

# SEANKELLY

O'Rourke, Meghan. "Kehinde Wiley," The Wall Street Journal, April 25, 2012.

**THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.**

## Kehinde Wiley

On studying art in the forests of St. Petersburg at age 12, his hyperdecorative style, and combining grandeur with chance



FAR FROM HERE Artist Kehinde Wiley in his studio in Beijing, with works from his recent Armory Show. He lives part time in China, where he is able to paint free from distractions. *Portrait by Mark Leong*

Painter Kehinde Wiley, 35, has enjoyed the kind of meteoric career that led Andy Warhol to quip about 15 minutes of fame. When he was a child, his mother, a linguist, enrolled Wiley and his siblings in art and literary programs as a way to help keep them safe in the rough South Central Los Angeles neighborhood where they lived. Early on Wiley gravitated toward the visual arts; when he was 12, he went to the U.S.S.R. on an arts exchange program, thanks to a foundation grant funded by financier Michael Milken, which ignited his interest in global politics.

After Yale's MFA program, Wiley got a coveted residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem, where he started establishing himself as an art-world luminary. Drawn in by the "peacocking" of Harlem street life, he began making luxurious, Old Master–influenced portraits of young black men in street clothes. Subsequently, in his "The World Stage" series, he broadened his focus to include large-scale portraits of young men from regions around the globe. His work references Titian as easily as it does pop culture, and addresses stereotypes of race and class, power and history.

Unlike other artists, Wiley is not interested in art for art's sake. His work shares his lively sense of humor, and he believes it's important for African-American kids to see pictures of people who look like them on

museum walls. And he continues to break down boundaries. He collaborated with Givenchy's Riccardo Tisci on his latest project, "An Economy of Grace," which will open at New York City's Sean Kelly Gallery this month. The two chose paintings from the Louvre to serve as inspiration for a series of portraits of African-Americans in couture gowns they designed. Wiley's work, now more than ever, pushes the lines between design and high art, reinventing classical portraiture for a contemporary world.

—Meghan O'Rourke



Wiley with his mother, Freddie, and siblings.

I think the central narrative of my early childhood had to do with growing up in a family where my mother had to raise six kids alone and do graduate school, while figuring out how to keep us from becoming products of the environment that we were living in. I grew up in South Central Los Angeles in the '80s, back when it just wasn't a cool scene. But my mother had the foresight to look for a number of projects that would keep us away from the streets.

One that was particularly fortuitous for me was called the Center for U.S./U.S.S.R. Initiatives. It was a program set up to create an educational exchange between American and Soviet youths, with the idea that there would be a sort of ping-pong politics style—so that perhaps Soviet children would become envious of our way of life. We had 50 American kids hanging out in the forest outside of St. Petersburg. We had to study Russian for the year, and we did art in the forest.

Most of the kids came from very well-heeled families. But my tuition for the program was covered by the Milken Family Foundation. Milken's contribution to my early development was seminal, in the sense that it opened the whole world up to me—the possibility of seeing other cultures, and envisioning a world beyond the confines of Los Angeles, certainly. It brought up race and different modes of language and expression.



"After La Nègresse, 1872" (2006), a bust inspired by Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux's "La Nègresse" (1872).

When my mother was working her way through college, we kids helped her run her junk store. It was like "Sanford and Son." We'd go through the streets finding things, and people would donate things knowing that she would take them; we'd be pulling in old furniture and redoing it and selling it to people on the streets. Most of the clientele was Spanish and we learned to speak Spanish on the streets. A lot of the furniture had this really heightened, decorative, late-French Rococo, old-lady sensibility that was really annoying to me at the time. But I remember in later years feeling an affinity with the hyperdecorative because it had a sense of nostalgia, in a way.

I have a fondness for making paintings that go beyond just having a conversation about art for art's sake or having a conversation about art history. I actually really enjoy looking at broader popular culture. So, for example, in my last book of photography, the lighting was inspired as much by Tiepolo ceiling frescoes in Venice as it was by Hype Williams's early-'90s hip-hop videos—both having a sense of rapture, both having a sense of this bling. One more sacred, one more profane.

My father is Nigerian; my mother is from Texas and African-American. My father was the first in his family to go to university. He flew from Nigeria to Los Angeles in the '70s to go to UCLA, where he met my mother. They broke up before I was born, and he returned to Nigeria. She destroyed all the photos, and I'd never met the guy. So, when I turned 20, being fatherless, and also being profoundly interested in portraiture and wanting to know what he looked like physically, I decided to hop on a plane. Without the experience in Russia, I don't know if I'd have had the guts to do it because it was just so outside for my life experience. I had a very youthful sense of invincibility. There were warnings all over the Internet from the State Department not to go into Nigeria at that time.



Wiley (far right) with his father (lower left), stepmother and half-siblings in Nigeria.

I went looking for one man in the most populated nation in all of Africa. I think there was a sense of curiosity, a psychic necessity. Just who is that other thing? What's my other half? And to stare this other guy in the face and be like, wow, that's weird.

I found him. But it was tough. All I knew was his first and last name and what he'd studied—architecture. I went from architecture department to architecture department looking for this guy. Finally, I took the ethnic route and went to the area where his last name comes from, to the major university there. His name's on the door of the architecture building. He heads the department.

I began a series of portraits of him. Once I get a project in my head, I start getting really obsessive about it. I studied how art-making practices have evolved in Africa, and how they've influenced art-making practices in the States and in Europe, specifically with people like Braque and Picasso, who were experiencing this feeling of the uncanny when looking at African art objects, which has a lot to do with historical European notions of the black body. And, conversely, I started going back to Africans thinking of themselves through the mirror of how someone else thinks of them.

All of those different perspectives and shattered ways of thinking were incredibly helpful to me. Later on when I was studying art theory, first in San Francisco and then at Yale, this sort of postcolonial postmodern condition of shattered identities and fractured selves, I didn't have to look very far. You know? This is not conceptual; this is actual life lived. In terms of how I started putting one foot in front of

the other in my own art-making process, I didn't—my job was always to absorb and learn as much as possible and then just be in the world.

I went to the Studio Museum in Harlem and became the artist in residence there, and began this process of street-casting. And so in terms of designing a practice or designing a life, I've always had certain goals in mind: find the father, build the studio in this country, or what have you. But then you just let go and you allow radical contingency to take place, and that's where the magic sort of happens. You think you know what you're going to do when you hit the ground, but then the actualities show themselves.



"Prince Tommaso Francesco of Savoy-Carignano" (2006), based on a van Dyck portrait.

The work is also about the power of letting go. So much of portraiture has to do with powerful people: powerful white men in powerful poses in big, powerful museums. So what happens when portraiture is about chance? Absolute chance? Someone who just happens to be trying to get to the subway one day now ends up in the painting that goes to one of the large museums throughout the world!



Wiley's 2009 print "After Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres's 'The Virgin with the Host.' "

—Edited from Meghan O'Rourke's interview with Kehinde Wiley



The inspiration for Wiley's 2009 print "After Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres's 'The Virgin with the Host.' "

For the new project, Riccardo Tisci and I pulled some connections and got a private audience at the Louvre. The poses of the women, all of whom came from the New York metropolitan area, were taken from specific paintings that we saw in the Louvre, as were the gowns that we designed together. Couture is a symbol of wealth and excess, and that's what art has been. There's a certain guilt associated with it—desire and guilt—it's always more sexy when you feel slightly guilty about it.

I think one of the things that must happen in the work is for it to become class-conscious. You'll never be able to exist within this marketplace without recognizing that paintings are perhaps the most expensive objects in the art world. It's not going to change anyone's life. But what it does function as is a catalyst for a different way of thinking. The very act of walking into the Los Angeles County Museum and seeing Kerry James Marshall as a kid gave me a sense of, Damn, maybe I can do this. And, so, symbols matter. One of my interests is in having the work in as many public collections as possible. When I go to the Brooklyn Museum or the Metropolitan Museum and see my stuff, I'm aware that there are other young kids who don't have access to anything like it.



"Leviathan Zodiac" (2011), part of "The World Stage: Israel" series, now on display at New York's Jewish Museum.



"Defend and Develop the Island Together" (2006) from "The World Stage: China."



"Hunger" (2008) from "The World Stage: Lagos & Dakar."

PHOTO CREDIT: Kehinde Wiley and Sean Kelly Gallery