

TEMPLON



KEHINDE WILEY

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INTERVIEW: KEHINDE WILEY

THE BEAUTIFUL AND TERRIBLE

The American artist on Gauguin and France's colonial past on the eve of his show at Galerie Templon, "Tahiti — Kehinde Wiley"



Kehinde Wiley, "The Chancellor Squire on Horseback," 2005. Oil on canvas, 274 x 366 cm (108 x 144 in).



Kehinde Wiley, "Princesses Vierge of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha," 2012. Oil on linen, 243.8 x 183 cm (96 x 72 in).

BY AYMERIC MANTOUX

A STAR OF the Contemporary art scene celebrated for his powerful portrait of Barack Obama last year, Kehinde Wiley is back in Paris, three years after a very strong exhibition at Le Petit Palais. For his new show at Galerie Templon, the African-American artist uses the figure of Gauguin to explore France's colonial past and question our relationship to "otherness," and universality. In this show, he proves he is not only a painter and a portraitist, but also a thinker and a mind-blowing conceptual artist.

The last time we saw your work in Paris was at Le Petit Palais. It seems you are always looking for a confrontation with art history. Why is that?

The Petit Palais project was something very specific. There was a series of large Christ paintings and stained-glass panels that I wanted to explore. Yes, that's something



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that's important to me. In general, what I do is try and take something specific in our history and find some type of relevance to what daily life is for specific individuals. It's important that the subject of

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the paintings are not famous people or particularly renowned people, but everyday people who are minding their own business and trying to get work. I often find them in public spaces, stop them and invite them to be part of my project. That project with Petit Palais was specific to the collection there.

So is your new exhibition with Templon related to Tahiti and French colonial heritage?

Well it's different and it's the same in many ways. It's different, because we're dealing with people who stand outside of our normal binary notions of gender and sexuality, but it's also about many of the same questions, many of the same strategies. I would go into Tahiti, look at the Mahu and I would go into

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Kehinde Wiley, "The World Stage: Haiti Venus at Paphos," 2014. Oil on linen 152.4 x 122 cm (60 x 48 in).



Kehinde Wiley, "The World Stage: Lagos & Dakar, Dogon Couple," 2008. Oil on Canvas 243.8 x 213.4 cm (96 x 84 in).

dance clubs, I would go into certain areas, and stop people on the streets. It was really similar in many ways.

How did you come up with the idea of this project?

What started my desire to do this was my appreciation for Gauguin. Not simply Gauguin, but artists who have that kind of orientalist connection. Some artists like Jean-Léon Gérôme, who represent foreign culture as being exotic, as a place to fantasize, a place to find yourself in flotation. There's also this very European romantic notion of discovering yourself through the representation of bodies of black and bare people in different parts of the world. What I wanted to do in some way, was to pay a kind of homage strangely to those paintings, because I find them deeply problematic, but also very attractive and beautiful.

This duality is at the core of all your work, isn't it?

I often call it the twin desire. It's a desire to at once embrace the father, and also to destroy the father. It sums up all the anxieties that the artists face with regards to art his-



Kehinde Wiley, "The World Stage: Brazil Randerwon Romualdo Cordeiro," 2008. Oil on canvas, 122 x 91.4 cm (48 x 36 in)

tory. But also the ones they have at a more personal level, when looking at art: how do you look at a beautiful and terrible past and think your way out of it, by moving forward as an artist?

Your Mahu project is much more specific than just addressing Gauguin or Tahiti...

It's by reading on Gauguin and Tahiti that I came across this subject. He was very much involved with the Mahu, but then also there has always been kind a slippage of identity; and being seen as one thing and not another. It became such a thing as a metaphor for the way of looking that my works engender in a very symbolic way. So as the work explores the individual, but also the way I see it, the fashioning of identity is something very contingent and very personal, but also public at the same time. The subject matter or the subjectivity of the people in my paintings, regardless of their gender expression, is always something that deeply changes, based on who's looking. What histories are being told, compared? I think that's the fascinating part. No two exhibitions are alike. I'm constantly

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changing positions in the world, changing historical narratives.

Do you believe people in Paris will react more to this work than in New York or Beijing?

Of course. This show is designed specifically to be seen in France. And the type of returns I have confirm that. Like any artist working on a global scale, it's important for me to consider where my work is being seen, and how the viewer's

history is going to affect the way that they see the paintings. How the local history can affect the way they see it. I think that the same paintings in America maybe would have been deeply misunderstood by many. And some of the subtle nuances that are very unique to the French colonial process and empire may be lost on an American audience.

Is it important to you that viewers

understand immediately, or is the fact that they may have to make an effort a part of what you are trying to achieve?

I think the French are probably uniquely touched by that series. First of all the fact that Gauguin is French. But also the fact that the French have evolved in the way they consume culture. It's a very site-specific project. It will be interesting to see how the work is viewed, after the exhibition is fin-

ished, and each and every one of these paintings is scattered around the world in different homes, museums, collections. Each one of my works has a life of its own. It starts in the gallery context, but ultimately they have to live out their own existence in different contexts as well.

— *The exhibition is on view through July 20 at Galerie Templon, 30 rue Beaubourg, Paris (3rd arrondissement).*