

THE PAINTER AND HIS COURT

Kehinde Wiley has gone from depicting power to building it.

BY JULIAN LUCAS

Soliciting pedestrians in the Matongé neighborhood of Brussels, Kehinde Wiley, forty-five, looked more like a sidewalk canvasser than he did a world-famous artist. He sidled up to strangers in an orange hoodie and lime-green Air Jordans, extending a hand and flashing a gap-toothed grin. In nearly fluent French, he explained that he wanted to paint them, and offered to pay three hundred euros if they came in for a photo shoot the following afternoon. Most passersby ignored him or gave excuses: jobs, parking meters, and even a preference for being pictured exclusively from behind. For those who stopped, Wiley produced an exhibition catalogue, flipping through pages of classically posed portraits with models who were Black like them.

It was early April, still freezing in the medieval city that Charles Baudelaire thought full of “everything *bland*, everything sad, flavorless, asleep.” On the Chaussée de Wavre, a busy street lined with ads for cheap wire transfers and “100% Brazilian Hair,” many responded warily to the artist’s invitation. “You did these?” some asked. Others wanted to know if they could dress as they pleased. “It’s your portrait,” Wiley assured one skeptic. “Oh, is it?” the man replied. Another prospect not only refused but ejected Wiley from a multistory complex of barbershops and wig emporiums, jabbing him in the chest with an indignant forefinger as he warned that it was no place for an artist.

Wiley took a drag from his cigarette—Benson & Hedges, the brand he’s smoked since high school—and then waved his assistant, cameraman, and studio manager down the block. Rejection keeps him humble, the artist insisted. But he also felt certain that those who walked past would eventually see his work and have a different reaction: “Holy shit, I missed out on that?”

Among the people whom Wiley did persuade, the clincher was often his Presidential portrait of Barack Obama, confidently seated before a flowering wall of greenery. Everybody knew that face—but who was this painter, coming on like a hustler in the city of spies and chocolatiers? He explained his background to a candidate from Congo: “My father is Nigerian, my mother is American, and I’m lost.”

Wiley excels at the pickup line, a crucial ingredient in a practice that parallels cruising. “I’m an artist and you’re a work of art,” he told a man named Patrick, who was sipping a beer in sunglasses and a fur-trimmed leather coat. The very image of an unflappable *sapeur*—Congolese French for “dandy”—he was still so excited by Wiley’s attention that he dragged him off to meet a group of friends. They subjected the artist to a raucous sidewalk interrogation.

“Just Black people?” one man challenged.

“Black people with some style,” Wiley answered.

“Hood stuff, basically,” another flung back.

“No, *you* have to show up and decide,” Wiley said.

He played it cooler with a willowy young woman named Emerance, who was sitting on a railing with a glass of red wine.

“A lot of it is by chance, not because you’re some superstar,” Wiley said.

“I’m a superstar to my mom,” she replied.

There was even a man who was offended by the artist’s fee. He’d do the sitting free, for the love of beauty.

Wiley’s portraits single out ordinary Black people for color-saturated canonization, turning spontaneous encounters on streets across the world into dates with art-historical destiny. A mother in New York might become

Judith holding the head of Holofernes; a dreamy Senegalese youth, Caspar David Friedrich’s “Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog.” The artist revels in embodying chance, the butterfly effect that leads from everyday life to gilt-framed immortality. “In every male ejaculate there’s a possibility to populate an entire city like New York,” he told me in one of our conversations, alluding to the golden sperm that adorned his career-making portraits of young men in Harlem. “Every single person that’s around is winning some cosmic game.”

Few have won bigger than Wiley, whose good fortune has taken him from an enfant terrible of the early two-thousands, when he became known for transfiguring hip-hop style into the idiom of the Old Masters, to one of the most influential figures in global Black culture. He was already collected by Alicia Keys and the Smithsonian when his official portrait of Obama, unveiled in 2018, sparked a nationwide pilgrimage. Now, following the success of Black Rock Senegal, a lavish arts residency he’s established in Dakar—soon to be joined by a second location, in Nigeria—Wiley is shifting the art world’s center of gravity toward Africa with a determination that combines the institution-founding fervor of Booker T. Washington and the stagecraft of Willy Wonka. No longer just painting power, he’s building it.

In Brussels, Wiley was searching for models to confect into the image of royalty for a site-specific show proposed by the city’s Oldmasters Museum. The challenge was familiar. Just as Black communities are everywhere, so, too, are highbrow collections thirsting for “relevance”—a coincidence that keeps Wiley in constant demand. It’s hard to think of an artist who’s done more split-screen shows with dead predecessors: Wiley and Thomas



Wiley, both an iconoclast and a lover of the canon, draws strength from the contradictions that define his work.

PHOTOGRAPH BY SHIKEITH

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Gainsborough, Wiley and Artemisia Gentileschi, Wiley and Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux. Just before we met in Brussels, the online arts journal *Hyperalergic* published an April Fool's Day article announcing that a museum had solved racism with an acquisition of his work, quoting an imaginary official who declared, "We think this one Kehinde Wiley painting is going to do the trick."

The artist is well aware of his appeal to institutions navigating cultural renovations. "There's nothing as anachronistic as a museum or a symphony or a ballet," he said, on a later drive through Brussels. "How do these places survive? By creating spaces for young people," and finding ways to "open up to new blood and new imagery."

Our conversation drifted to the British Royal Family. Wiley's assistant played a video of Prince William dancing in Belize, rigidly jerking his hips amid a colorfully dressed crowd. "Oh, my!" the artist cooed. The video had gone viral during a disastrous good-will tour of the Caribbean, which sparked protests and calls for reparations. "They're riding roughshod over the entire reason why they get to be there, which is enslaved human beings," Wiley said. "It's not cute."

In Matongé, whose large immigrant population lives not far from Belgium's royal palace, Wiley's cameras and clipboards scared some people away. But a mysterious entourage also exerts a certain magnetism. "What happens is that we start to become a spectacle," the artist explained. "People just want to know what's going on." A shy young man carrying baguettes and a blue gym bag walked by several times before surrendering to curiosity.

Wiley seemed to gain confidence with each encounter. He isn't a tall man, but his affable demeanor and slightly rakish appearance—piratical goatee, distinctive comma shaved into wax-flattened hair—exude charisma. His mellow voice glides and hums between phrases: at times, picking a careful path through a thorny garden; at others, enveloping the listener in warm complicity. Every so often, his cautious playfulness yields to outbursts of mischief: deadpan impressions; abrupt talk-show belly laughs;

and, when it came to me and my questions, the ironic metacommentary of someone keenly sensitive to portraiture's artifice.

We ended the night at Chez Malou, a Congolese eatery promisingly emblazoned with the face of a no-nonsense matron next to an enormous hot pepper. The entourage feasted on pork bits, tilapia, and viscous okra soup. At one point, Wiley, a devoted



angler, broke the head off a fish smothered in onion sauce. He identified it, from the bones, as a catfish.

Fourteen models turned up the next day at a nondescript studio. Wiley's assistant unpacked costume jewelry; his photographer, Brad Ogbonna, installed lights; and his manager, Georgia Harrell, distributed cash and contracts. Wiley sipped coffee and perused a sourcebook of reference images compiled by his research interns, applying Post-its to those he planned to use. A sepia photograph showed King Leopold II with a hand tucked in his jacket; in an oil painting, a boy wearing lacy crimson trousers held hands with his mother, a smug duchess. I asked Wiley whether it mattered if an art work he adapted was any good. "It can be total crap, as long as it's a great pose," he replied. "Nobody's going to be looking at the source."

Yesterday's strangers filled out paperwork, dressed to the nines, the ones, and everything in between. Patrick, the *sapeur*, still wearing sunglasses, arrived in a black velvet jacket with gold embroidery, bringing a friend whose logocovered kit from Moschino made him look like a race-car driver. Emerance, in a floral sheath dress and pink heels, lamented the gentrification of Matongé, which she ironically described as "the famous African street." Wiley gave brief remarks, omitting the project's historical background to avoid poisoning the vibe.

Under Leopold II, the so-called builder king, Brussels batted on profits from the ivory and rubber trades, brutally extracted from the Congo Free State—which covered much of present-day Democratic Republic of Congo—in a terror that killed millions. His equestrian likeness still overlooks Matongé, testament to a bloody legacy that has made Brussels home to one of the largest Little Africas in Europe. Wiley's show takes inspiration from Leopold's obsession with Congolese flora. The monarch maintained a sprawling network of greenhouses at his palace in the city's suburbs, where he tried to cultivate rare plants from his African fiefdom.

Most of the transplants died—an allegory, in Wiley's view, for the failure of the colonial project. One of the artist's calling cards is what he terms botanical filigree, a vegetal backdrop that surrounds, or even entwines, his sitters. For the Brussels exhibition, he's deploying the motif in bronze and marble, enclosing human figures in glass "greenhouse pods" that evoke Leopold's folly. "I wanted to re-create the horror of it but infuse it with vitality," he explained in one of our conversations, envisioning contemporary Afro-Europeans as signs of "historical continuity and resistance."

Now they took the stage in a whirl of tableaux vivants. The baguette boy became a clingy nymph in a gender-swapped rendition of Jacques-Louis David's "The Farewell of Telemachus and Eucharis," pressing his cheek against a young woman's shoulder as Wiley delicately adjusted the position of his foot. The artist modelled a regal stance for the race-car driver, who grinned sheepishly and made a finger gun with his hand. Wiley laughed so hard that he actually slapped his knees.

"It's more like this," Wiley said, once he'd recovered his composure. "Très . . ."—he thrust his chest forward, threw down his hands, scowled disdainfully, and sniffed. Later, he practiced a balletic half-turn with Emerance, cupping his joined hands in an expression of feminine poise.

The models posed for sculptures on an enormous lazy Susan. Ogbonna worked the camera as Wiley, crouching, turned the apparatus, shouting

"Take!" with clockwork regularity. (The artist's studio uses software to combine the shots into three-dimensional renderings, which are subsequently printed in polymer clay.) At certain moments, he looked like a supplicant kneeling before his subjects; at others, a potter throwing them on the wheel. Afrobeats played continuously. One model's frozen figure revolved to the slick rhythms of "Monalisa," by Lojay and Sarz: "Baby follow my commanding like zombie, Go down on me with your coca body ... you can't run away."

Wiley raced back and forth between stage and camera as though running speed drills. First, the quilted jacket came off; then the Lacoste sweatshirt. At one point, sweat caused hair wax to run into his eyes, and he briefly interrupted the shoot to call for a Kleenex.

"That's fucking amazing," he told Ogbonna as they clicked through shots. "You can see them as sculptures already."

The fifth of six children in a struggling single-parent household, Kehinde Wiley was born in South Central Los Angeles in 1977. He and his fraternal twin, Taiwo, were the offspring of a fleeting campus romance between Freddie Mae Wiley, an African American linguistics major, and Isaiah Obot, a Nigerian studying architecture, both at U.C.L.A. Obot had returned to Nigeria when Freddie Mae gave birth, and ignored her requests for a list of baby names in his native Ibibio. Determined to preserve a sense of their Nigerian heritage, she gave the two boys traditional Yoruba names for twins.

Wiley made his first art works on the walls of the family's home on Jefferson Avenue. The Wileys, who sometimes relied on welfare, didn't have much money. But Freddie Mae supplemented their income by converting the house into what the artist fondly described as a "Sanford and Son'-style" antique store, which she piously dubbed My Father's Business. Wiley grew up immersed in his mother's business: vintage clothes, claw-foot furniture, Afrocentric statues, and antique tchotchkes, all laid out for sale in an overgrown greenhouse.

Wiley learned Spanish from customers, composition by sketching merchandise, and cooking from Julia Child, whose shows inspired him to take over

in the family kitchen before he was ten. "Within a year, he was a better cook than my mom," Taiwo told me. "I hate to see it published, but it's true." Recognizing his precocity, Freddie Mae enrolled Wiley in art classes, and took him on excursions to museums like the Huntington Library, in San Marino, where he fell in love with eighteenth-century English portraiture, even as he struggled with a feeling of exclusion from the rarefied white world it evoked. (The Huntington recently exhibited Wiley's answer to Thomas Gainsborough directly opposite "The Blue Boy.") A study-abroad program in the Soviet Union further broadened his horizons, and when he returned Wiley matriculated at the L.A. County High School for the Arts.

"I understood very early about the social component to art," Wiley told me. He staged his first solo show at the house before he'd even graduated, treating visitors from around the neighborhood to a sparkling-cider reception. Every painting sold; when a family friend offered to buy a work that Wiley had made especially for Freddie Mae—a portrait of a woman in a field of flowers—the teen-age artist encouraged his mother to take the deal. "I wouldn't even say that art is the greatest thing that Kehinde will accomplish before the Lord promotes him," Freddie Mae told

me. "I see him as a great entrepreneur."

The sales helped pay for his room and board at the San Francisco Art Institute, where he earned a bachelor's degree, in 1999. That year, he entered the M.F.A. program at Yale; his friends there included other now prominent artists like Wangechi Mutu and Mickalene Thomas. "We all sought each other out as the few Black students in our departments," Mutu told me via e-mail. She and Wiley met on the dance floor at parties and visited each other's studios, where she recalls being impressed by the intricacy of his then small compositions. He remembers them less charitably. "I was making, like, really embarrassing allegorical paintings that involved onions and watermelons," Wiley told me. "Assuming that people understand the importance of a citrus fruit in a painting, or an Italian cypress or something—it's just not gonna fly."

He experimented with painting people from Black neighborhoods in New Haven, prompted by the constant racial profiling that he faced on campus. Nowadays, portraiture is enjoying a renaissance, but at the time Wiley's decision to represent people—especially those who weren't white—was a bold break with the era's conceptualism. At first, Wiley hedged the transition, trying to "justify figuration" by suspending his models in crisp color fields. That



"O.K., you can tell your truth, but then I want to tell my truth right after."



Wiley's portraits often recast Western portraiture, endowing Black youth with Old Master grandiosity. "Femme Piquée Par Un"

changed after a studio visit from Kerry James Marshall, whose critique profoundly altered Wiley's approach to the relationship between figure and ground. "Enough with the sharp edges. They're cold, they're clinical, and they say a lot about you," Wiley recalls the older artist saying. The comment helped inspire his work's distinctive entanglement of decorative patterns with limbs and skin. Wiley realized that the interplay could stand in for other relationships: race and society, man and marketplace, model and artist.

He moved to New York in 2001, arriving with little money and a roman-

tic vision of life in the big city. Brian Keith Jackson, a novelist from Louisiana, remembers meeting Wiley when he came to a party at the writer's apartment with a plastic bottle of gin. Jackson made him sign it, and from then on the two were inseparable. In the years since, he has accompanied Wiley on travels from China to Brazil, and written several essays for his catalogues. "There weren't many Black gay men that were the face of something," Jackson told me. "We just struck out on the city, because you needed that support."

Wiley also found community at the Studio Museum, where, in 2001, he

began a yearlong residency. He'd arrived at a propitious moment. Thelma Golden, then best known for her landmark exhibition "Black Male," had just started her tenure as chief curator of the storied Harlem organization. "Kehinde is one of those artists who was fully formed from the start," Golden recalled. She took an interest in the young painter partially because his work paralleled her research for her exhibition "Black Romantic," which explored the tension between popular genres of idealizing portraiture and the conceptualism of institutions like her own. In the catalogue, she wrote, "I was suspi-



Serpent (Mamadou Gueye),” from 2022, reimagines a sculpture, by Auguste Clésinger, that was first displayed in 1847.

cious of the notion of the ‘real’ or the authentic that many of the artists strive to present”; she found it full of “overwrought sentiment” and “strident essentialism.” Yet she also wanted to reckon with its appeal.

Wiley’s work bridged the two worlds. At the time, he was working on a series called “Conspicuous Fraud,” which explored the commodification of identity through depictions of young men with explosively branching Afros against monochromatic backdrops. In the most celebrated work from the series, a man in a suit closes his eyes as his smoke-like hair fills the canvas: a dream of es-

cape, or a silent struggle with double consciousness. Golden featured the painting in her exhibition, earning Wiley immediate notice. In an interview for the exhibition’s catalogue, he declared, “I want to aestheticize masculine beauty and to be complicit within that language of oppressive power while at once critiquing it.”

Harlem was a revelation, Wiley recalled, “teeming with this sexy black young energy” that strutted down the sidewalk. At the museum, he often slept in his studio, overlooking 125th Street, papering the walls with Polaroids of men he’d met around the neighborhood.

A breakthrough came when he found a Black teen’s discarded mug shot and arrest record. Wiley took the photograph home and began to consider the chasm between the aggrandizing conventions of European portraiture—with its kings, saints, and smug gentry—and its perverse opposite in the photo studios of the New York Police Department. What if he reversed the terms, simultaneously demystifying the Western canon and endowing Black youth with Old Master grandiosity?

The breakthrough earned Wiley his first solo museum show when he was just twenty-six. “Passing/Posing”

transformed a room at the Brooklyn Museum into a b-boy Sistine Chapel. Arch-shaped portraits depicted men in basketball jerseys posing like Biblical figures. Break-dancers cut up clouds in a mock ceiling fresco called “Go.” (Wiley recently reprised the composition in stained glass, for a monumental skylight in the new Moynihan Train Hall.) It was “a sendup of Old Master painting as the ultimate cum shot,” Wiley told the art historian Sarah Lewis; many of the young men were surrounded by filigrees of fleurs-de-lis and spermatozoa. The packed opening featured a performance by the Juilliard-trained drag queen Shequida, who sang a Baroque arrangement of Kelis’s “Milkshake” accompanied by the Columbia Bach Society. “I had no idea where I was going to go,” Wiley told me, though it was immediately clear that he was going up.

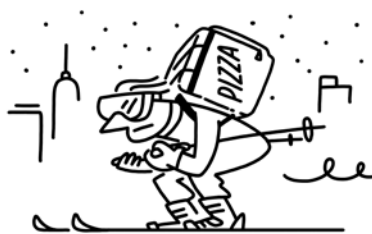
“The future was almost there,” an early studio assistant recalled. With fondness and frustration, she and others described a boss who projected a fabulous persona even as he struggled to pay salaries and slept off all-nighters on piles of bubble wrap in a ragged Chelsea studio that doubled as his apartment. Wiley started hiring extra hands—initially, a quartet of Columbia undergraduates—before he had even finished his residency, overwhelmed by a demand for his paintings that quickly outstripped his ability to make them. A division of labor emerged. Wiley cruised Harlem for striking young men, often bringing along a gay assistant or an attractive woman friend. The artist did his own photography. Lacking the equipment to print transparencies, he outlined subjects from projections of ordinary printouts rubbed with Vaseline. Assistants completed the elaborate backgrounds, leaving Wiley to concentrate on the figures.

The team worked at a furious pace. For the gilt patterns, they used a shimmering model paint more often applied to cars than to canvases, and its strong fumes often sent them scrambling to the windows. Wiley was “not interested in quality control,” one of the painters told me, pointing out errors in foreshortening figures—an artifact of outlining from projections—and inconsistent sperm motifs in his early work. One assistant found him to be more

attentive about his own image; she was struck by a Dolce & Gabbana shirt he’d bought for an opening while she confronted him about an overdue payment. Wiley insists that it was fake; either way, it was a talisman of his determination. “He executes on his ideas,” the painter told me. “Everything he said, he did.”

“Nothing surprised me,” the gallerist Jeffrey Deitch said of Wiley’s success. “It was all preordained.” What interested Deitch wasn’t just the paintings but the persona. Wiley’s compositions evoked predecessors like Barkley Hendricks, with his poised, gilt-backed icons of everyday Black style; a tradition of homoerotic photography, dating back to Fred Holland Day and Wilhelm von Gloeden, who posed peasant youths as classical heroes; and the exaggerated gender play of contemporary drag, fashion, and advertising. At the same time, Wiley’s reputation conjured up the spectres of Warhol and Basquiat, collapsing their dance of detached media manipulator and streetwise innocent into a single figure.

Deitch staged Wiley’s next hit show, “Rumors of War” (2005), an exhibition of equestrian portraits whose standout, “Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps,” became the young artist’s signature work. It swapped out the diminutive Corsican general of David’s masterwork for a muscular Black man in a headband and fatigues, raising a tat-



tooed arm as he digs his Timberland boots into the stirrups. Deitch arranged its purchase and long-term loan to the Brooklyn Museum, where it hangs in the lobby. Like many other Wileys that crib titles from their inspirations, it now surpasses the original in online search results.

Years before a repentant art world started buying Black art like indulgences, Wiley’s rise provoked grumbles. Roberta Smith described his early

paintings as “gaudy shams” enjoying “fifteen minutes of fame,” and compared the young artist to the fanciful and largely faded French salon painter William-Adolphe Bouguereau. Others saw more commercialism than critique in his slick fantasies, especially once he began collaborating with luxury brands like Grey Goose. Wiley, undaunted, embraced celebrity. He painted LL Cool J for the VH1 Hip Hop Honors, and Michael Jackson, at the singer’s own request, portraying him on a white horse, clad in plate mail and serenaded by cherubim. He threw legendary parties, cooking, at one bacchanal, a menu of six quail, four rabbits, three red snappers, and two ducks with the heads left on for about a hundred guests.

“By the end of the night, we had little gay boys going around with joints and cigarettes and silver platters,” Scott Andresen, an artist friend who co-hosted the gathering, recalled. Wiley’s openings escalated to such an extent that one took place at a Harlem ballroom, and featured voguing demonstrations by members of the House of Xtravaganza. The spectacles were less an extravagance, though, than an investment.

In August, I met Wiley at his SoHo apartment, a cavernous ground-floor loft in a cast-iron building surrounded by galleries and boutiques. It had taken months to pin the artist down. In the past year, he’s travelled to more than a dozen countries on four continents—not only for work but also to relax at his homes in Senegal, Nigeria, and the Catskills.

“I sort of feel like I’m cheating on one life with a different life,” he said of these migrations, each inaugurating a new season of friends and habits. Lately, he has favored Africa; this past February, he and Taiwo celebrated their forty-fifth birthday at a new house in the exclusive Victoria Island neighborhood of Lagos. But when I asked if any particular place was “home” Wiley demurred, saying, “It’s probably about entropy and how warm the seat is since last you’ve sat in it.”

We sat on opposite couches in his high-ceilinged living room, watched by a fun-house hoard of contemporary portraiture. Works by Njideka Akunyili Crosby, Deana Lawson, Shikeith, Mick-

alene Thomas, and Amoako Boafo—whom Wiley championed after discovering him on Instagram—floated above family photographs and African carvings, one of which supported a heavy Warhol catalogue. Dominating the collection was a recent portrait by Wiley, which depicts a shirtless dark-skinned young man holding a copy of Nancy Isenberg’s “White Trash” between his splayed legs.

Wiley offered me a glass of wine and an oversized ice cube, cautioning me to slide it in with care. Broken glass was on his mind; the previous day, contractors had dropped a tool and shattered the skylight in his den, startling the artist and his Afghan hounds, Sudan and Togo. “The vibe is not the same,” Wiley said of returning to Manhattan. He moved into the apartment nine years ago but has spent only two months in the city since 2020. Many of his friends and associates have moved elsewhere, and some of those who hadn’t—like LL Cool J, whom he’d just seen at a party thrown by the stylist and socialite Legendary Damon—reminded him of another era.

I asked if there were any of his own works that he had wanted but couldn’t keep. “Hell yeah,” Wiley said, naming a painting from his 2008 exhibition, “Down,” which had been acquired by his friend Swizz Beatz. The series reimagined fallen figures like Hans Holbein’s “The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb”—a landmark of morbid realism—in a register of down-low homoeroticism, envisioning Black men in attitudes of saintly repose. Beatz’s acquisition featured a particularly beautiful figure, Wiley reminisced, with a twisting torso and exposed Hanes briefs beneath a cascade of golden passionflowers. “But where the hell would I hang a twenty-foot painting?”

Then there’s his edition of “Rumors of War,” the enormous statue of a dreadlocked rider that he created, in 2019, as a riposte to Confederate monuments. (The original, first exhibited in Times Square, is now outside the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, in Richmond.) He’s thought about installing it at his new Black Rock campus, in Nigeria, but modesty, so far, has constrained him. “I’d prefer to have it somewhere in the forest,” he said, alluding to his property



“Hey, looks like I’m going to be stuck here awhile. Can you get dinner started and finish raising the kids?”

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in the Hudson Valley. “I want Black Rock to be less about me.”

Wiley doesn’t do self-portraits, though not because he shuns the spotlight. “I’m always very suspicious about artists who are ambivalent about recognition,” he told me. “The ability to have something to say and reach people? That’s a dream.” Nevertheless, he prefers having a famous name to having a famous face, and the freedom that comes with directing attention to being its object. The one portrait of Wiley that I saw in his apartment—a heavily Photoshopped print by David LaChapelle—depicts the painter as a macho athlete admiring his own reflection, flanked by Pamela Anderson and the trans performance artist Amanda Lepore.

It’s a tellingly chameleonic image. Wiley seems to draw strength from the contradictory glosses that attach to his identity: court painter and populist, iconoclast and canon junkie, crusader for inclusion and art-world cynic. He’s a man who seems equally at ease among the people of Ferguson, Missouri—where he painted a series in honor of Michael Brown—and posh friends like the conservative socialite Princess Gloria von Thurn und Taxis.

Directly behind me was a porcelain statue of Chairman Mao with his legs

casually crossed. In 2006, Wiley opened a large studio with a sculpture workshop in Beijing, where he also rented an apartment, learned Mandarin, and started dating a local d.j. This marked the beginning of a transition from hot-shot painter to diversified global enterprise. Starting in China, Wiley embarked on a series called “The World Stage,” an atlas of the Black figure and the world’s decorative traditions. During the same period, he expanded into new mediums, like sculpture and stained glass; new Old Masters, like Hans Memling; and, starting in 2011, a new gender, as he returned to Harlem to paint women in custom gowns by the Italian designer Riccardo Tisci. The resulting show, which featured in a documentary, was called “An Economy of Grace.” But many critics saw only economies of scale, the endless recycling of a gimmick.

Then, in the mid-twenty-tens, Wiley’s career caught a major thermal. Black figuration swept to national prominence, buoyed, from one direction, by the rude awakening of the Ferguson uprising and, from another, by the trickle-down glamour of the Obama White House. The representation of Blackness became a national conversation, reviving the œuvres of Wiley’s predecessors, like Kerry James Marshall



"Portrait of Jorgo Wright," from 2022.

and Charles White; elevating contemporaries like Kara Walker to stardom; and launching the careers of dozens of young artists, such as Toyin Ojih Odutola, who were challenging the epidermal biases of Western portraiture through formal experiment.

Wiley's glossily photorealistic treatment of Black skin dovetailed perfectly with the era's emerging *peau idéal*. In 2014, the producer Lee Daniels featured his work in the hit television show "Empire." The next year, he received a major survey at the Brooklyn Museum, "A New Republic." It seemed to varnish early provocations with a new sobriety: "Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps" had debuted against the backdrop of the Iraq War in a show that mocked martial masculinity; in 2015, the work was reborn as an insurgent paean to Black resistance. Wiley's idylls

of Old Master empowerment also gained relevance in an America presided over by a Black family in a neo-Palladian manse.

On a bureau in the foyer of Wiley's apartment is a photograph of him and Barack Obama. Not long after Wiley's retrospective, the National Portrait Gallery began considering him to paint Obama's Presidential portrait. His selection, announced in October, 2017, was historic: America's first Black President would sit for its first Black Presidential portraitist. For an artist who'd made his mark posing the powerless, the ostensible challenge was depicting a man who wielded the real thing. At the portrait's unveiling, on Lincoln's birthday the following year, Obama recalled warning Wiley to leave out the "partridges and scepters," teasing the artist that he had "enough political problems with-

out you making me look like Napoleon."

The curtain came down on a bower-side chat with America's supreme confidant. The President sits, sans tie, with arms folded in a posture of vigilant welcome, surrounded by flowers symbolizing Chicago, Hawaii, Indonesia, and Kenya. Obama's feet don't touch the ground; the author of "Dreams from My Father" seems to levitate on an antique chair of the kind that Freddie Mae once stocked among the houseplants at My Father's Business. The artist cried as he thanked his mother from the podium.

Wiley has made many works that imitate devotional icons, but his image of Barack Obama, like Amy Sherald's of Michelle, sparked a national pilgrimage. According to Kim Sajet, the director of the National Portrait Gallery, the portraits tripled the museum's attendance. A security guard observed an elderly woman get on her knees and pray to Obama's portrait. "People cry and say, 'I miss him,'" the guard wrote in a sketch that she shared on Instagram. In June, 2021, the portraits began a five-city tour of museums across the country, drawing hundreds of thousands of visitors. Unveiled in the second year of the Trump Administration, and travelling in the shadow of COVID-19, they served, in a way, as a locus of mourning—not for Obama, who was comfortably podcasting and constructing his Presidential library, but for a vision of the country that had withered with his departure from the White House.

Wiley painted Obama solo. But for years most of his portraits have been extensively prepared with others, at coordinating studios in New York, Dakar, and Beijing. The flagship studio occupies a second-floor space near the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway in Williamsburg. When I visited this summer, assistants wearing earbuds filled canvases in silence, sitting at varying altitudes along a wall that runs the length of the room. A young woman added jewel-green birds to an oval-shaped composition with a mask of tape obscuring the central figure. Other works showed only silhouettes, as though their subjects had been raptured from the frame.

The paintings begin life in Photo-shop. Wiley sends initial shots of mod-

els to a graphic designer, along with decorative motifs and detailed instructions for creating a backdrop. After the mockup earns his approval, assistants trace it onto the canvas, then begin their painstaking work on the fashion, the flora, and the filigree. Individuals focus on particular works, but also serve as floating detail specialists. The bird painter was brought on for her knowledge of Japanese landscape painting; the clothing expert, who has worked at the studio for seventeen years, doubles as a quality-control inspector, insuring that every Wiley looks like a Wiley. The process has become intuitive, she told me: “I’m his hand, almost like a human printer.”

Generally, by the time a painting reaches Wiley everything except the figure is finished. The artist is free to refine his own specialty: skin, or, in Ellisonian terms, the Blackness of Blackness. Wiley was trained to mix underpainting—a preliminary layer that many artists use as a chromatic keynote—in shades of burnt umber, terra-cotta, and sienna, a spectrum that he described as a “scaffolding” for white skin. After years of working with darker models, he began to experiment with blues and reds, emphasizing the resonances between contrasting hues. “It’s not just pulling up, like, Mars Black,” he said. “You’re creating a series of emotional temperatures that either feel good or don’t.”

Wiley’s surfaces have grown more elaborate even as his themes turn inward. “I’ve sort of inherited my younger self,” he said of his reputation for bombast; in recent years, he’s experimented with smaller canvases, oval frames, and landscape. (“Colorful Realm,” which opens next month at Roberts Projects, in Los Angeles, will depict models in natural settings inspired by the Japanese scroll painter Itō Jakuchū.) Early career motifs have returned in moodier guises: a guarded youth in armor whose dreadlocks tangle with columbines, or an equestrian statue of a rider thrown from his horse.

“Archaeology of Silence,” Wiley’s satellite show at the 2022 Venice Biennale, reprised the odalisques of “Down” as larger-than-life martyrs, in a sepulchral presentation that fused Renaissance funerary luxury with Black grief and grievance. (The show subsequently

travelled to the Musée d’Orsay and opens at the de Young Museum, in San Francisco, this coming March.) Moses Sumney sang a Hebrew lament at the star-studded opening, where Chance the Rapper bought a puffer jacket, which he later wore in a music video, from the exhibition’s pop-up store. For Wiley, it was still only a prelude to the year’s most important biennial.

In May, Wiley made his début in Dakar as a global patron of the arts. His Pan-African Xanadu, Black Rock Senegal, had opened three years earlier, with an all-night party where musicians performed and models walked a floating runway. Henry Taylor painted visitors; Alicia Keys tried on jewelry by the Senegalese designer Sarah Diouf. Wiley boasted in the *Times* that, while photographs of the Met Gala “got old after two days,” people were still posting pictures from his celebration weeks after the guests had gone home.

Soon he began welcoming trios of artists for one- to three-month stays, with plans to curate an exhibition of their work at Dak’Art, Africa’s longest-running biennial, in 2020. Instead, Wiley spent more than a year with a cohort of fellows in lockdown, sketching employees and captaining weekly fishing trips to pass the time. (At Art Basel, his fish fries have become an institution; Chaka Khan performed at the one he held this year.) The artist grew so attached to life in Senegal that only Naomi Campbell could force him out, with a summons to judge at Lagos Fashion Week. “‘Get your ass on a plane,’” Wiley recalled her saying. “So I got my ass on a plane.”

Now he was back, determined to dazzle the rescheduled Dak’Art with a group show called “Black Rock 40.” Wiley zipped up and down the Corniche—Senegal’s answer to the Pacific Coast Highway—in a flurry of planning and schmoozing: hors d’œuvres at a seaside hotel with a gaggle of returning fellows; a merchandising shoot with local models on a picturesque beach; a charm offensive at the biennial’s grand opening, which took place at the Ancien Palais de Justice. Wiley mixed with artists like Barthélémy Toguo and Abdoulaye Konaté in a colonnaded hall open to the breeze, observing that the imposing for-

mer courthouse ought to become a permanent art space: “All it would take would be for a bank to get involved.”

Dakar was initially a layover on visits to see family in Nigeria. But through the years Wiley fell in love with the storied seaside metropolis, which hosted the continent’s first pan-African festival in 1966. Inspired by his formative residency at the Studio Museum, he carved out a foothold in the city eight years ago, buying a vacant waterfront property on the advice of a friend and local museum director named Boubacar Koné. Dakar, with its style and its dynamism, fit his budding project “like a glove,” Wiley told me. He recognized that, “just like New York or London,” it had the potential to become a place where the “world comes to discover who they are.”

Almost every evening of the biennial’s opening week ended with cocktails at Black Rock. The pumice-colored compound looks like any other villa from its unmarked entrance, at the end of a quiet alley. But inside is a verdant courtyard of palm, banana-leaf, and monkey-puzzle trees. The buildings were designed by the Senegalese architect Abib Djenne, who took inspiration from the nearby shore’s volcanic rocks: three multistory artists’ apartments; private studios with panoramic ocean views; and a main house with twenty-foot-high doors of gleaming tropical hardwood.

Wiley calls them the Doors of Return, alluding to the Door of No Return, which commemorate victims of the slave trade, and his nightly gatherings had the air of a glamorous family’s never-ending reunion. Guests lounged in an art-filled great room as waiters in black-and-gold uniforms circulated with seafood caught by the host. The window walls offered aquarium views of a patio and a kaleidoscopically lit infinity pool. “This is home,” Brian Keith Jackson, the novelist, declared one evening, grandly gesturing toward a group of artists by a unicorn floatie. Nearby, Tunji Adeniyi-Jones, a painter and former fellow, stared out at the ocean, where whitecaps gleamed in the darkness. “This is the shit that changed our lives,” he said.

In the art world, an invitation to Black Rock is something of a golden

ticket. The experience is almost genie-like in its breadth of accommodation: chef-prepared meals, a gym and a sauna, bespoke excursions with local guides which fellows have used to study indigo dyeing and Sufi brotherhoods. It's a land of pure imagination that leaves many overwhelmed with gratitude. (The photographer Nona Faustine described her residency in a guest-book as "the most profound experience of my life, outside of giving birth to my daughter.") Beyond material assistance and cultural immersion—and, for many, a sense of diasporic homecoming—the residency functions as an entrée into the extended Wiley clan, a carousel of notables who make Black Rock feel less like an arts nonprofit and more like a royal court. Wiley, Jackson told me, "plays in the vernacular of empire, and he's positioned himself where he's the king."

Absent like Gatsby the first night I visited, Wiley descended from his upstairs residence to mingle on the eve of his exhibition. Dressed in a flowing

white shalwar kameez, he strode around the party like the captain of a ship, giving orders to kitchen staff and tsk-ting his boyfriend—a towering Nigerian model and aspiring designer in a sequined pink-and-green ensemble—for slipping upstairs: "Another costume change, Kenneth?" (They met on a dating app in Lagos, where Kenneth suspected that his match might be using a celebrity's identity to catfish.) Wiley finally settled down next to Taiwo and his old friend Scott Andresen on a chaise longue by the pool. Andresen asked the artist about meeting his father for the first time during a trip to Nigeria in 1997. "I thought he was going to be bigger," Wiley said. "He was a small man with a big desk."

It was his first trip to Africa. Because he and Taiwo could afford only one ticket between them, Wiley went alone, searching city after city for a man whose face he'd never seen. He finally found his father at the University of Calabar, where he was serving as chair of the architecture department. Wiley

filmed the encounter in anticipation of a joyful reunion, but Obot was cagey and skeptical of his intentions—a let-down that inspired a now missing series of portraits. Even so, the trip was pivotal. Wiley met long-lost half siblings and committed more broadly to reestablishing his African roots.

A project that originated in the search for family has since become inextricable from it. Wiley often cooks meals for the fellows; recently, he began sponsoring the son of a single mother who works for him as a housekeeper, assuming a paternal role in the boy's life. The next stage of Wiley's homecoming odyssey will take him back to Nigeria, where he and Taiwo have built a fifteen-acre estate in a village near their father's ancestral home. "The first thing I do is jump into that river," Wiley said of his visits to the property, which includes fruit orchards, a piggery, and a fishery stocked with tilapia and catfish. "I'm literally going to be a farmer."

The plan is for his farm to supply Black Rock Nigeria, a second, larger residency that will open next year in Calabar. "Nigeria is home, so I better show out," Wiley told me, thumbing through architectural renderings on his iPhone. Artists will live in semi-detached town houses, each with its own entrance to a common pool, in a riverside complex shaped like the region's ancient *nsibidi* script. The project has become such an obsession that Wiley demands daily video updates from the construction site. And he hasn't ruled out plans for residencies in other reaches of the diaspora: today, Black Rock Nigeria; tomorrow, Black Rock World.

"I wouldn't bet against him," his friend Antwaun Sargent, a director at Gagolian, told me. He situated Black Rock in a growing constellation of residencies established by Black artists on both sides of the Atlantic, including Amoako Boafo, Theaster Gates, Rick Lowe, Julie Mehretu, and Yinka Shonibare. Their retreats are beachheads in an art world that still feels as fickle as the tides in its embrace of Black artists. "People always talk about, like, 'It's just a moment,' or 'We've been here before,'" Sargent said. "What they're missing is that this time folks are building really, really dynamic institutions." He praised Wiley for serving as a bridge



"Customers who bought this item also bought this item."

between scenes, continents, and generations. “The job isn’t just for one of us to make it,” he concluded. “The job is to create a network.”

More than fifteen hundred people attended the “Black Rock 40” opening at the Doua Seck cultural center in Dakar’s Medina district. There were young stars like the designer Telfar Clemens and heavyweights like Sir David Adjaye, the Ghanaian British architect. The V.I.P.s networked on a private veranda as Wiley, just across a crowded lawn fringed with palm trees, jogged onstage in a wax-print suit. “*Bon soir, Dakar!*” he exclaimed. Later, the Nigerian singer Teni kicked off the entertainment with a song for all the stressed-out creatives. “Sometimes it feels like success is a drug,” she crooned.

Black Rock fellows posed for pictures inside the exhibition, where paintings and photographs shared space with sculptures and video installations. Near the entrance was a quilted canvas by the Ghanaian artist Zohra Opoku, depicting a winged Egyptian figure. In the middle of the room, Hilary Balu, a Congolese artist, exhibited two reliquary statues made of unrefined sugar, an allusion to the slave-trade wealth reflected in the lavish tomb of a Kongolese monarch.

Snapshots ricocheted across Instagram, but more important networks were forming in the room, where the dance between art and material power—so integral to Wiley’s paintings—seemed to have leaped off the canvas. Among those present were bankers, an oil executive, the U.S. Ambassador, and two French-Togolese sisters with connections to major museums, who had previously introduced Wiley to Togo’s President, Faure Gnassingbé.

The introduction was for a show that has been in the works for more than a decade, and which opens next September, at the Musée du Quai Branly, in Paris. Called “A Maze of Power,” it will feature portraits of current and former heads of state from across Africa, paired with videos that document the negotiations around each sitting.

“I didn’t really want to make a show about applauding the nice guy who’s done good things in Africa,” Wiley told me; instead of moralizing, he aims

to dissect the self-presentation strategies of those who rule. The labyrinthine exhibition space will evoke the “trappings of power.” Wiley also plans to incorporate landscape into the paintings, offering glimpses of the African cityscapes that are home to a rapidly growing fraction of the world.

Wiley wouldn’t disclose his subjects. But in the past decade he’s had audiences with Presidents Macky Sall, of Senegal; Nana Akufo-Addo, of Ghana; Alpha Condé, of Guinea (until he was overthrown, last year, by a military junta); and Paul Kagame, of Rwanda, whom he visited in March. (Kagame, who officially won his last election with ninety-nine per cent of the vote, wants to be painted as a herdsman, possibly an allusion to the cattle-based iconography of Rwanda’s traditional monarchs.) All were reassured that there would be no irony or political agenda in the portraits—a complex promise from an artist who has always worked at the bleeding edge between critique and complicity.

Wiley’s detractors often invoke a quotation from Audre Lorde: “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” The appeal of a Black-cast canon has lost currency at a time when the promised panacea of “Black faces in white spaces” has come under fire. In 2018, when Beyoncé and Jay-Z filmed a video for their single “Apeshit” at the Louvre, it was a triumph of Wiley’s new Old Masters aesthetic. Skeptics wondered what was so revolutionary about two billionaires galivanting through a treasury of art.

But Wiley, who once described himself as a manufacturer of “high-priced luxury goods for wealthy consumers,” never promised anyone empowerment. In a way, his has been the classic fate of the court painter: conscripted as a propagandist—by the royalists, the reformers, and the revolutionaries—when his real passion is for capturing the fleeting postures of his era. One of the most striking sculptures in “Archaeology of Silence” depicts a young woman lying in what appears to be a mausoleum’s

niche; it takes a few moments to notice that she is holding an iPhone. Wiley looks forward to the “decay” of these time-stamped touches. “I love seeing those frilly collars in old Dutch paintings,” he said, comparing them to the oversized sportswear in his early works. “The culture is always changing.”

Last winter at the National Gallery in London, I saw Wiley’s exhibition “The Prelude,” an exploration of nature and the sublime which envisions Black wanderers amid the mountains and seascapes of such nineteenth-century Romantics as J.M.W. Turner, Winslow Homer, and Caspar David Friedrich. For most of his career, Wiley conspicuously omitted landscape from his paintings, pointedly substituting decorative patterns

for the land and chattels that loom behind many Old Master portraits. It was a liberation of style from property and privilege. Recently, though, he’s abandoned the constraint. The shift is a call for Black people to take up space in the world, which doubles as a wink at his own vertiginous climb.

The exhibition culminated in a six-screen video installation, which I watched in a darkened room just off the main gallery. In the film, a group of Black Londoners hike through glacial Norway, struggling against the elements and their allegorical exclusion from a sharp white background of snowscapes. An extended sequence of closeups show the models smiling against a freezing wind, tears streaming from eyes tinted blue by contacts. They were the grinning, lying masks of Paul Laurence Dunbar’s verse—Black expression painfully conforming to oppressive standards—but transposed to a key of triumphant appropriation.

Midway through this alpine fantasia, I noticed a young Black woman in the audience with a pajama-clad daughter in her lap. Onscreen, two women conjoined by intricately fused plaits played patty-cake amid the fjords and mountains. Cool Norwegian light bathed the child’s face like underpainting as she watched the scene with complete absorption. She reached up and tugged her mother’s braid. ♦

