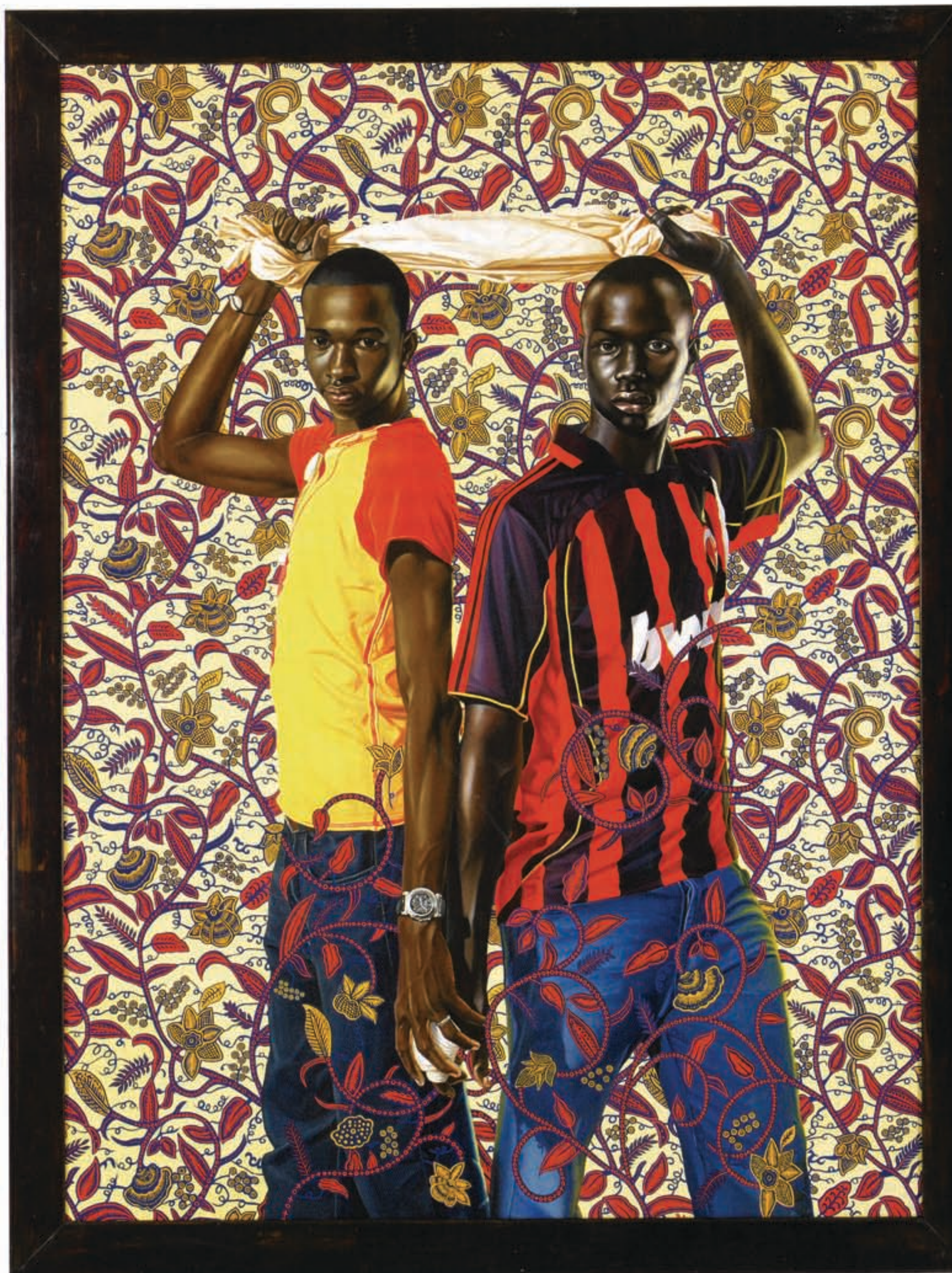


FOCUS



Kehinde Wiley

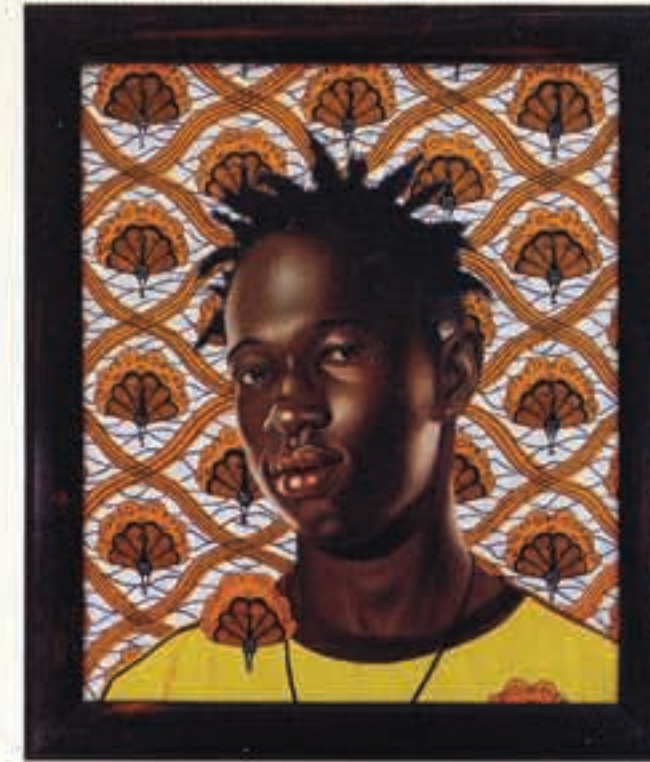
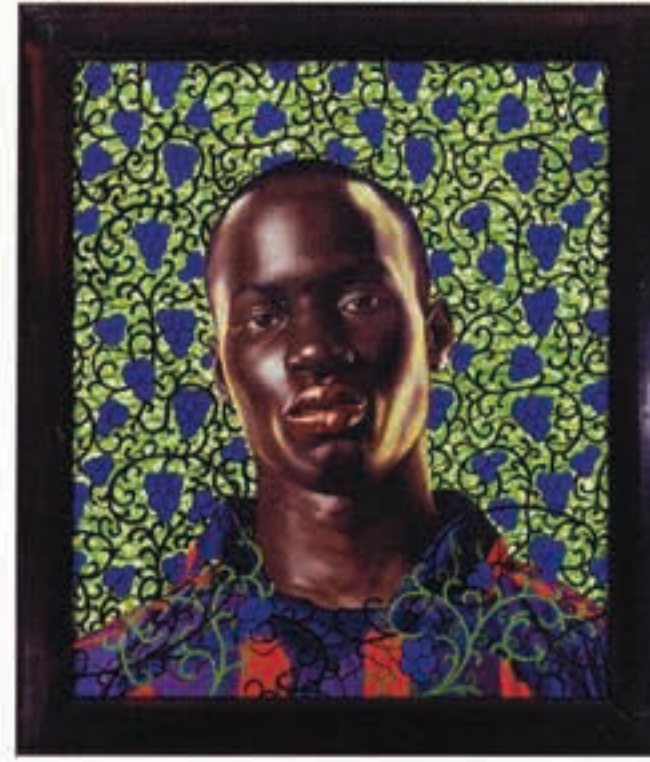
Portraits, patterns and fashion; post-colonialism and mortality
by Jenni Sorkin

Opposite:
Place Soweto
(*National Assembly*)
2008
Oil on canvas
244×183 cm

Below left:
Dogon Couple
2007
Oil on canvas
244×213 cm

Below middle:
Matar Mbaye
2008
Oil on canvas
66×56 cm

Below:
Ibrabima Sacho
2008
Oil on canvas
66×56 cm



Kehinde Wiley's paintings make use of one of the most basic art-historical principles of the medium: the figure/ground relationship. Nearly life-size black male teenagers in hoodies and baggy sportswear are overlaid on richly floral textile motifs, as though the portraiture of Barkley L. Hendricks had been cross-pollinated with Yinka Shonibare's fabric installations. Wiley uses wide grained canvas, which after all is a textile, and dizzying repeated patterns to render a series of divisions: representation vs. non-representation, art vs. craft and European portraiture vs. African printed cloth. This last most closely relates to the artist's immediate subject matter in his recent show at the Studio Museum in Harlem, his personal exploration of West Africa, specifically Lagos (Nigeria) and Dakar (Senegal): sophisticated capital cities known currently for their hot club scenes but historically as hubs for the European slave trade.

Wiley is not the first African-American artist to dream of (and at times romanticize) Africa: Black Power-era artists, many of whom began their careers at the Studio Museum in the 1970s experimented with explicitly African motifs – for example Barbara Chase-Riboud's sculptural fetishes or Ben Jones' fragmented arms and masks. Throughout the 1970s and even into the 1980s African-American art was regularly displayed alongside vernacular African art. The practice dates to prewar Modernism – Pablo Picasso and André Derain's frequent visits to study (and later emulate) vernacular African objects at the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro in *fin-de-siècle* Paris are well documented. On the American side of the ocean, the landmark 'African Negro Art' exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1935, also conspicuously displayed African objects as art works rather than ethnographic artefacts, and was influential to a generation of artists that included Walker Evans, who photographed it extensively.

As with his Modernist predecessors, 19th-century Malian Dogon figures and local, colonial-era nationalist sculptures inspired the poses in Wiley's current paintings. He employs their quirky attributes, as in the painting *Place Soweto* (*National Assembly*) (2008), in which two homeboys, with an intimacy somewhere between friends and lovers, grasp at two ends of a cloth overhead while touching fingers, nearly holding hands. There is a subtle, non-committal homoeroticism implied through the close contact between men and in the consistent substitution of male-male couples in what were originally carved wooden figures, such as *Dogon Couple* (2007), where a stiff arm, miming the stylized nature of the carved wooden figurines, is draped across the shoulders of another man.

But whether the original sculpture inspiring *Place Soweto* ... was made by a European national or as a patriotic gesture recalling the 1976 uprising is anyone's guess, as Wiley's work makes no firm effort to examine the hard issues of post-colonialism, choosing to celebrate, rather uncritically, the export of America's ghetto-fabulous fashions, the styles of dress preferred by young Africans everywhere, even the boy soldiers wielding machetes in Uganda or Sierra Leone. But this is not Wiley's concern. Fashion is youth, his paintings tell us, and youth is only temporary. Thus, Wiley's background vines are spurred on, creeping aggressively out of their flat panels and allowed to thrive unchecked, intruding onto the narrative space.

Such a simple move becomes Wiley's crowning achievement: the ground suggestively covers over his figures as an allusion to their mortality, and with the encroachment comes a host of potentially charged references: the high infection rate of AIDS among African and African-American men, the high rate of violent deaths among the same populations, the fragility of homosexual subcultures and, most crucially (or least, depending on your viewpoint), the death

of portrait painting, in favour of the mutability of cotton cloth and its currency as a portable, populist and utilitarian medium with a specific (colonial) past and continuous present, embedded in trans-national networks of trade – both literal and aesthetic.

Portraiture in the digital age is a funny thing. Wiley's smooth canvases and painstaking erasure of brushwork are surely a nod to Flemish and Northern Renaissance portraiture, to the Memlings, Holbeins, Van Eycks and others known for their peculiar types of hyper-realism. But his young men gleam, their cheekbones and foreheads highlighted by the artificial chiaroscuro endemic to digitally enhanced photographs, from which the artist works. Basking in self-glow, they radiate the wobbly confidence of teenagers mugging for the camera rather than the canvas. Although many of the portraits are named after their subjects – *Matar Mbaye* (2008) or *Ibrabima Sacho* (both 2008), for example – it is hard to deduce differing personas, since there are none of the subtle background clues or personal effects usually found in portraits, and the faces are not offered the detailed enlargement of the frame, as in portrait photography. But this is deliberate, a challenge to the historical hegemony of white portraiture, the idea of what portraiture is, what it can do and what it means. Wiley may be attempting to recoup collectivity through brief attention to the individual, re-envisioned as an archetype: an urban/urbane young man, offered the historical precedent of tribalism, or post-colonialism – either way, subsumed under the rhetoric of struggle – then classified and studied endlessly as an ethnographic Other. Wiley's paintings do not shrink from the prevalence of loss in contemporary black masculinity but instead assert it as a permanent genre still rich with possibilities.