

SEANKELLY

Beta, Andy. "Kehinde Wiley's Global Vision on View," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 19, 2015.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Kehinde Wiley's Global Vision on View

A retrospective of the artist's work opens at the
Brooklyn Museum this month



Artist Kehinde Wiley sits in his studio in Brooklyn. A retrospective of his work, 'Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic,' is opening at the Brooklyn Museum of Art on February 20. PHOTO: KEITH BEDFORD FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Kehinde Wiley finds it maddening when he hears his body of artwork summed up as if all he does is paintings of rappers in classic art styles.

Yes, his subjects often wear baseball caps and hoodies. And yes, many are shown on thrones, on horseback and in other heroic poses and contexts traditionally reserved for kings and military leaders and saints.

But his work isn't simply portraiture with a twist—it carries provocative commentary about the politics of race and representation throughout the history of art.

A midcareer retrospective of Mr. Wiley's work, "Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic," opens Friday at the Brooklyn Museum, including a selection of his immense, eye-popping paintings—some measuring 25 feet long—that have made him one of the most recognizable artists of the 21st century. Also on view: some of his most recent portraits, done in the more archaic medium of stained glass.

“It was super particular, with crazy-high stakes,” said Mr. Wiley, 37 years old, of reassembling and installing the stained-glass panels, which had been produced and shipped over from the Czech Republic. “If anything drops, the whole exhibition is over.”

An early supporter of Mr. Wiley’s work was New York art dealer Jeffrey Deitch, who said he values artists whose work engages with artistic precedence while still being accessible and part of a broader cultural dialogue.

“Kehinde has that,” Mr. Deitch said.

“Of all the artists I’ve shown, Kehinde connects with people in a big way: in the art world, in the music world and beyond,” he said. “The work speaks to people.”

Lately, Mr. Wiley’s work has become something of a cultural touchstone, appearing on screen in Lee Daniels’s new Fox television series “Empire” and Spike Lee’s latest film, “Da Sweet Blood of Jesus.”



Mr. Wiley works on a painting in his studio in Brooklyn. PHOTO: KEITH BEDFORD FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Mr. Wiley has gained pop-culture renown for a series of large paintings juxtaposing famous African-American celebrities in settings drawn from old-master paintings—from singer Michael Jackson in a suit of armor to New York Knicks’ Carmelo Anthony bearing a broad sword.

But Mr. Wiley said that giving contemporary black figures in hoodies and sneakers the same treatment traditionally used for history’s white elite has also led him to be pigeonholed.

“Everyone talks about my work as though it is just hip-hop meets classic painting and it is so frustrating,” Mr. Wiley said. “People reduce it to, ‘You paint rappers.’ ”

Mr. Deitch laughs off such generalizations, calling them a measure of the paintings’ accessibility.

“A lot of Kehinde’s message is asserting a black presence in this largely white, male history of Western art,” he said. “It is a profound statement he is making. It is a global vision versus a Western vision of art history.”

Some of Mr. Wiley's most potent work portrays models he encountered around the world—again using traditional art-historical treatments to give anonymous figures a sense of iconic power and presence.

From his first solo show at the Brooklyn Museum in 2004, "Passing/Posing," to his more recent series of portraits, "The World Stage," which showcases subjects found in Jamaica, Lagos and Brazil, Mr. Wiley has expanded his vision globally.

The artist now has workspace outside his home base in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn, including studios in Beijing and Senegal.

The Brooklyn Museum has had a long-term commitment to Kehinde's work, said Eugenie Tsai, the museum's managing curator of contemporary art who oversaw "A New Republic."

Eleven years after "Passing/ Posing," she said, "it seemed like a good time to catch up and see where he's gone and where he's going."

Mr. Wiley acknowledged "every artist wants a big fabulous show like this and that it feels really good." But, he added, "you have to put it in perspective and not allow it to be an occasion to put the nail in the coffin."



Mr. Wiley works on a painting in his studio. PHOTO: KEITH BEDFORD FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

On the day of the stained-glass installation—where no drops occurred—the artist returned to his studio and resumed work on a painting.

"The question is, how do you mix color and light together in a way that exists in the world and not the way that it exists in a camera?" Mr. Wiley asked rhetorically as he set to work adding color to his subject's brow, gazing intently at the canvas.

The image is one of a farmer he photographed in Cameroon who, except for his skin color, looks as if he could easily hail from a farm in Kansas, sporting an outdated leather jacket and big American-flag belt buckle.

"It is one of the aspects of the work I enjoy," he said, noting the strange fashion he encounters around the globe.

"Being in these small villages, I get a snapshot of what it is like to be alive in the 21st century right now."