

Galerie Daniel Templon

Paris

KEHINDE WILEY

THE WASHINGTON POST.COM, Oct 4, 2014

Kehinde Wiley explains his 'An Economy of Grace' paintings focusing on black women



Kehinde Wiley paints in his New York Studio. (Jessica Chermayeff/Copyright Show of Force)

By Erin Williams October 4

Over the past decade, artist Kehinde Wiley has created larger-than-life paintings of black men in everyday culture. The Los Angeles native and Yale-educated portrait painter has captured everyone from men on the street to rapper LL Cool J ([whose painting hung](#) in the National Portrait Gallery). . But in 2012, he changed his focus to black women. Wiley recruited women off the streets of New York, draped them in flowing gowns and created the exhibition titled “An Economy of Grace” that was on view at the Sean Kelly Gallery in New York. The process was filmed and made into a documentary of the same name and has garnered recognition from the Toronto Reel Artists Film Festival and South By Southwest Film Festival, where it won the Jury Prize for Best Documentary Short.

We spoke with the 37-year-old artist, who will be presenting his first retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum in 2015, about his decision to focus on women for this project..

The documentary premiered on PBS in September and can now be viewed online at PBS.org.

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Q. Your work has been largely focused on the image of men in modern society, starting with the streets of Harlem and expanding into an international brand. What made you arrive at the idea of creating work that was focused on women?

A. In the end, so much of what I wanted to do was to have a body of work that exhaustively looked at black American notions of masculinity. How we look at black men — how they're perceived in public and private spaces — and to really examine that, going from every possible angle. And so far as women were concerned, I always had been curious about how they would fit into my vocabulary, but I didn't know how to go about [making] a fresh new body of work. I didn't think it was appropriate to thoughtlessly remake the same type of work and just place women in that field. I thought it would be useful to look at the history of how women had been seen in paintings, how they'd been portrayed in paintings, and how specifically a painting made in the 21st century, they both acknowledge and respond and accept and protest to all of those beautiful and terrible things from the past.

Q. In the documentary, we see the women go through a heavily outward transformative process — they wear gowns, headpieces and makeup — not unlike the paintings of women of status in earlier centuries.

A. I really thought it was important to look at the language of power as opposed to our historical painting. But also I think in many ways it was to sort of pay homage to all the myriad black women in my own life. It's amidst the sometimes daunting realities of thinking about my own mother and her story, thinking about my aunts, and sort of the space and the circle of women that surrounded me as a man and paying homage to that in a body of work that used the language and power of dignity but also folds that into a conversation around our historical dignity and how that language has been used and manipulated.

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Q. At the beginning of the documentary, you are discussing the idea of the exotic in everyday culture, and you say “I think that when I watch television or participate in media culture in America, sometimes the way that I’ve seen black people being portrayed in this country feels very strange and exotic, because it has nothing to do with the life that I’ve lived or the people that I’ve known.” In examining the recent events of the death of Mike Brown, a young African American man in Ferguson, Mo., how can your artwork continue to mold the conversation of the image of the modern-day black man?

A. I think it gets to what the heart of what my work is about. So what does it feel like to be in this colored skin that I inhabit every single day? The difference between the reality of that and knowing your own personal history, your own desires and longings and humanity. And then watching in the public sphere your own precepts and thoughts around it — you’re reduced to this charade, this two-dimensional caricature.

The heart of what my work is about is to be able to flesh out the tension and anxieties of life at the intersection between those two places. Not to run away from it but to be able to accept that conflict, and to be able to create images that at once celebrate and not denounce the very confusing state of being. And so far, as the nation is still going through this and coming to grips with the way they view black men in the streets of Ferguson or New York or Los Angeles, it shows that in a very real way whilst we have the first African American president, as we may think gains [are being made], it remains a work in progress.