

# TEMPLON



KEHINDE WILEY

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## Island idyll seen through a fresh lens

*Kehinde Wiley, famous for his painting of Barack Obama, has taken a new path – to Tahiti, writes Gareth Harris*

**A**fter you've painted Barack Obama, what comes next? Kehinde Wiley's career was turbocharged after the Los Angeles-born artist unveiled his portrait of the 44th US president early last year at the National Portrait Gallery, Washington DC. Visitor figures at the gallery jumped to a record high of 2.3m in 2018, helped in no small part by the portraits of Barack and Michelle (Amy Sherald's elegant rendition of the former first lady).

Wiley has since taken a very different path, decamping to Tahiti in the South Pacific. On the island idyll, the artist has immersed himself in the lives and ways of the Mahu, a centuries-old community made up of transgender women (Mahu is the traditional Polynesian classification of people of a third gender). The result is a new series of paintings and a video installation on show at Galerie Templon in Paris, focused on this important indigenous social group.

The Mahu have "existed from time immemorial in the cultures of the Pacific", wrote the Peruvian author Mario Vargas Llosa in *Tate* magazine in 2010. But they were demonised and banned by both Catholic and Protestant missionaries who sought to indoctrinate the native population during the intense period of colonisation in the mid-19th century, Vargas Llosa adds.

Wiley treats the Mahu phenomenon sensitively, cannily combining trans identity with issues such as the legacy of French colonialism – Tahiti became a French colony in 1880 – and the country's highfalutin' tradition of history painting. "France is the seat of power when it comes to grand painting," he says. Jacques-Louis David and Eugène



Staggering: Kehinde Wiley's 'Portrait of Tuatini Manate' (2019)

Delacroix painted monumental, macho battle scenes; this quasi-anthropological display, with its touches of quiet drama, presents France's past through a distinct new lens.

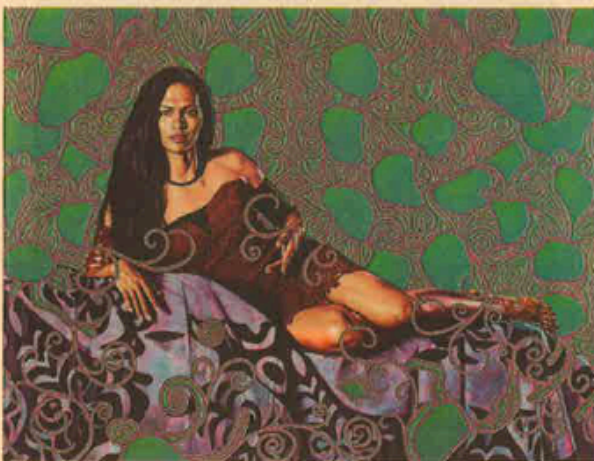
The elephant in the room here is Paul Gauguin, whose reputation today is somewhat tainted because of his depictions of pubescent Polynesian women and girls, which are highly divisive. Wiley is clearly torn over the 19th-century artist's legacy. "I wanted to [both] honour and disrespect him,"

Wiley says. In response, he is showing these magisterial transgender Tahitian women set against lively decorative backgrounds (these backdrops are based on linoleum patterns used to hand-print traditional textiles).

Think of Wiley's works, and images of ennobled urban black youth in *Old Masters* poses spring to mind. Paintings such as "Triple Portrait of Charles I" (2007) are accomplished but his art was in danger of becoming formulaic. Here, Wiley eschews virility. A statuesque showgirl blasts across the canvas in the portrait of Shelby Hunter (2019), a dazzling Mahu woman. Some works are better than others; the "Portrait of Tuatini Manate, II" (2019), an individual who looks both defiant and defenceless, is staggering.

This is no surface treatment of what it means to be part of a transgender community. A tightly edited video installation gives context and insights into their ways of seeing and states of mind. The Mahu are integrated into island society but they still maintain an air of being graceful, slightly tragic outsiders. Wiley hopes that one day the works will be shown in a public institution in Tahiti, a move that would salute these citizens on home ground.

To July 20, [templon.com](http://templon.com)



Kehinde Wiley's 'Portrait of Kea Loha Mahuta, II' (2019)

Diane Arques / ADAGP, Paris, 2019