

KEHINDE WILEY

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Art

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“I’m trying to imagine a place where the promise of America is lived out.”

Going for baroque

Kehinde Wiley’s brand of hip-hop portraiture blows up at the Brooklyn Museum.
By Paul Laster

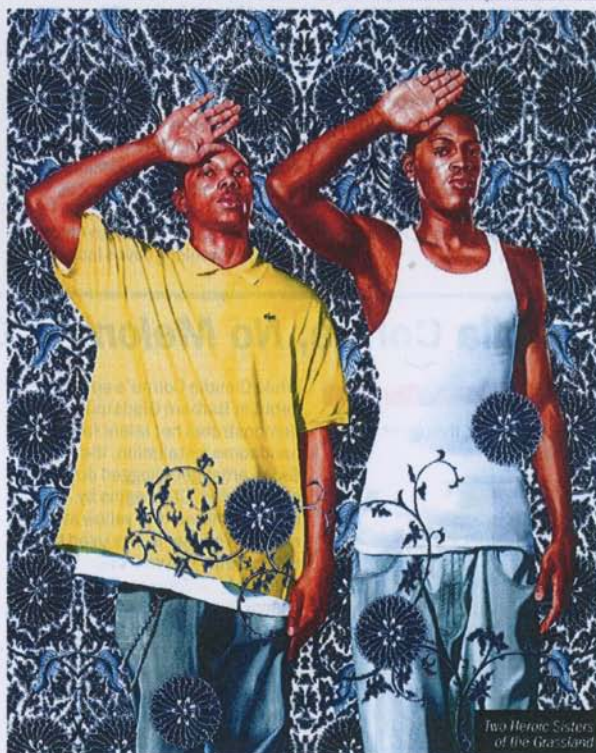
Since 2001, Kehinde Wiley has mixed references to hip-hop with Old Masters portraiture. Wiley’s paintings and sculptures investigate race, power and the politics of representation, to which Wiley adds classical technique and compositional brio. With his first museum survey opening at the Brooklyn Museum, the Los Angeles native offers his thoughts on how the racial divide between art-world elites and the broader art audience impacts appreciation for his work.

What drew you to portraiture?
When I was a kid, I’d go to the Huntington Library and Gardens and see these amazing 18th- and 19th-century British and French portraits. I became fascinated

by what those portraits stood for, and why people like myself were absent.

You often use individuals you find on the street as your models. Are you trying to convince white viewers to see them as ennobled, instead of thinking of them as the usual racial stereotypes?

I don’t think I’m changing anyone’s mind. The people who clutch their pearls and cross the street still clutch their pearls and cross the street. By and large, those same people are my collectors. Often, I’ll go to their homes and find that the only brown or black presence is in a painting; it’s a sort of “guess who’s coming to dinner?” scenario. What excites me, though, is how



Two Heroic Sisters of the Grassland

contemporary art can speak to people who aren’t part of the elite.

Why the title “A New Republic”?
We think of America as a rallying point for people who won’t tolerate limits on their freedom. Ironically, this call to arms has always been made at black people’s expense. Our republic has always been

broken in this respect. I’m trying to imagine a new republic, a place in which the promise of America is lived out, if not in real life, then in this sort of imagined space that in some small way affects the broader trajectory of culture.

Kehinde Wiley opens Fri 20 at the Brooklyn Museum.

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