

With the Same
Loving Hand

Kehinde Wiley

If Michael Jackson was the King of Pop, then Kehinde Wiley is the Prince of Postmodern Pop Portraiture. Indeed, his painting of Michael Jackson astride a white steed riffing on Peter Paul Rubens's portrait of Philip II could be considered a resonant icon for our celebrity-worshipping culture. But Wiley is just as well known for taking more ordinary portrait subjects and placing them in settings redolent of Renaissance splendour. "It's also about drawing attention to a very real, lived present, to people who are oftentimes ignored, people who are diminished into two-dimensional caricatures," the artist tells Elizabeth Fullerton.





COURTESY GALERIE TEMPLON, PARIS AND BRUSSELS. PHOTO: B. NIETUTTI

Previous pages
Saint John the Baptist in the Wilderness (detail), 2013
 Oil on canvas
 143 × 113 cm

This page, above
 Exhibition view, *Lamentation*,
 Petit Palais, Musée des Beaux
 Arts de la Ville de Paris, 2016

Right
 Portrait by Humberto Contreras



Los Angeles-born Wiley has garnered fame for his grandiose, exuberant portraits of young brawny African-American men adopting the heroic poses found in Renaissance and Baroque masterpieces set against busy floral or patterned backgrounds. Although he has painted portraits of black celebrities—in fact, he has just been commissioned to paint former US President Barack Obama’s official portrait—the artist started out plucking his models from the street and thrusting these ambassadors of hip-hop culture, with their tattoos and baseball caps, into the gilded milieu of European royalty immortalized by the likes of Anthony van Dyck, Titian and Jacques-Louis David.

This power subversion appeals to Wiley, who grew up in the tough LA neighbourhood of South Central, the fifth of six children and second twin to a single mother. Thanks to her resourcefulness and his own resilience, Wiley beat the odds to train at San Francisco Art Institute, followed by Yale.

Since graduating in 2001, Wiley has enjoyed great success, with collectors snapping up his paintings and museums queuing up to offer him exhibitions (his recent two-year retrospective, *A New Republic*, toured seven institutions around America). His work has sometimes divided critics. Detractors say his easy-on-the-eye, near-photorealist portraits can be superficial and formulaic, although Wiley has broadened his subject matter to feature women and subjects from Jamaica to Senegal. He has also branched out into stained glass to create gender-fluid portraits of the Madonna and various saints. Wiley’s disruptive approach to race and gender provokes the viewer into fresh ways of thinking about identity and representation.

This past summer Wiley moved in a new direction with his exhibition of portraits of influential contemporary black artists at Sean Kelley in New York. These new masters are presented in a more contemplative mode, placed in Baroque settings of drapery and grand landscapes. For his latest show at Stephen Friedman in London, he has created a new body of work around the sea and the irrational, including a three-channel film inspired by a trip to Haiti. Between travels to his studios in Senegal, China and the US, Wiley spoke with me about these seascapes and, more broadly, the lure of the Renaissance for a young artist who came from poverty.

There is a rich tradition of maritime painting in Europe. What drew you to the genre? This is something that I’ve always been fascinated with. In America we have Winslow Homer, who popularized representation of the black body and oceans, but I think for many artists marine painting is relegated to the sidelines. More recently I began thinking about the conceptual artist Bas Jan Ader, whose last performance was to jump into a small boat and attempt to sail from New York to Europe. Unfortunately he ended up drowning. So much of what he was playing with was the ocean as this unknowable, profound, unspeakably powerful entity. I’ve also been doing a lot of reading around madness and the irrational, specifically looking at [*Robinson Crusoe* author] Daniel Defoe and his investigation into the ways we categorize madness, and quickly you fall upon this idea of the ship of fools. That adds another interesting layer.

Much of your work has been inspired by old masters. Was this also the case with the seascapes? These paintings are very directly influenced by specific paintings and they’re also strange fusions, as opposed to using one starting point. The major painting in the exhibition is *Ship of Fools*. There’s a Bosch version of it that I’m really moved by, although mine is unique in its own way because we had to restructure it to make it make sense for the twenty-first century. A lot of Bosch’s painting was drawn upon the imagination, whereas I’m actually going out into the world photographing actual people, actual objects, drawing that onto the canvas and then going in with oil paint and underpaint, so it feels unified but in the end it’s a series of moves that become more and more abstracted from the original object. It reminds me a lot of the equestrian paintings I was doing a few years back. When you actually rented horses and had models sitting on them, you quickly realized that Renaissance artists would have made man a lot larger in proportion because it’s the idea that man is more powerful, that we have rational and physical superiority over the natural world.

Film is not your usual medium. How did this project originate? The experience I had in Haiti taught me not only about the difference between a poised and polished beauty but also the ability to recognize absolute grace in sites of trauma. Also, while there I started to pay attention to some of those beautiful handmade boats that you find throughout the coastline that were designed to sail and are not

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run by motor power. There is a kind of poetry in having these incredibly vulnerable boats and these young black men and women who navigate these turbulent seas. So when I was thinking about a show of this magnitude, there was something about the language of those boats that required me to find a very site-specific response.

Your models tend to be mainly young, male and muscular... That’s an understatement! The desire in my work is to have a consumerist 18–35 entertainment demographic, a type of urban virility that’s been fetishized in western culture. There’s a decided self-consciousness about the type of casting found in my work and there’s no difference here, except that the clothing is a bit different.

You’ve tended to paint elaborate backgrounds that envelop the sitters, making an incongruous contrast with their macho poses. The background is a response to a type of black masculinity that’s often defined by hyper-sexuality, a propensity towards sports, antisocial behaviour. There is something poetic to be able to see a black male American or African body juxtaposed with a field of vines and flowers. It’s almost as though the backgrounds were demanding to be represented as well. Their competition for the picture plane exists in direct relationship with my insistence upon the black body being in the forefront within a museum space, that sense that I deserve to be here, that constant fight for presence.



Opposite page
Equestrian Portrait of King Philip II
(Michael Jackson), 2010
Olbricht Collection

This page
*Equestrian Portrait of Isabella
of Bourbon*, 2016
Oil on canvas
300 x 312 cm

What is the appeal to you of the Renaissance, Baroque and Rococo periods? A lot of it comes from growing up extremely poor in South Central LA. There's a decided amount of longing for an impossibly romantic bygone era that's vacuum-sealed from the very difficult reality that I grew up in. It's easier as a young artist to fall in love with the material practice of those regal paintings without necessarily thinking about empire and how those gilded palaces were fashioned upon the back of those black and brown people in some of the most vile situations you can imagine. It's also about drawing attention to a very real, lived present, to people who are oftentimes ignored, people who are diminished into two-dimensional caricatures. I wanted to be able to treat them with the same loving hand, with the same attention to detail that was devoted to some of the most powerful people in European history.

Some of those people are canonized in your stained-glass portraits, shown at the Petit Palais in Paris in 2016. What does that medium bring to your work? The use of stained glass I would almost consider to be painting at its purest, to the extent that sheer light becomes spectacle. The religious pedigree of stained glass obviously adds a certain level of interest for me given that some of my very earliest work was inspired by the Venetian school of religious painting and that sense in which the divine, the body of Christ, is always associated with rapturous light.

What was your thinking behind the monumental scale of those works? There's a lot of chest beating that you see when you're looking at those grand Davids and Ingreses that are in the Louvre. I didn't invent the language but I definitely understood what the political and propagandistic import of the scale was. In a pre-literate society, where first church, then state is commissioning artists to communicate its social and religious values, size matters. I wanted to look at patriarchy, domination and empire as being embodied in that scale question.

Kehinde Wiley's "In Search of the Miraculous" at Stephen Friedman Gallery, London, runs until 27 January.

Opposite page
In Search of the Miraculous, 2017
Film stills

