

SEANKELLY

May, Dorian. "Artist in their Studios: Kehinde Wiley." *Vanity Fair*. November 2019.

The image is the cover of the November 2019 issue of Vanity Fair magazine. The central figure is Kehinde Wiley, a Black man, dressed in a full suit of highly detailed, silver, scale-like armor. He stands in a studio setting, holding a sword. Behind him, a woman is also dressed in similar armor. The background is a vibrant, floral pattern. The magazine title 'VANITY FAIR' is printed in large, bold, red letters at the top. Below it, the text 'On Art' is written in a white, cursive font. The main title 'The Portraiture Issue' is prominently displayed in a large, white, serif font. At the bottom, there are several text elements: 'Exclusive! Kehinde WILEY Photograph by CHRISTOPHER STURMAN', 'Plus! ANDY WARHOL The Sargent of the jet set by Natasha Fraser-Cavassoni', 'FREUD AND BACON by Martin Gayford', and 'Featuring GILBERT & GEORGE, JONAS BURGERT, DEREK FORDJOUR, SUSIE BOYT, Sir PETER BLAKE, HANS ULRICH OBRIST, YUKIMASA IDA & WALDEMAR JANUSZCZAK'. At the very bottom, it says 'IN ASSOCIATION WITH CHRISTIE'S'. On the left edge, there is vertical text: 'VANITY FAIR ON ART 2019'.

VANITY FAIR ON ART 2019

NOVEMBER 2019

VANITY FAIR

On Art

The *Portraiture* Issue

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Photograph by
CHRISTOPHER STURMAN

Plus!
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IN ASSOCIATION WITH CHRISTIE'S

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Size always matters,” laughs Kehinde Wiley, although his studio is surprisingly modest given the magnitude of his works and the messages which accompany them.

In the last 48 hours alone, the American artist has been celebrating the opening of his inaugural Senegal Artist in Residence programme with Naomi Campbell and Alicia Keys, then helping Michelle Obama deliver a surprise birthday gift to Barack: a nine-foot portrait of daughters Sasha and Malia. Though he describes the canonisation of Obama as an epic moment, Wiley often declines requests for commissions and has dedicated his career to addressing the absence of black men and women from cultural narratives. His blend of intellect and irony have given birth to the now unmistakable cool, colourful, mostly macho modern master-pieces that invite a deeper dialogue. “My paintings are beautiful on purpose—to sugarcoat a jagged little pill,” he explains.



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Growing up in South Central Los Angeles, one of six children to a single mother who promoted the arts, Wiley recalls wandering around museums and noting that none of the people hanging in the galleries looked like him. By the age of 12, his talent had won him a coveted invitation to an art programme in St. Petersburg. But it was as an artist in residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem that Wiley's now distinctive portrait-making style took shape after stumbling on a discarded New York City mugshot of a black man. "Portraiture in its capital P version is a fine art term, but in a much more philosophical way has to do with how we fashion ourselves and the way we see something of virtue in the world," he says. "A portrait functions as a mirror saying this is what we choose to hold as a portrayal of our better selves."

Wiley considers his body of work to be his own self-portrait; black, gay, rich, poor, invisible and invincible all at once. It was Michael Jackson who roused his interest in the metaphor of armour when he commissioned him to paint what would be the last portrait of the controversial pop icon's life. "Michael spoke about armour that is at once designed to keep something out as much as it is to hold something in, and I think that metaphor gets problematised when thinking about race as well," he says. As America continues to grapple with a climate fuelled by division, Wiley's first monumental public sculpture, Rumorsof War, was installed in Times Square, New York as a counterpoint to the myriad of Confederate sculptures that populate the United States. Wiley does not think that history should be erased. "In the future, I would imagine instead of tear-ing them all down, creating a response that sits across from them... a sort of stare down," he explains. "Instead of censorship, it's about creating a marketplace of ideas—may the best idea win!"