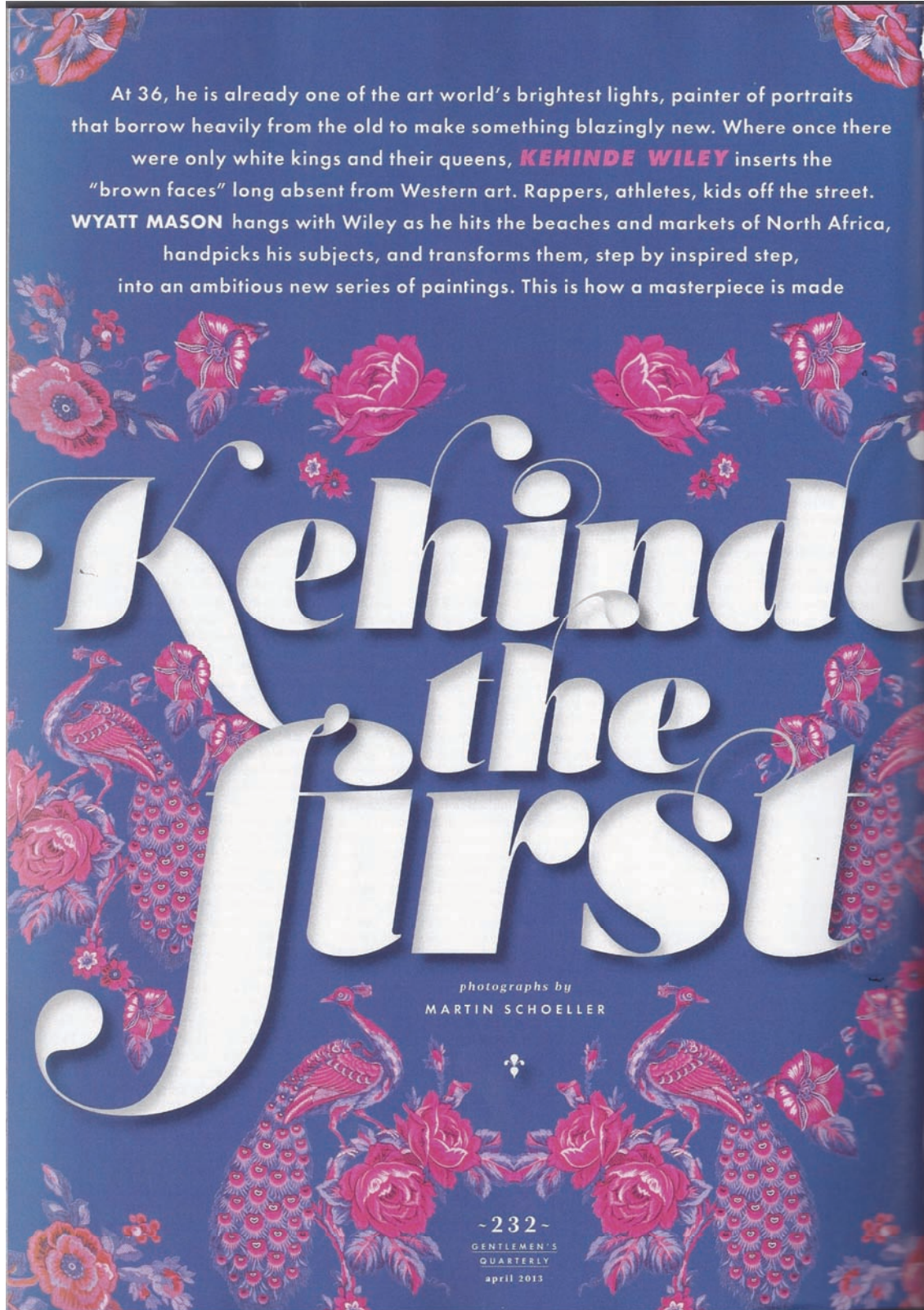


Galerie Daniel Templon

Paris

KEHINDE WILEY

GQ, April 2013



At 36, he is already one of the art world's brightest lights, painter of portraits that borrow heavily from the old to make something blazingly new. Where once there were only white kings and their queens, **KEHINDE WILEY** inserts the "brown faces" long absent from Western art. Rappers, athletes, kids off the street. **WYATT MASON** hangs with Wiley as he hits the beaches and markets of North Africa, handpicks his subjects, and transforms them, step by inspired step, into an ambitious new series of paintings. This is how a masterpiece is made

# Kehinde the First

photographs by  
MARTIN SCHOELLER

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GENTLEMEN'S  
QUARTERLY  
april 2013

# Galerie Daniel Templon

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KEHINDE WILEY

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KEHINDE WILEY  
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**DOWN THE MIDDLE** of this busy African beach, in stupendous summer heat, Kehinde Wiley is striding, a man you couldn't miss: that black guy—which is to say not Arab, which most everyone else here is, in Morocco, just outside Casablanca. He's the fellow over there, in the flashy pink bespoke shirt, with the motley retinue in tow, a gang of seven of which I'm presently one, tied to Wiley as if by invisible strings. In front of him, boys teem across the flat glittering low-tide sands. They're chasing soccer balls, their bodies lean and strong. Most in their teens, they run in and out of play, passing and giving chase. Despite large tortoiseshell aviators, there's no question that Wiley's eyes are on the boys—but not creepily. Professionally. Purposefully.

Wiley, as some of you may know, is an American artist, an unusually successful one. In the decade of his career to date, he's become one of the most sought-after painters in America. Holland Cotter, of *The New York Times*, called Wiley "a history painter, one of the best we have.... He creates history as much as he tells it." Even if you don't know him by name, you've likely glimpsed his grand portraits of hip-hop artists—LL, Ice-T, Biggie. Maybe you've even seen his massive portrait of the King of Pop: the one of MJ in full armor, astride a prancing warhorse. If all this suggests that Wiley, a 36-year-old gay African American man, is court painter to the black celebrariat, that misconception has been useful to promoting his brand, up to a point. More often Wiley's paintings are of people you don't know, people like those he'll meet over the next month in five different African countries—Morocco, Tunisia, Gabon, Congo, and Cameroon—in search of representative men, hundreds he'll photograph all over Africa, returning to his studio in Beijing to paint a wildly ambitious, continuing endeavor that he calls the World Stage. It's why we're on this tourist-free beach outside Casablanca

today: scouting for models who will be part of a show already scheduled for October in Paris—just four months away—a show that will feature paintings of beautiful young men like these.

"That one," Wiley says to a woman close by in his entourage, pointing at a passing boy. "You first," he says, "and then I'll join you."

The young woman at Wiley's side is Arab; her beautiful name is Narrimane. A local fixer, she is there to translate. Dark hair shaggily up and highlighted pale orange, Marlboro red between full, pretty lips, her black tank revealing black bra straps that strain against substantial breasts—no idle detail, given that the female bathers nearby go full burka in the mild surf, baring no more than dark eyes. Alone, Narrimane approaches a boy with a Boogie Board at the verge of the waves. Tall in a black Lycra mock-turtle surf tee, he listens to her Arabic as she gestures at Wiley, standing with arms crossed a ways off, mouth pursed ducklike, a public face, one he seems to adopt in moments of frustration or boredom or deep thought, a mask. The boy listens a beat, shakes his head east-west a few times, and slips away into the water.

Narrimane shrugs, and Wiley turns up-beach toward a group of boys congregated around an unsteady umbrella beneath which some are smoking. Narrimane makes her way over. Two boys, small-bodied in board shorts, greet her.

The Arabic preamble again; Narrimane gesturing to Wiley, who steps now into their midst. Spend an afternoon with Wiley and you'll discover that he's a champion talker. Seems to know something about everything and is interested in everyone, at least for a minute or two. You can get his attention easily, but keeping it's another matter. You'd better be interesting, or he's not interested. And this whole going-through-a-translator thing is clearly crimping his style. So he tries a little English, a little French, one of the languages spoken here by some. Wiley's French is pretty good; the boys' French is not. So as Narrimane continues in Arabic, Wiley shows the boys something he has in his hands: a perfect-bound Kinko's-ish softcover filled with colorful pages—examples of his paintings. As he opens the book, you see that Wiley wears a wedding ring on his left hand. Later, when asked why he, a single gay man, would do this, he tells me it's a bit of stagecraft, something to set the boys at ease. Wiley opens the notebook to a vivid image of a handsome African man in a skintight pale blue Puma athletic shirt, a large lemon yellow number 10 printed on the front. Seen from the waist up, arms comfortably crossed, he stands boldly, chin slightly raised, before an extravagantly patterned background. This is Wiley's signature mode: an almost photo-realistically rendered foreground figure, skin alive with light and shade; a flamboyantly patterned, defiantly colorful background, its repeating pattern's whorls creeping past the foreground figure like vines growing toward sunlight.

Wiley and his entourage search for models on a beach near Casablanca.

"Eto'o!" one of the boys exclaims, of the man in the painting.

"That's right!" Wiley says, delighted. "Of course you know Eto'o!"

"Eto'o?" say some boys nearby, darting over as if a dinner bell's been rung. They clot around Wiley and the first boy, looking at the image of Eto'o. Those of us not as well versed in international soccer heroes as



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painting, and I'll make you live forever." A self-styled Noah in this biblical epic, Wiley has been called by calamity—the world's museums, flooded with whiteness—to bring the art world a salvational brownness. It's an argument he's bet his career on. It's an argument he's winning.



**A PAINTING MIGHT** seem like a quaint kind of immortality in 2013, when more people see, in an afternoon, some trending meme than will see, in a lifetime, a great painting. Even so, Wiley's designs on posterity—enormous ones—are based on the practice of putting faces onto canvases with paint.

Let's look at the Wiley painting that Michael Jackson commissioned. It stands over ten feet tall and portrays Jackson, in full armor, seated on a blue-beribboned warhorse, cherubs hovering above his head and poised to crown him with a wreath of laurels. If this portrait seems like exactly the sort of painting one might expect of a man given to wearing gilded military uniforms as casualwear—in other words, a painting that is bombastic, syrupy, and garish—those adjectives, curiously enough, aren't mine: They're Wiley's. He's used them to describe the work by the painters from whom he frequently draws inspiration—

Baroque Flemish master Peter Paul Rubens; eighteenth-century British artist Thomas Gainsborough; France's court painter to Napoleon, Jacques-Louis David.

"There's a reason for that," says Wiley, "and that has to do with power." The power implicit in a rich person's ability, historically, to advertise wealth through the opulence of his holdings, holdings that included what once was the ultimate in luxury: a portrait of oneself painted by a master. Wiley is an accomplished student of these dynamics and their presence in painting as much as he is a practitioner. He's not mining images originated by others because he can't come up with them himself. Rather, he's curating a conversation with art history. In the background, it's with the painters he loves; in the foreground, it's one about money and power and race.

In 2009, Wiley got word that Michael Jackson was trying to reach him. "I ignored him, because quite honestly I thought it was a prank," Wiley says. They ended up speaking on the phone at length about the commission: "Surprisingly, he was really knowledgeable about art and art history." Although Wiley has said that the painting, which was executed after Jackson's death, draws on five different paintings to form the composition, central to it is the Rubens known as *Philip II on Horseback*. It's almost as I described above, with one major compositional adjustment: Wiley's version, of course, swaps out the Spanish king for the American one. Despite the swap, the gist of the title doesn't change—*Equestrian Portrait of King Philip II*—asking the viewer to consider the pictorial past with which Wiley and subject are engaging. What's become pretty remarkable about Wiley's paintings is that, if you Google the titles of some of the original artworks he's appropriated, what comes up

isn't the original. It's Wiley's. In the Great Art Museum of Googlestan, Wiley has already succeeded in inserting brown faces to such an extent that they often supplant the originals.

His route to success is almost perfectly improbable, a story that has about it the whiff

teenage Moroccan males are may not recognize the name Samuel Eto'o—the Roger Federer of African soccer, all but a secular saint to a billion people.

A little guy with a Mohawk and bulging abs speaks. Narrimane says the boy wants to know if Wiley took the photo.

"Photo?" Wiley says, laughing. A deep, jolly laugh. "No," he says, "it's a painting. I painted this. Say that it's a painting."

Narrimane translates this into Arabic for the boys. Small nods, dense silence. It's not clear if they get what Wiley means. Flipping pages, Wiley listens as the boys name other African footballers there—Eboué! Mensah!—but he also shows them paintings of faces they don't recognize, boys and men with brown faces like theirs.

This is when Wiley says, "I want to paint you, like this. I want you to be my model. Translate, please."

Narrimane does. The bare-chested boy looks at her a beat, his look saying: *You've gotta be kidding.*

Wiley catches the look. He's seen it before.

"You," he points to the boy, "like this," he points to his painting.

Seconds pass; wheels turn; Narrimane reiterates; the boy finally smiles.

In a notebook, Narrimane writes the boy's name in large letters with a Sharpie, his phone number below it. She hands the boy the notebook, tells him to hold it to his chest: a mug-shot pose. One of Wiley's studio assistants, a slight white kid named Zack, steps in and snaps a photograph of boy with notebook. They tell him they'll see him tomorrow.

To what end, this quest? The history of art, Wiley argues, has ignored brown faces, consigning them to tiny parts in the backgrounds: slaves, footmen, fallen combatants. Wiley is aiming to give them their aesthetic due, country by country. "Andy Warhol said that we would all have our fifteen minutes," Wiley has said, with pugilistic bravado. "Fuck the fifteen minutes. I'm going to give you a

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of myth. Born in 1977, the fifth of six children to a single mom living in South Central Los Angeles, Wiley is a twin, five minutes younger than his brother. Wiley's name means just that: second-born of twins. The boys' father was Nigerian, their mother having met him at UCLA. Despite living on welfare, Wiley's mother was able to finish college and go on to earn her master's degree in African linguistics at USC. Taking permanent leave from an architecture program, his father abandoned her, returning to Nigeria before his twins were born. Wiley's mother destroyed her photos of the man, erasing him from their lives as surely as he had erased himself.

Although the household was located in one of America's most brutal '80s neighborhoods—crack was on the rise, gang violence was at an all-time high—the interior of the home was as cultured as the streets around it were dangerous. "A lot of it was my mother having been a linguist," Wiley told me. "She was obsessed with language. Black American vernacular speech and American Standard English. As kids, we were consciously thinking about the code switching that appears between school and home. Much more often, it's just a survival mechanism that occurs with black kids who are bused to a white neighborhood. For us it was a conscious lived experience because of Mom's work. We reveled in it. It taught us that all languages are tools."

Despite her emphasis on education and conversation, Wiley's mother became disenchanted with academic life and opened a junk shop in their area, a shop that Wiley has alternately described

### HOW A WILEY GETS MADE

AS PART OF HIS GLOBE-SPANNING PROJECT, THE WORLD STAGE, WILEY CASTS MODELS OFF THE STREET (OR THE BEACH), WHO ARE THEN PAIRED WITH A MASTERPIECE, POSED, PHOTOGRAPHED, AND PAINTED



as straight out of *Sanford and Son* and a magical space, one filled with old chests, clothing, antiques. He and his siblings would scour the neighborhood for objects they could bring their mother to sell. For her part, she was scrounging for activities and opportunities to keep her kids off those streets. When Wiley and his twin brother,

Omar and Ali Berguen on the beach near Casablanca in July.

Taiwo, were 11, she enrolled them in a small art conservatory that was on the campus of Cal State L.A., where the boys would go on weekends. Taiwo exhibited greater initial talent but lost interest.

At 12, Wiley was sent much farther afield: the Center for U.S./U.S.S.R. Initiatives. During the summer of 1989, Wiley was among fifty American children sent to live in a forest outside Leningrad. They studied Russian language and they made art. Though Wiley's mother couldn't afford the tuition, a grant opened up the world to her son. When he returned from Russia, he was mostly kept on lockdown by his mom inside their home. He stayed safe, worked hard, and excelled, the San Francisco Art Institute leading to graduate school, for painting, at Yale.

While this trajectory took Wiley far from the dangers he grew up with, it didn't lead him to ignore the straits faced by so many other young urban black men. He draws the majority of his subjects from the streets, soliciting the interest of strangers in becoming paintings. That practice began in earnest in Harlem when Wiley was just out of Yale. He received a yearlong residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem. The neighborhood was filled with faces and bodies that spoke to Wiley, and so he talked to them, inviting them back to his studio, where he posed them, shot them, and painted them—the personal process that he's since expanded to global scale.

While Wiley's critics acknowledge his talents and his seriousness, some begrudge him the racial politics of his mission on aesthetic grounds. "I don't think that they're terrible paintings," art critic Ben Davis, a vocal Wiley detractor, told me, "but they don't benefit from close scrutiny. I find them cartoonish and the painting itself flat. It seems very formulaic. If you think of really good portraiture, you get a sense of emotion, paintings that have a spark of individuality where



PAINTING: BEHIND REDDIE; WORK IN PROGRESS; © KEHINDE WILEY

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The day after being handpicked on the beach, Omar and Ali were posed by Wiley and photographed by his right-hand man, Ain Cocke.



The source painting for the Wiley: *Portrait of a Couple* (1610) by an unknown artist.



The final product: *Portrait of a Couple, 1912-1956* (2012) by Kehinde Wiley was unveiled at a show in Paris in October.

something of the sitter is captured. Wiley's formula smothers that. He's releasing product lines. 'Here I am releasing my Ethiopia line, my Israel line.' He's not producing a new critical image of black identity. He's an art director selling a formula, a style, that can be translated into a lot of different mediums."

It's hard not to concede that Wiley's work insulates itself against criticism—who could object to more brown faces in the white-washed art world?—but that isn't to say that his figures stand for nothing. Consider a painting from 2008, which had its first showing the weekend before the presidential election that put Obama in office. Called *The Virgin Martyr St. Cecilia*, it takes its pose from a sculpture known by that name by Stefano Maderno, an Italian of the same era as Rubens. In the original sculpture, Cecilia lies prone and lifeless, depicted at the moment of her death. In his own massive eight-by-nineteen-foot painting of the saint, Wiley replaces her with a young black man wearing an orange hoodie, gray pants with a bright yellow belt, and gray Nikes with a bright yellow swoosh and matching laces. Against a vivid blue background, a flurry of pink and white flowers fall, behind and onto and in front of the young man. As is the face in Maderno's sculpture, his is unseen, facing downward into a crumpled white sheet. He could be sleeping, but the title makes clear he isn't: He's dead. The image brings to mind a gang slaying, or a police shooting, at the moment after the boy's death, memorialized bloodlessly in a rain of flowers.

The first time I saw *The Virgin Martyr St. Cecilia*—and because I'm a white guy from Manhattan—it made me think not of a reality known to me personally but of a fiction beloved by me: *The Wire*. Specifically, the character of Wallace in season one, the corner boy who ends up with a bullet in his chest when he crosses a drug dealer. The truly memorable moment comes afterward, when another character mourns the boy. "Where's Wallace?" he asks the dealer, again and again, knowing that he's the man who's had Wallace killed. It's a powerful scene, but the moment that stays with you isn't the image of Wallace lying dead so much as that of the man who seeks him and who has lost him. In Wiley's painting, here, as it were, is Wallace; and what's more, here's the idea of the innocents who fall. And here, too, is the idea of the artist's attempt to commemorate such losses with images that lodge in the eye long enough that they can reside in the mind, remaining there long enough that they might work their way to the heart.

To put it another way, in *The Virgin Martyr St. Cecilia*, Wiley has given us a painting through which fallen boys live forever by dying forever. He makes it hard to turn away. Or, by being not particularly confrontational, he makes it easy to keep on looking.

**BACK IN CASABLANCA**, the boys aren't turning away.

It's the next day, and they've been told to come to an apartment building in the middle of town. It's here that two dozen of them will be photographed, the hundreds of images carried off to Wiley's Beijing studio with the thousands of others that will be taken during this latest month of travels. For now, though, the courtyard is a clutter of lobster red Pumas and slate gray Nikes, nervous boys tapping their toes. Narrimane appears from upstairs, calls one of the boys' names, hands him a release form, and ushers him away to hoots from the others, who crane their necks to watch him disappear.

I follow the boy upstairs. As he turns to climb to the next landing, the expression on his face says: *It is not unlikely that I am being led to my death.*

Enter the adytum: a narrow hallway, a wall painted a vampiric red. Boys in a line. Here's one from the beach, with braces and a backward ball cap. Here's another, a huge guy whose long little head and its heavy brow give him the face of a killer until he smiles and *poof* is a little kid with eyes a-twinkle. They're all standing slightly asway, release forms in hands, holding them at their edges like wet watercolors they don't want to smudge. There's banter, but they're not looking at one another, not really. They're staring through a double doorway, transfixed. Through it, music is swelling, up-tempo French cabaret stuff. Wiley's dancing to it, after a fashion. He's sporting another pink-and-white-striped bespoke shirt, like the one he was wearing on the beach.

This very morning we were out buying fabric. These fabrics will find their way into the backgrounds of the paintings—Wiley pairs local fabrics from each of the countries in the World Stage with his models, those fabrics being a visual language that speaks to the creativity of the particular country. But some of these fabrics will make it to his Beijing tailor, a man who makes his suits—at least a *hundred* of them—to Wiley's exacting specs that include waistcoats with pockets for watches. The label in all his Beijing-made couture reads Wiley's name in a baroque cursive. "China!" he says of what you can get done there, laughing.

For shoes he's gone with fluorescent yellow trainers that make him look like he's coasting around on huge (continued on page 244)

PORTRAIT OF A COUPLE © KEHINDE WILEY, USED BY PERMISSION

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highlighters, carrying him back and forth across the wooden floor of this big, empty, white-walled, high-ceilinged room. Pausing here, darting there, his hands in constant motion, touching the model, adjusting, pausing at his chin as he stares, considering the fantastic-looking creature before him.

Take Diana Ross's hair from 1973, settle it onto a tall, dark, slender man with a Gilbert-and-Sullivan mustache, a fellow dressed in a T-shirt and red shorts braced by American-flag suspenders, an outfit which might scream midwestern fairgoer but which actually makes him look sultanly, the tee dangling long strands of itself from sleeves and neck, the shorts baggy and droopy in a way that seems to force you to stare at his crotch. This is no fluke: The guy made every stitch he has on. Turns out he's a fashion designer of Moroccan extraction: Amine Bendriouch, proprietor of the label Couture & Bullshit—no, really. His company logo features two bulls standing on either side of the monogrammatic lettering, each holding it with a hoof, each astride a large pile of shit he's just evacuated, head canted just so, as if to say: *Ooops!*

**CRITICS WONDER ABOUT THE EXTENT TO WHICH WILEY'S PAINTINGS ARE PAINTED BY WILEY HIMSELF. WHAT IS NOT HARD IS COPYING SOMEONE ELSE'S STYLE; WHAT IS HARD IS ACHIEVING A STYLE WORTH COPYING.**

We met him last night at a party Wiley and Co. were invited to. It was high in someone's unpromising-looking Casablanca apartment building—there were mutterings, as we rose in the snug, grimly lit elevator, that it had all the ambience of the projects. Inside it was large and lavish and merry and full. We'd been told it belonged to some local lovers of the arts dying to meet Kehinde. Turns out the illness that might have brought on such a death had been improperly diagnosed—they'd been under the impression that Wiley was a notorious American musician.

Wiley's suit was awesome. Words fail your reporter, who remembers it as zebra-striped, which is inaccurate, for it actually featured jagged bursts of black on a white ground. The suit, if it could speak, would say: *Wheeeeeee!* This word would do double duty to describe Wiley in party mode, moving

through the room like a jolly mayor, a politician you could trust, meeting and greeting, laughing and laying on hands, in the loud room, leaning in close to ears and recoiling in laughter that became general as the night wore on. "Their parties go all night," said a woman of improbably long legs who stood with others of her species, one of whom, her cohorts were quick to tell me, was a former Olympic pole-vaulter. Rumors of a meal circulated, for hours, until a lavish spread was served in a small city of crockery, emitting steam and scents that drew the party to the table the way lions rush an elephant.

And it was there, amid such festivities, that we met Bendriouch, who was all animation and noise but now stands, in the daylight of Wiley's lighthouse stare, silent and stock-still. Wiley has just circumnavigated him in a few fleet steps, stopping here to neaten and broaden and sculpt the fabulous touse of his diva hair, to take that mustache of Bendriouch's, to grip it with his fingertips at both its drooping ends simultaneously, twirling them in his fingers as a villain would his own—Wiley producing from that frowning mustache a great dark smile. These intimate manipulations of Bendriouch's person do not faze him.

Wiley is looking at an image of eighteenth-century artist Gabriel-François Doyen's painting of Saint Jerome in a big three-ring binder—its front cover reads "Africa 2012," reference images. From these paintings, most of which hang in the Louvre, Wiley is choosing poses into which he contorts his models. Though Wiley has said that he and his models collaborate on choosing painting and pose, that collaborative dynamic isn't much in evidence today. Wiley just picks a picture, shouts its number to his friend Gandy, sitting gatekeeperly near the threshold of the double doors, noting number and name of the model in a ledger. (Gandy is also responsible for paying the boys the \$50 or \$100 they'll get for the shoot.) In the Doyen, Jerome holds a skull, iconographic trope of Introspective Man Pondering Mortality and Eternity; via Wiley, he will hold a bowl. In the Doyen, Jerome stares down at the skull; via Wiley, he will stare out at us. Like a man directing traffic, Wiley stands off to one side now, out of frame. Pointing, he indicates where the model should look—*eyes up...good*—whether his whole head or only his eyes, Wiley tapping his own chin with his finger, a gesture to which Bendriouch responds, lifting his chin slightly, looking in that direction, there and—*that's it...nice—PAF!*

The strobes flash; the shot is taken.

The shooter of these thousands of images, for years, has been Ain Cocke (rhymes with *pain coke*). Cocke has worked for Wiley for close to a decade, first as a painting assistant and now as Wiley's studio manager in Beijing. A very accomplished painter, Cocke is also far less successful than Wiley, in the market sense—not even in the same conversation. He has collectors, he has a gallery, but he also has a Chinese wife and an attendant appreciation for food and shelter, and so runs that studio in Beijing. An unusual place for Wiley to have a studio, you say, this African-American from South Central? Wiley moved there part-time about six years ago after he began a now ended relationship with a Chinese DJ,

staying on because he likes the distance from the West, the privacy it affords, and doubtless the savings it provides. The Beijing studio remains his principal point of production.

Critics have long wondered about the extent to which Wiley's paintings are painted by Wiley himself. When I asked if I could visit his studio in China to watch him paint, he declined. He welcomes studio visits *qua* visits, and there are snippets of video of him painting on the interwebs—Wiley in headphones, palette and tiny brush in hand, delicately drawing the dark outline of a large eye. Caption: "Man, Alone, Confronting the Muse." This surely isn't inaccurate, at times. But due to high demand for Wileys, a single Wiley can't produce them fast enough, and that's where the assistants take over—though, again, to what degree and at what point it's deliberately difficult to say. Not that this is at all unusual in the history of art. For every Caravaggio, who painted his work himself, soup to nuts, there were ten others—Giotto, Botticelli, Brueghel, David, and on—who had teeming workshops. What is not hard is copying someone else's style; what is hard is achieving a style worth copying.

"The sentiments about authenticity in the public eye," Wiley tells me, with conversational casualness and an air of mild fatigue over having, once again, to explain this, "the discomfort with a large-scale art practice, comes from a myth in an artistic process that never existed. Rubens, Michelangelo: Both had large studios with many assistants. There is a long line of artists who work with other artists to realize a larger vision than is possible with one hand. Education in art history taught me this, as did being steeped in the reality of painting. My interest is in completing an image that is spectacular beyond belief. My fidelity is to the image and the art and not to the bragging rights of making every stroke on every flower. I'm realistic. It's not romantic, but that romance never existed."

Today, in Casablanca, the pair of hands working for Wiley are Cocke's, hands that will return to Beijing to manage the execution of the Paris show's paintings under Wiley's direction. With a nine-inch-long blue slot-head screw tattooed from the top of his shoulder to his biceps, Cocke is arranged behind a tripod that holds a Nikon digital rig. He has the significant job of getting photos that serve as road maps for the paintings, for he and his assistants do no: paint from life, only from photo reference.

"Painting from life is a completely different monster," Wiley says, "which I like. But because I've been painting from photography for so long, I've learned my best moves from photography."

On the LCD of Cocke's camera, the seized images of the boys are striking indeed. Luminous, austere, and they don't. There is, without question, an inscrutable something about them, and, it seems to me, this something is not the pose or the light or the hands, whether Wiley's or Cocke's. It is the boys themselves, a quality they share. They have, after all, been chosen—cast in the role of the Beautiful and the Overlooked.

That quality is something I see all afternoon: a quality of desire, on the part of the boys, both to want, and to not be seen

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KEHINDE WILEY CONTINUED

wanting, to be seen. The biggest hams here, for example, those who bound in from the hallway and hand their form to Gandy and prance puppyishly over to Wiley—clearly enough they want to be seen, even if it's clear that they aren't sure where here is or what seen will mean. They look at me and my camera, hopefully, awkwardly, rather than at Cocks and his, Wiley gently directing them to look where they should.

Spoiler alert: These boys don't become paintings.

Rather, it's the boys who were reluctant to be talked to at the beach, those who were suspicious, or shy, of this black man who was saying he wanted to paint them.

Twenty-nine brown-faced boys that day were made to resemble Napoleon, or Jerome, other names from history, posing, being touched, touching. One boy, Amil, who was all but buried under a beach umbrella when we met him—he would become a painting. Where many of the boys were photographed in their own T-shirts and shorts that afternoon, Amil was dressed up by Wiley in a long kurta, that gownlike shirt worn by men in hot climates in Africa and Asia. This one was designed by Bendriouch, actually, coming from his C&B line. Amil looks awkward and uncertain, standing there in the center of the room as Wiley crouches, flips through his sourcebook, finds what he wants. He shouts out the number to Gandy, rises to his highlighted feet. Steps to a wall to retrieve a curtain rod and the bowl Bendriouch bears, and adjusts the boy—touches his arm, his cheek, his hand—into a transformative pose: Emperor Napoleon by Jacques-Louis David. Wiley tells Amil to lift his chin, just a little. The boy blushes, does.

PAF!

THE NEXT MORNING, we were taken by Mercedes van south into the high desert, into the 100-degree-plus heat of Marrakech, the Ibiza of Africa, some 200 miles from coastal Casablanca. We have come here to shop, or Wiley has, having spent the day traversing the warrenlike lanes of the enormous bazaar, in search of handwoven rugs and huge brass door knockers—and vast golden doors!—with which he would furnish his unfinished estate in Senegal. Five of us—me, Cocks, Gandy, Zack, and novelist Brian Keith Jackson—attempted to keep up with him, but he is tireless, and we are tired.

We'd rolled up, poured out, and headed in to this restaurant. The two white guys in our party in shorts were allowed to enter, whereas the bouncers stopped Gandy and Jackson, saying that they couldn't come in that way. Yeah, the bouncers made the case that the shorts Gandy was wearing were more casual than the ones the white guys were wearing, but that seemed like clear bullshit to your eyewitness. I asked for the manager, told him I worked for a major media organization, and wondered aloud if he'd like me to write a story about these fellows not being allowed in. An empty threat, essentially, but we were given a table straight off.

"Pulling rank!" Wiley said, as we were walked in. And then: "Please don't write about this." And yes, I am now writing about it, as I told him I had to, because it seems like the subject of this ugliness—blacks treated

like shit—is the subject of Wiley's work, a subject that he's both been painting and refusing to paint. This seems to be how Wiley wants it, to find ways of acknowledging the issue without depicting it, of finding a place at the table without making a big commotion about how degrading and soul-killing that process can be.

And, anyway, here we are now—collapsed on cushions, ceilings twenty feet high, tiled in vivid colors, candles flickering madly, igniting the room—eating and drinking like sultans as, yes, belly dancers, some of uncomfortable loveliness, bearing platters of candles balanced on their heads as they writhe, approach us, breasts invitingly bared, beckoning that we thrust paper money deep in their cleavage, which we do, all this after our altercation at the door.

To questions about his process, or about his biography, or his ambitions, Wiley will not so much resist answering as he will show a preference to speak on subjects about which he has greater enthusiasm at that moment—which is pretty much anything else. As a version of MJ's "Billie Jean" pumps through the vast space, Wiley tells me that it sounds like a product of the Muzak corporation of elevator-annoyance fame, noting, with wonder, "You just can't take all the oxygen out of Michael," for even this version has its charms. Caviar is discussed as well, its grades, Wiley's appreciation of domestically sourced sturgeon, not to say his love of fishing, his plans to soon travel to the Rio Negro for peacock bass. ("I've fished everywhere I've traveled.") Foie gras, too, has its conversational moment as it arrives at the table ("organ butter!"), Wiley explaining how easy it is to make at home.

"It is its own heaven," he says of foie gras, more toasts for which arrive. "I have this bible in my house," he says, "*Foie Gras: A Passion*." I confess that I can only imagine that the author of such a book would be insufferable with a title like that—*A Passion!*—someone to stay far away from.

"He's such a faggot," he says, laughing.

A ridiculous flotilla of dishes arrives before us, clattering things so much it looks like a table in the Marrakech market larded with goods for sale. I say so: "I'm looking at everything on this table and thinking: 'No! I won't pay more than forty!'" Wiley laughs his big laugh. I have seen how he loves to bargain, how he goes at it.

"My thought is: Come in hard and leave early," he says. Upon entering a shop piled teeteringly ceilingward with colorful carpets, Wiley would seize on one, hear the price, and shake the seller's hand in a "you've got a deal" mode while naming a number, mid-handshake, well below what the seller had named, guaranteeing a what-the-fuck? reaction from the seller as he is caught in a pantomime of assent to an agreement he didn't agree to.

See Wiley, dressed as he was today in local garb, a pretty cream-colored *shalwar kameez*, complete with matching slippers (and dark aviators; and puffing a cigar), holding the hand of a rug seller with a hideous boil on his ear, one so large it looks like an animal has affixed itself to his head. Imagine the moment when Wiley takes the man's hand and names a number, the seller very, very surprised. PAF!

For it occurred to me, watching, that were I to paint Wiley in the style of Wiley, I would be inclined to choose such a moment: colorful carpets as background, cigar clenched in his teeth, left hand holding a heavy fist of cash—the artist reaching out, taking hold, laying claim.

AFTER ANOTHER WEEK of travel, through Tunisia, we parted ways, Wiley and his entourage rolling on, boarding a plane to Gabon, the next stop on this leg of the World Stage tour, street casting and fabric shopping, rinse and repeat, before heading on to Congo, where shit got crazy. There they were again, in

THERE THEY WERE, IN A TINY VILLAGE IN THE CONGOLESE JUNGLE, AND THE SECRET POLICE SWOOPED DOWN, SEIZED THEM AND THEIR THINGS, TOOK THEM TO SEVERAL BLACK SITES. AND HELD THEM FOR DAYS.

a tiny village in the Congolese jungle, shooting there as they do. And the Congolese secret police swooped down, seized them and their things, took them to several black sites. And held them for days.

"They thought that we were tampering with the democratic elections," Wiley tells me later. "They thought we might be buying votes. It was our fault. We should have known better." In the documentary about their travels, Wiley does not say that Zack was able to call his parents, that they may have known some people with the clout to get them out. I tell him it's curious that these things don't get mentioned. He says he doesn't want to go into that stuff much because "it's a negative way of talking about Africa."

That negativity has no place in Wiley's art, to date. Its message, a positive one, a repetitive one, is as tireless as its maker. Wiley is literally spanning the globe in search of brown faces to paint in every country he can travel to, fish in, shop in, spreading his colorful vision of what inclusiveness looks like, miles to go before he sleeps, whether it's at the Sofitel in Marrakech or under arrest in Congo, where, eventually, a few days in, he and his entourage were released and told to leave the country, immediately.

"It's painful," Wiley told me, over the phone, with the flu, this February. He was speaking not of his arrest but of the process by which he came to select, from the thousands of photos with which he and his team returned from Africa, the models who would become the fifteen paintings that went on display in Paris at the end of October. "There's so much more material than we can actually use. When the trip was over, Ain and I were in Cameroon, and we went down to the bar in the hotel and laid it all out. Laptops. Went through the images together. Culled and culled. Two hours. Culling by



# Galerie Daniel Templon

Paris

## KEHINDE WILEY GQ, April 2013

### KEHINDE WILEY CONTINUED

country. Then so many were left. And from those we picked. It becomes pretty clear."

Wiley traveled more in August, as preparations for the paintings began. By e-mail, Wiley and Cocks decided on sizes for the various paintings, which backgrounds would be paired with which models. In Beijing, Cocks began to prepare the surfaces, having the large custom stretcher bars built and the linen stretched, and the assistants began painting on layers of gesso, which dries and then is sanded smooth and painted on again and sanded down again, to create a surface on which to paint. And the painting began, the painting of the backgrounds, the projecting and tracing of the figures of the boys they photographed. There is Amine, his huge hair, his cocky red shorts. And there is Amil, bearing a bowl. And there are the others, taking form. Wiley's hands, his many hands, laying on the lines and outlines and underpainting as the peaceful proud army of Africans is constituted.

On October 27 in Paris, a party was held at the gallery on Rue Beaubourg, where French collectors and friends came to fete Wiley. Look at the paintings. They have been shipped in from Beijing in rolls, have been restretched on their boards and framed. They are enormous, explosively colorful in this severe white space where they hang. They will be sold, for big numbers. Attempts are made to get some of the boys, the models, visas to fly over and see what they have become. It's

too short notice, though, most don't even have passports, it's impossible. They will not see themselves. Would they see themselves, if they saw these paintings?

How very much I would like to ask the twins, Omar and Ali, the boys pictured on pages 236-237. They were the last models we'd found on that first day on the beach. They were standing together, each the mirror of the other, their tiny matching bodies, their identical, kind eyes. Let's imagine them into this gallery in Paris, passing paintings of brown faces staring proudly down at them until, at last, they stand before themselves, enormous on Wiley's canvas. "Painting has the ability to communicate something about the sitter that gets to his essence," Wiley said to me at that restaurant in Marrakech. Would Omar and Ali—these identical twins who, when each looks at the other understands he is seeing, essentially, himself—would they see, in Wiley's double-portrait, their essences? Or would they see what everyone sees when they look at a Wiley: the familiar patterns, the bright colors, the luminous brown skin, the decorative abundance—features not of faces but of a painting, of a Wiley. What does one see when one sees a Wiley? One sees a Wiley. Which is to say, one sees the things Wiley set out to show you.

WYATT MASON, a contributing writer to The New York Times Magazine, teaches at Bard College.

### ADDITIONAL CREDITS

**Page 80.** Poster-sized print by Mary Maguire, available unframed (18" x 24") for \$60 via [mmlyme@aol.com](http://mmlyme@aol.com)

**Pages 184-185.** 7) From left: JBphoto/Alamy; Yannis Vlamos/GoRunway; Josephine Schiele; courtesy of Michael Allin; Phil Oh. 8) Courtesy of Joe Schildhorn/BFAnc. 13) Condé Nast Archive/Corbis. 14) Runway: Filippo Fior/GoRunway. Street style: Tommy Ton/Trunk Archive (2).

**Pages 194-195.** 21) Clockwise from top right: Julot Bandit; Rick Diamond/Getty Images for BET/Michael Loccisano/Getty Images; Jason Merritt/Getty Images; Ron Galella, Ltd./WireImage/Getty Images; Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images (3, 22) From left: Ahmad Elatab/Splash News; x17 Online. 29) Lauren: Jim Spellman/WireImage/Getty Images. Other photographs, clockwise from Spurr: Courtesy of Steve Eichner/WWD (2); Dario Cantatore/Getty Images for Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week; Matthew Eisner/WireImage/Getty Images; Courtesy of Steve Eichner/WWD; Courtesy of Thomas Iannaccone/WWD. Top, from left: Courtesy of Steve Eichner/WWD; Michael Tran/FilmMagic/Getty Images; Courtesy of Thomas Iannaccone/WWD.

**Page 197.** 35) Courtesy of Hiroyuki Hirai. 37) Sydney Maag. 38) Courtesy of Leather Soul. 47) From left: Yannis Vlamos/GoRunway (4); Filippo Fior/GoRunway.

**Page 204.** 50) From left: Ren Galella/WireImage/Getty Images; Kai Regan/Corbis; J. Vespa/WireImage/Getty Images; KMazur/WireImage/Getty Images; Eamonn McCabe/Redferns/Getty Images; Prince Williams/ATLpics; Britt Chester; Mychal Watts/WireImage/Getty Images.

**Page 216.** 96) Ford: Jason LaVeris/FilmMagic/Getty Images. Other photographs, clockwise from Brady: Jason Kempin/Getty Images; Jeff Vespa/WireImage/Getty Images (2); Tommaso Boddi/WireImage/Getty Images; Charles Eshelman/FilmMagic/Getty Images; Bennett Raglin/WireImage/Getty Images; Dave M. Benet/WireImage/Getty Images; Albert L. Ortega/Getty Images; Gregg DeGuire/WireImage/Getty Images.

**Page 217.** 99) From left: Lambert/Getty Images; Silver Screen Collection/Getty Images; Warner Bros./The Kobal Collection; Everett Collection; H. Armstrong Roberts/ClassStock/Corbis

**Pages 224-225.** From left: 1. Shirt, \$225; Shipley & Halmos. Tie, \$85; Gitman Vintage. Tie bar, \$15; The Tie Bar. Shoes, \$255; Walk-Over. Belt: Ralph Lauren. 2. Shirt, \$255; Band of Outsiders. Loafers, \$440; N.J.C. Made by Hand. 3. Shirt, \$230; Band of Outsiders. Tie, \$15; The Tie Bar. Boots, \$120; Clarks Originals. Canvas belt: vintage. 4. Sneakers, \$45; Keds. Belt: A.P.C.

**Page 226.** From top: 1. Tie, \$175; Charvet. 2. Tie, \$13; Uniqlo. Tie bar, \$15; The Tie Bar. Pocket square: Brunello Cucinelli. 3. Shirt, \$255; Bespoken. Jeans, \$220; Baldwin. Belt: Brunello Cucinelli. 4. Tie bar: The Tie Bar. Belt: Dolce & Gabbana.

**Page 227.** Bottom right, belts from left: 1. Charvet. 2. Gant by Michael Bastian. 3. Thom Browne New York.

**Page 233.** Suit vest and pants: Kehinde's own. White shirt: Brooks Brothers. Tie: Michael Bastian. Watch: Nixon. Rings: Burkindy. Bracelet: Moussa Traore.

**Page 236.** T-shirt and jacket: Kehinde's own. Rings and bracelet: Moussa Traore.

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