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Vaughn, Kenya. "Farewell 'Kehinde': 'Transformative' exhibition at SLAM by famed artist ends Sunday." *The St. Louis American*. February 6, 2019.

THE ST. LOUIS AMERICAN

Farewell, 'Kehinde'

'Transformative' exhibition at SLAM by famed artist ends Sunday



This is the final weekend to catch 'Kehinde Wiley: Saint Louis' at Saint Louis Art Museum. The exhibition closes on February 10.

As The Saint Louis Art Museum readies for the end of the "Kehinde Wiley: Saint Louis" exhibition, Renee Franklin, director of audience development for the Saint Louis Art Museum admitted that she had never seen anything like the response it has received over the past three months.

"The museum really hit a home run here," Franklin said of the exhibition, which ends on Sunday, February 10. "From working with Kehinde and thinking it through as to how we could connect with St. Louisans."

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According to Franklin, every single day since it opened in October, the exhibition has received daily traffic from all walks of life. Young people and old people alike. Black people. White people. City people. County people. There were people who saw the exhibition as a good reason to come to the museum for the first time in their lives standing next to people who consider themselves art connoisseurs.

“I’ve been doing this work for the museum for 20 years – and I think we’ve had a lot of successes creating points of entry for diverse communities to embrace the museum, and to think creatively and come to programming,” Franklin said. “But Kehinde, in my opinion, has been transformative.”

Franklin feels it was transformative for the visitor, the subjects of the exhibition and the institution itself by offering the black experience as we see ourselves within a mainstream institution.

“It is all about us, but it is also juxtaposing us in the art world,” Franklin said. It’s showing the absence so that you understand – and you see it big and right before your eyes.”

Curated by Simon Kelly, curator of modern and contemporary art, and Hannah Klemm, assistant curator of modern and contemporary art with research assistance provided by Molly Moog, “Kehinde Wiley: Saint Louis” was Wiley’s first exhibition since painting the official presidential portrait of Barack Obama. He became the first black artist to have a presidential portrait (of the first black president) to hang in the National Portrait Gallery.

The timing of the exhibition was intentional, so that the buzz from painting Obama would spill into his portraits that gave the presidential treatment to residents of North City, Ferguson and other areas in North County by way of grand-scale portraits that were inspired by works in the Saint Louis Art Museum’s permanent collection. It didn’t seem to need it.

“From an organizational standpoint, I think it surprised some people that it has been as powerful and popular as it has been,” Franklin said. “Some people did not expect the exhibit to just explode.”

That’s exactly what happened.

In addition to the exhibition traffic, nearly all of the programming surrounding it were sold-out events.

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Capturing and changing a community

“You have these eight-foot-tall black men and women occupying the walls where there are normally white powerful men,” Franklin said. “So [with this exhibit] we expanded the narrative to include everyone’s story.”

And as the exhibit title states, this story is a St. Louis story.

“Kehinde said that he was most impacted when he walked into a museum and saw himself,” Franklin said. “And I think that is happening to every visitor who is coming into the exhibition. We’ve never had a project like this. It really speaks to St. Louis – it’s really a celebration of St. Louis.”

Nearly a dozen paintings of black men and women, but people of all races have come and connected with “Kehinde Wiley: Saint Louis.” People have been completely engaged with the exhibit – so much so that they have had to reprint the brochure.

“I really believe that art can build bridges and challenge institutional inequities,” Franklin said. “I think that this is an example of a step in the right direction. Now I think the people who make the decisions, they are seeing the impact of including everyone’s story – not just here in St. Louis but across the country. This exhibition, we could take some lessons from it. It hit upon all those things in society that we have to work on.

The story of the artist, the story of the art and the subjects that inspired the work –Franklin saw first-hand in her work with the models that were featured in “Kehinde Wiley: Saint Louis.”

Brincel Kapéli Wiggins Jr., who is seen in Wiley’s “Jacob de Graeff” painting wearing a “Ferguson” ballcap, now wants to travel the country visiting art museums.

“That was never on his radar before,” Franklin said. This experience has changed his life.”

It had a similar effect on Lynette Foote, who was featured with her daughter in Wiley’s “Three Girls In A Wood,” the largest painting in the exhibition.

“I’m grateful that he chose me because there were several people and he only picked a few. And he had such an open spirit,” Foote told *The American* on the eve of the exhibition’s opening. Being a part of the experience not only fostered a new interest in art, but it compelled her to be more open with people in her everyday life and take more initiative when it comes to meeting people and trying new and different things.

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“If it has changed their lives, it’s going to change their kids’ lives,” Franklin said. “This experience doesn’t stop with them.”

There are still a few days to catch the exhibit before it comes down on Sunday.

“It is community from the beginning to the end,” Franklin said. You can’t walk into that exhibition as an African-American and not feel pride and glory and happy all of that.

“Kehinde Wiley: Saint Louis” is currently on display at the Saint Louis Art Museum through February 10, 2019. For more information, visit www.slam.org.