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Alsharif, Mirna. "Obama portrait artist unveils latest work and 'call to arms' in Times Square," *CNN*, September 28, 2019.



The sculpture "Rumors of War" is unveiled in New York City's Times Square on September 27, 2019

Kehinde Wiley, the artist best known for his portrait of former President Barack Obama, unveiled his first monumental public sculpture in Times Square on Friday.

"Rumors of War," Wiley's largest work to date, mimics the equestrian portraiture of Confederate statues such as that of Gen. James Ewell Brown "Jeb" Stuart in Richmond, Virginia, according to a statement from the Times Square Alliance, a nonprofit organization that promotes Times Square.

But this statue's subject is definitely not a Confederate general.

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Members of the Malcom Shabazz High School marching band, from Newark, New Jersey, perform at the the unveiling of artist Kehinde Wiley's sculpture "Rumors of War."

Atop a bronze horse carefully crafted by Wiley sits a young African-American subject with dreadlocks, dressed in a hoodie sweatshirt and jeans torn at the knee. Similarly to Stuart in his statue, the young man is also looking back over his shoulder.



Artist Kehinde Wiley speaks at the unveiling of his new work.

Wiley, a graduate of Yale University's School of Art, spoke at the unveiling, saying the story started with going to Virginia and "seeing the (Confederate) monuments that lined the streets."

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"I'm a black man walking those streets," said Wiley. "I'm looking up at those things that give me a sense of dread and fear. What does that feel like -- physically -- to walk a public space and to have your state, your country, your nation say 'this is what we stand by'? No. We want more, we demand more, we creative people create more. And today, we say yes to something that looks like us, we say yes to inclusivity."

A nationwide debate surrounding whether to memorialize the Confederacy has divided communities across the country, including in North Carolina, Kentucky, and Tennessee.

In 2017, white nationalists marched to protest the removal of a Robert E. Lee statue in Charlottesville, Virginia, where Heather Heyer was killed amid violent clashes between demonstrators.

Wiley told the crowd that "Rumors of War" refers to "a changing of times" and is meant as a "a call to arms" that says "'I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take it anymore. This is my America too.'"

"Rumors of War" will be on display in Times Square until December 1, 2019. It will then "be permanently installed on historic Arthur Ashe Boulevard in Richmond at the entrance to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts", not too far from the Confederate statues that inspired it, according to the Times Square Alliance.

Museum Director, Alex Nyerges, said in a statement that the installation will be "a historic moment" for Richmond and reflect the diversity of the city."

"We hope that the sculpture will encourage public engagement and civic discussion about who is memorialized in our nation and the significance of monuments in the context of American history," said Nyerges.

Wiley, who says he "was trained to paint the body by copying Old Master paintings," is known for his portraits of African-Americans and reinterpretations of classic artworks, according to his website.

"What I choose to do is to take people who happen to look like me -- black and brown people all over the world, increasingly -- and to allow them to occupy that field of power," he told CNN's Christiane Amanpour in 2015.

In 2017, former President Barack Obama chose Wiley to paint his official portrait for the Smithsonian Museum in Washington. The portrait was unveiled at the National Portrait Gallery in 2018, making Wiley the first African-American artist to execute an official presidential portrait for the gallery.