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KEHINDE WILEY

PORTFOLIO, juillet 2019

ISSUE 29

JULY 2019

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MPAS AWARDS 2018
LUXURY MEDIA
OF THE YEAR
SILVER

ONE FOR THE BOOKS

CHNG YI TA | LIM TZE PENG | DAVID FONG
LOCAL LITERARY LUMINARIES
DELLEN SOH | TOPI MANNER

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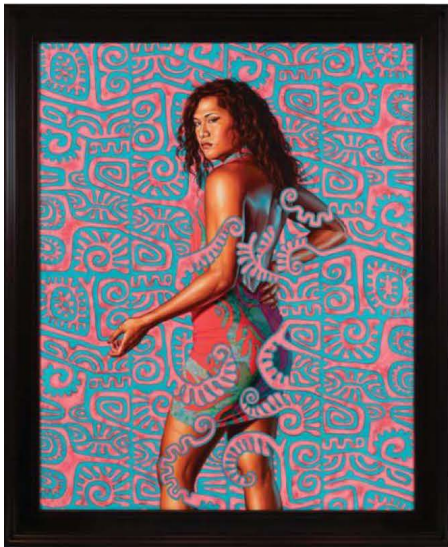
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"PORTRAIT OF KEA TEURU" (2019)



"PORTRAIT OF TUATINI MANATE" (2019)



"PORTRAIT OF SHELBY HUNTER" (2019)

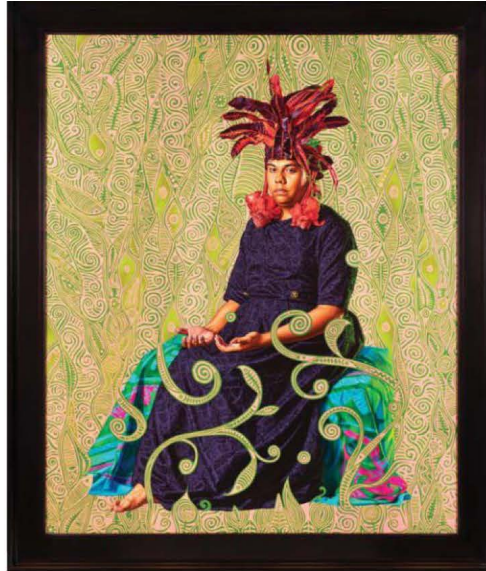
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"PORTRAIT OF MOERAI MATUANI" (2019)

CULTURE

PAINTING BLACK LIVES

KEHINDE WILEY

One of the most renowned portraitists of his generation, Kehinde Wiley is known for combining the present with the past in his canvases of contemporary African Americans in the manner of Old Master paintings

BY Y-JEAN MUN-DELSALLE



"PORTRAIT OF KEA LOHA MAHUTA II" (2019)



"THE SIESTA" (2019)

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From everyday black men and women on the street, to rapper The Notorious B.I.G. and Michael Jackson and former U.S. President Barack Obama, Mr. Kehinde Wiley is celebrated for his colorful, photo-realistic and larger-than-life portraits of young, attractive black and brown bodies who gaze at us with confidence, adopting bold poses that echo saints, heroes and leaders from Western art historical paintings by the likes of Velázquez, Rubens, Titian, Van Dyck, Ingres and Holbein. Replacing depictions of aristocratic Europeans holding symbols of power, wealth and status from past centuries with urban black men, his subjects are clad in contemporary apparel – hooded sweatshirts, sneakers and baseball caps – with glowing skin, head held high in a regal, empowered posture, and set against a backdrop of heavily ornamented patterns of flowers, leaves and vines representing the landscape, which is based on Victorian wallpaper, Baroque textiles or Renaissance tapestries.



Since 2012, Mr. Wiley has added black women to his repertoire, dressing them in flowing, custom-made couture gowns. Looking at how women had been portrayed in the history of art and then responding with a painting made in the 21st century that accepts and objects to the beauty and horror in very white masterpieces from the past, he instills notions of dignity. Over the past 18 years, he has created a body of work that tackles the image of black men and women in modern society, how they are perceived in public and private spheres and black American notions of masculinity and femininity. In his own way, he is correcting the lack of non-white faces in Western museums, where people of color have been historically invisible, typically excluded from representations of power.

In Mr. Wiley's latest solo exhibition at Galerie Templon in Paris, running until July 20, 2019, featuring all new works that he spent two years making, he explores racial and sexual identity and the history of French colonization, going to Tahiti to seek out his models within the Mahu trans community. Considering themselves a third gender between male and female, they were once venerated before being banned by Catholic and Protestant missionaries. Following in the footsteps of Paul Gauguin, who was inspired by traditional Polynesian society, Mr. Wiley reflects on the French artist's troubling way of looking at trans women there, and references and opposes Gauguin's famed yet troubling paintings fraught with historical undercurrents of colonialism and sexual objectification. After studying Gauguin's paintings, Mr. Wiley's sitters, portrayed in a

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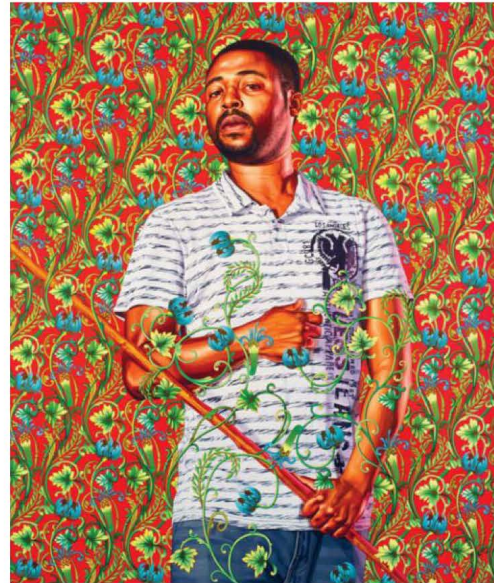
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"CHAD NURSE AS GENERAL JOHN BURGOYNE" (2017)



"PORTRAIT OF JAZON RALPH" (2018)

dozen or so powerful paintings and a video of interviews, chose their own poses and outfits that counter the narrative proposed in a Gauguin. "I am interested in transformation and artifice," Mr. Wiley states. "My newest exhibition will engage with the history of France and its outward-facing relationship to black and brown bodies, specifically relating to sexual proclivity. Gauguin features heavily in the imagination of France and her global interface - with that comes an entire history of complicated gazing. I interrogate, subsume and participate in discourse about Mahu, about France and about the invention of gender."

Sometimes how black people are portrayed by the media - reduced to two-dimensional caricatures - has nothing to do with the life Mr. Wiley has lived, and it delivers a disheartening message to young black citizens. But through his paintings, he brings out the tensions of life, accepts the conflicts and creates images that celebrate the complex, perplexing state of being. "If you look at a still-life painting of flowers or a landscape, and then if I put some nodes on your head, the wires would show electrical energy when you saw a portrait," he says. "That staring into the eyes of another human being means something. I don't know what it means, but my work is about exploring different ways that mean something, whether it be black men's lives, trans women's lives in Tahiti or presidential lives. These are means by which we place ourselves in the shoes of someone else. That's what we as human beings are best at, imagining what it feels like to be that other person, and when you walk through the show, you're feeling what it feels like to be her." In

fact, his entire oeuvre could be considered to be something of a self-portrait, about seeing other people in himself.

When I ask Mr. Wiley why he chooses to place his subjects in a pose and history that is not their own, he replies, "Are they really, though? There's a swagger, a self-empowered knowing that you see in old European paintings, and I love hijacking that language, but that language exists already for many people that I know and love, people who look like me. Many times, I'm able to simply show a type of truth that may not be public but personal, a type of poetry that is true." However, is he paying tribute to or criticizing old Western masterpieces? "You ask me a very important question about my relationship to history, to empire, to conquest, to art history, and I'm at once critical and accepting. It's a beautiful and terrible history. What do I do with it? This new way of thinking about what the past was and how we move forward has to do with practicality. Artists are here to record the stories of our hearts, not our political stories, but rather our interior stories, so we're apolitical. We're looking up and down at the same time, we're saying yes and no at the same time, we're saying "I love Gauguin" but it's (messed) up at the same time. I'm trying to use my life, what I feel, what I like and what I'm drawn to as an indicator of what's important in the world, and if I feel something there, perhaps the audience will feel something as well."

Start in Art

Born in 1977 in South Central Los Angeles, where riots broke out after four white policemen were acquitted in the videotaped beating

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of Rodney King, Mr. Wiley is the son of a Nigerian father whom he never knew as a child and an African-American mother, the fifth of her six children and a twin. They lived off welfare checks and income from his mother's thrift shop on the sidewalk in front of their house, salvaging merchandise from around the neighborhood, before his mother qualified as a teacher. Naturally gifted in art, at age 11, he attended a nonprofit program giving art classes to children, and then studied painting in Russia a year later. After an education at the San Francisco Art Institute and then Yale graduate art school, he gained recognition in the contemporary art scene in the early 2000s with his Hip Hop Honors series on pioneering rappers such as Ice T and LL Cool J.

Following the phenomenal international success of his portrait commission of Obama – as the first African-American artist to paint an official presidential portrait for the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery – the logical next step for Mr. Wiley was to create his own artist residency. Recreating the experience he had had when he first moved to New York in 2001 as an artist-in-residence at Studio Museum in Harlem, he launched Black Rock Senegal last month, a stunning artist residency retreat that he designed with local architect Abib Dejenne in bustling Dakar, set amidst the volcanic rocks by the water's edge – a project five years in the making. After first visiting Senegal when he was 19, he fell in love with the simplicity of the

place and its coastal feel. Now he calls it his part-time home when he's not in his studio in Brooklyn. Artist residences in Africa are rare, so he's working to redress that imbalance. The multidisciplinary residency invites artists for stints of one to three months to make art while experiencing Senegalese culture, providing living and work spaces including an individual studio, a kitchen with a private chef, an infinity pool, a spa and a gym designed for maximum privacy and interaction at the same time.

"Black Rock Senegal came out of a direct need to engage Africa in a much more personal way," Mr. Wiley comments. "I discovered Dakar on a layover in 1997, back when Air Afrique was the sole provider of flights from the West to Nigeria. It was my first visit to Africa and I was immediately enraptured by Senegalese language, food, art, culture and tradition. After years of exploring the continent's many cultures and countries, I had a personal desire to create a workspace in West Africa. As an artist who works in the West, I desired a space of renewal to explore new ideas and to create work outside of a Western context, to create work within the context of my own lineage. My goal is that Black Rock becomes a disease, a cancer that spreads across Africa or this sort of diasporic black experience, whether that be in Venezuela, Colombia, Brazil or Africa. Why not? Enlist new artists and architects, create new spaces, allow people of goodwill to support those institutions and let

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artists go to those places and create great work." At the moment, he is also setting up an art studio in Lagos, Nigeria, built by British-Ghanaian architect David Adjaye.

Mr. Wiley explains his thoughts on black representation in art today: "It's a very exciting time to see African-American, African, Asian, black, brown, female and non-cisgender artists, basically to see old-school patriarchy dismantled in many ways. In the past, it used to be that you had to be a heterosexual white male from Europe, preferably northern Europe, or the Americas to be successful as an artist, and now we're starting to see so many different voices, not just black voices, but Asian, female and queer voices. It's an extraordinary time and I welcome that as a means by which we can start to compare experiences, compare what it feels like to be out alone and invisible for so long. We have so much in common and so much difference as well." 

ICONIC ARTWORKS

"Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps" (2005)

In a nod to Jacques-Louis David's equestrian



portrait of Napoleon Bonaparte crossing the Swiss Alps, Wiley's portrayal of a young Black man mounted on a rearing horse sporting a bandana, camouflage outfit and Timberland boots presents a new brand of portraiture that redefines and asserts Black identity, while interrogating the history of Western painting.

"Princess Victoire of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha" (2012)



Based on a painting by Sir Edwin Landseer, it is part of Wiley's first-ever series devoted to African-American women, marking a departure from his previous subject matter focusing on urban Black men and carving out a legitimate place for them within art history.

"Saint Adelaide" (2014)

Exploring religious iconography, this stained-glass window shows a young Black man in place of Ingres' portrait of the Holy Roman Empress, which was part of the exhibition "Lamentation" featuring a previously unseen collection of 10 monumental works about being powerful in the world. Each subject glows, permitting audiences to witness a state of grace for people who are rarely seen in that way.

