastic princes and the keepers of great fortunes, adequately convey twenty-first-century realities or work as an agent of political liberation?" he wrote earlier this year.

Yet what Cunningham views as painting's weakness, Wiley sees as its strength. "Any writer or artist or thinker must have a set of limitations from which to push off from," he said. "By virtue of its familiarity it can offer surprise." And it does. With each subsequent series and show, Wiley stretches the understanding of what shape a portrait can take, who the art establishment serves, what the next generation of great American artists has in store.

“When I have exhibitions, the people who don’t belong to the typical museum demographic show up,” Wiley said. “People view themselves within the rubric of possibility.” The artist himself had a similar experience back in the day, upon seeing Kerry James Marshall’s portraits flourishing, black American life at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The works left him “thunderstruck.”

Today, Wiley refers to Marshall as “a hero who has, in an improbable way, become a friend.” His smiling face appears three times over Wiley’s “Portrait of Kerry James Marshall, La Lectura.” Seated amidst a dim, rocky cave, Marshall assumes the roles of both student and teacher, directing the viewer’s attention to a large book in his lap, whose insides remain indecipherable. His grin is illuminated with wisdom, kindness and a glint of mischief, leaving the viewer to question what comes next.

KEHINDE WILEY COURTESY: SEAN KELLY NEW YORK
Kehinde Wiley, “Portrait of Wangechi Mutu, Mamiwata,” 2017, oil on canvas