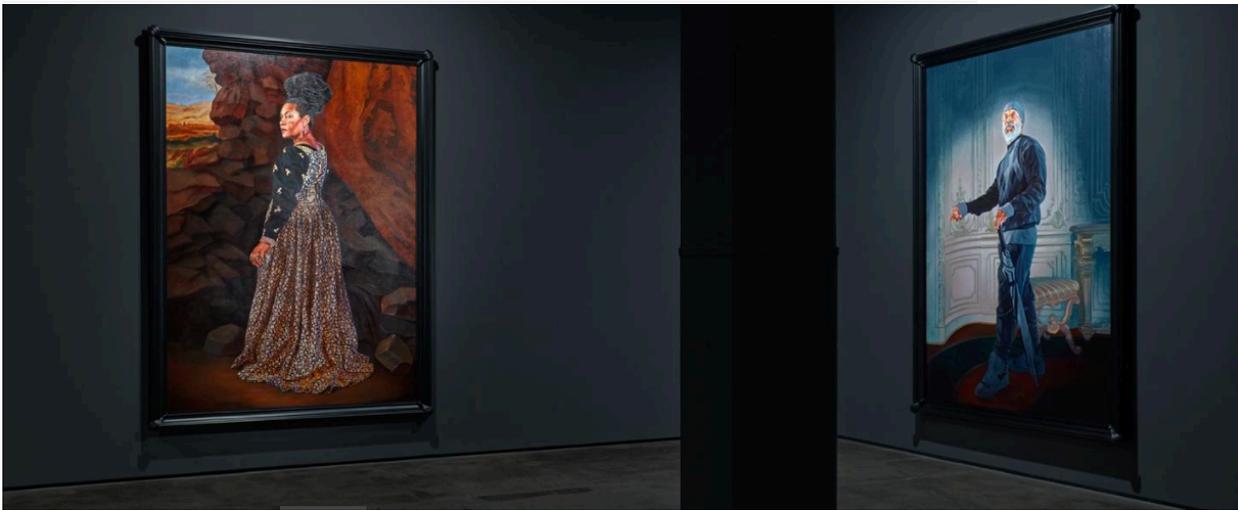


# SEAN KELLY

Bruney, Gabrielle. "All Hail Kehinde Wiley's Portraits of Art Royalty," *Creators*, June 19, 2017.

## Creators

### All Hail Kehinde Wiley's Portraits of Black Art Royalty



An artist famous for painting everyday black people turns to new models—his art world peers.

Kehinde Wiley is one of the best-known artists of his generation. His paintings hang on the walls of the Brooklyn Museum and on the walls of the Lyons' home on Empire. His juxtapositions of contemporary black figures with poses and settings from traditional Western portraiture are instantly recognizable: Wiley has created his own visual language of black bodies surrounded by bright florals or inserted into 18th-century military scenes. But for his latest show, *Trickster*, at New York's Sean Kelly Gallery, Wiley breaks from this vernacular by painting an entirely new kind of model—his black art world peers.

"I try to choose relatively uncelebrated people in anonymous environments, and I try to create a sense of dissonance between the historical understanding of portraiture and this new space where we're filling a gap," Wiley tells *Creators* of his signature works. But, he says, "When working with peers and heroes in a show like this, the dynamic is much more akin to religious painting."

Accordingly, for these new portraits Wiley eschews the colorful floral backgrounds that have been among his trademarks. Instead, his famous sitters—who include Kerry James Marshall, Carrie Mae Weems, Mickalene Thomas, and Yinka Shonibare—are posed against somber, even foreboding scenes ripped from Goya's *Black Paintings*. For years, Wiley has depicted everyday black people in the most celebratory ways possible. But when painting some of the mostly widely celebrated living black artists, he strikes a more complex tone. During a brief speech to visitors at Sean Kelly, Wiley described wanting his works to capture "a blackness that is neither menacing nor inviting." In a media environment that often veers wildly between depictions of blackness

that would be at home on either *The Cosby Show* or *The Wire*, with little in between, this is a challenging balance to strike.



The title and theme of the exhibit, *Trickster*, are in keeping with this balancing act. Here, Wiley imagines his artist subjects as mythological tricksters. The trickster figure is present throughout global folklore, from Hermes to Anansi, and is neither a benevolent deity nor a strictly malicious player. Instead, they use their cunning to traverse borders that neither gods nor humans dare to cross. Wiley's paintings position black artists in this role—clever and sly, they push boundaries and reveal truths about the world around them.



Wiley is well aware of the dissonance between his work in theory—celebrating the black form, scrambling established art world portraiture hierarchies—and the reality of his paintings as commodities frequently acquired by wealthy white art collectors. "I often see my works in collectors' homes, in these expensive mansions all over the world, and oftentimes [the people in the paintings] are the only black people in the room," he says. "The ironies of creating high-priced luxury goods for wealthy consumers that picture black bodies are not lost on me."



