

TEMPLON

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KEHINDE WILEY

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Kehinde Wiley's New Exhibition Is a Chapel of Mourning

"An Archaeology of Silence" opens in San Francisco, after a string of police killings of Black men. Along with powerful art, it offers a respite room to those needing a break.



Kehinde Wiley at "An Archaeology of Silence" at the de Young Museum in San Francisco with his monumental 2022 painting, "Femme piquée par un serpent (Mamadou Gueye)." Works were made in response to the killings of Black men and women — "bodies chopped down," the artist said. This one nods to an 1847 sculpture "Woman Bitten by a Serpent" by Auguste Clésinger.

Ian C. Bates for The New York Times

When Kehinde Wiley's exhibition, "[An Archaeology of Silence](#)," opens in the United States on March 18, the most important room some viewers might enter is one with no artwork at all.

The "respite room" at the de Young Museum in San Francisco will be an area where visitors can take a breath and regain their composure after viewing the display of almost billboard-size paintings and huge sculptures of Black men and women in sometimes crumpled positions — struck down, resting, wounded or dead — in settings that reference iconic Western paintings of religious and mythological subjects.

Among the 25 pieces is "[Reclining Nude in Wooded Setting \(Edidiong Ikobah\)](#)," a painting of a woman in a white tank top, cutoff jean shorts and white sneakers who lies across grassy terrain, her braids bunched atop her head. [One 17.5-foot-tall sculpture](#), titled the same as the exhibition, depicts a limp, shirtless man in jeans and high-tops, draped over a majestic horse. Another sculpture called "The Virgin Martyr Cecilia (Ndey Buri)," shows a lifeless, contorted woman in a miniskirt and sandals lying across the ground.

The show, which debuted last year at the [Venice Biennale](#), has a particular resonance opening in a nation reeling from the latest in a string of police killings of Black men — merely one segment of a long national timeline of brutality against Black and brown people.

Wiley made the pieces, an extension of his body of work called "Down," in the months following the 2020 killing of George Floyd while in police custody. At the time, the artist was waiting out the pandemic at his studio in Dakar, Senegal, and said the pieces were meant to reflect not only American brutality but also the effects of colonialism on Africans. Some of his models were Senegalese men and women whose names appear in parentheses in the titles of the pieces.

"I wanted to create an American story that can be appreciated by all parts of the globe," Wiley said on a recent afternoon in his sprawling Williamsburg, Brooklyn, studio, where various works-in-progress were propped against one long wall. "In America, to be honest, there's a different type of relevance."

Aware of that relevance, the de Young — which, with the Legion of Honor, comprises the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco — has coordinated a multipronged effort that considers the impact the images could have on

viewers. It is an endeavor undertaken by [other museums across the country, too, that have posted content warnings](#) or installed early exits for exhibits deemed potentially upsetting.



Foreground: “Young Tarentine (Mamadou Gueye),” 2021. Background: “Young Tarentine I (Babacar Mané),” 2022, after Alexandre Schoenewerk’s 1871 sculpture. Ian C. Bates for The New York Times

“The U.S. has a special relationship with systemic violence against Black people,” said Abram Jackson, the director of interpretation at the Fine Arts Museums, a permanent position the museum created just last year.

He has sought the input of community groups for many aspects of the exhibition including careful parsing of the text that accompanies the art. With the group’s input, for example, text that had read “Black bodies” was changed to “Black people” and “state-sanctioned violence” was changed to “systemic violence.” The museum is including workshops on grief with its programming. As part of the staff training, the de Young team met with museum security to offer a preview of the renderings so they are emotionally braced once it opens. The museum will offer free admission to the exhibition on several weekends, helped by a \$1 million grant from Google.org, the company’s philanthropic arm.

At the National Gallery of Art, in Washington, D.C., “content advisories” currently accompany the new [Philip Guston exhibition](#), which includes Klan-style figures and was designed to allow visitors to easily bypass controversial pieces. [A lengthy trigger warning](#) appears with the “Howardena Pindell: A New Language” exhibit at Spike Island in Bristol, England, which addresses slavery, violence against Black and Indigenous people and the AIDS pandemic. With instructions titled “Self-Care Practice for Self-Regulation: Body Practice and Self-Soothe,” it suggests that viewers “tap the chest area with your fingers to regulate and calm your mind. Take short breaths through the mouth to feel safe.”

Museums are taking these kinds of approaches as they try to expand their audience, yet worry how that audience will react, said Tom Eccles, the executive director of Bard College’s Center for Curatorial Studies, who calls them a “contemporary response but not a misguided one.”

“Today, we have an expanded notion of harm, and no museum wants to be in the business of creating a context of harm,” he said. “You’re going to get very strong responses from people having experiences that museums are not used to, and how does one accommodate that audience? Museums are literally feeling around in the dark.”



“Morpheus (Ndeye Fatou Mbaye),” 2022. Wiley said his exhibition is about more than death. The bright colors, the flowers, the green vines pushing from the background show nature’s resistance. via Kehinde Wiley and Galerie Templon; Photo by Ugo Carmeni



Installation view, "The Wounded Achilles," 2022, oil on canvas. via Kehinde Wiley and Galerie Templon; Photo by Ugo Carmeni



The exhibition embraces a solemn vibe, almost chapel-like. Foreground, Wiley's bronze, "The Virgin Martyr St. Cecilia," 2021. Works in background include, far right, "Christian Martyr Tarcisius (El Hadji Malick Gueye)," 2022. Ian C. Bates for The New York Times

The exhibition by Wiley, who is best known for [his presidential portrait of Barack Obama for the National Portrait Gallery](#) that [toured America](#) for more than a year, embraces a solemn vibe: dark and almost chapel-like with bright lights on individual pieces. Viewers can fill out response cards to write about the exhibit, which also will have multiple exits for anyone who needs a break.

“We didn’t want this to be a source of entertainment — you know, ‘Let’s go see the Obama painter,’” said Akilah Cadet, the founder of Change Cadet, a diversity and inclusion consulting firm who is part of the group assembled to work with the de Young. “You will be seeing Black death, and it can bring feelings of emotion for you as a white person wherever you are in your journey — and as a Black person in mourning or wherever you are in your journey.”

Just eight models were used for the more than two dozen pieces, building a sense of familiarity for visitors as they pass through the exhibition. When the pieces were shown at the Venice Biennale, some attendees wept and reached out to touch the hands of the sculptures.

“I walked in, and I was truly breathless,” said Darren Walker, the president of the Ford Foundation, who saw the show in Venice.

There, he bumped into Thomas Campbell, the director of the Fine Arts Museums, and the two hatched a plan to bring the exhibition to America, an elaborate and expensive effort considering the size and weight of the pieces. But it was worth it, Walker said.

“For me, it was the treatment of both the dignity and the beauty in the physical bodies represented in these massive bronzes and these large paintings that are often not the way we see dead Black men in American media,” Walker said. “When you think about Tyre Nichols and how we saw the physical destruction of an American — it was so dehumanizing.”

In January, officials in Memphis released footage from police body-worn cameras and surveillance cameras that [captured the horrific police beating](#) of Nichols, who died after being hospitalized.

The way Wiley wants the pieces displayed — a direct spotlight on each with darkness filling the rest of the space — offers a meditation, of sorts, on the deaths of those like Nichols, said Claudia Schmuckli, the show’s curator.

“It forces you in this intimate contemplation of the sculptures,” she said. “This piercing light bathes the bodies and the paintings. It gives them this aura of transcendence, of ecstasy that really transcends their value of sleep or death, which are all vulnerable, vulnerable states. The treatment of light allows us to see them overcome that.”



Foreground: “The Virgin Martyr St. Cecilia,” 2021. Background: “Young Tarentine II (Ndeye Fatou Mbaye),” 2022. Ian C. Bates for The New York Times

The show takes its title from [a book](#) by the French philosopher Michel Foucault, who describes the emergence of a discourse about something that is being societally suppressed.

The exhibition, “shines the light literally and metaphorically on the madness that is systemic racism that is often met with silence,” Schmuckli said.

Officials at the de Young are acquiring two of the sculptures and said they hope the exhibition travels to other U.S. cities, if space and schedules at other museums allow. But they said the show’s American opening at the de Young highlights the Bay Area’s role in global movements, which is often overlooked, even though it is [home of the Black Panther Party](#), started in Oakland in the 1960s. One of its members, 17-year-old Bobby Hutton, [was killed by police there in 1968](#).

More than half a century later, Wiley talked about a lingering sense of “irrational anxiety,” as when he drives through small towns on his way to his home in upstate New York and is pulled over by police.

“But is it irrational? You know what I mean?” he said. “There’s just this anxiety that surrounds just being in America.”

The modern styles of the models, he said, in settings that nod to iconic artwork, provide a sense of connection.

“The nuances of the hair-braiding style and nails and phone technology — it’s making it violently present right now. You start to piece together a story based on your own baggage,” the artist said about the work. “And certainly that’s the through line throughout all of it — these bodies chopped down.”

Wiley said his exhibition, however, is about more than just death. The bright colors, the flowers, the green vines twisting and pushing from the background of his paintings, “demanding to be taken seriously,” he said, show even nature’s resistance. And the tenderness in his treatment of the bodies offers what he considers minor notes of birth and redemption.