

Art in America



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KEHINDE WILEY
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De(i)fying the Masters

Creating anonymous, heroically scaled portraits of contemporary African-American males, Kehinde Wiley explores many grand precedents of European painting, while offering a wry critique of today's media version of black masculinity.

BY SARAH LEWIS



View of Kehinde Wiley's installation "Faux/Real"; at Art Basel Miami Beach/Delich Projects, 2003.

Opposite, *Female Prophet Deborah*, 2003, oil on panel, 90 by 60 inches. Brooklyn Museum. Works this article from the "Passing/Posing" exhibition.

Depicted life-size on an ample arched panel, a young African-American man wearing a red T-shirt, a red baseball cap turned backwards, a puffy blue winter jacket and blue jeans seems to float in a deep night sky. An elaborate ornamental filigree, composed of gold-colored sperm forms arranged in big, lacy configurations, covers part of his body and also creates a pattern behind him, collapsing the distinction between foreground and background. A cross hangs from a delicate gold chain around his neck. At waist level, his left hand points to an empty space in the pattern. With his right hand at the level of his face, the palm turned outward, his pinky finger awkwardly outstretched, he has clearly struck a symbolic pose.

The image, cryptically titled *Female Prophet Deborah* (2003), is part of the ongoing "Passing/Posing" series by 28-year-old Kehinde

Wiley. For these large-scale paintings, 18 of which were shown in a recent solo exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum, the artist renders casually dressed African-American men standing in the postures of prophets, saints and angels from Renaissance paintings, or of male subjects from later European portraits. Wiley thus inserts black males into a painting tradition that has typically omitted them or relegated them to peripheral positions. At the same time, he critiques contemporary portrayals of black masculinity itself.

Visitors approaching the exhibition were greeted by an insistent hip-hop beat from a video monitor placed directly outside the entrance. Music and the sound of Wiley's voice from a taped interview—components of an "Infiniti in Black" auto ad from a corporate campaign that pays homage to African-American artists—permeated the galleries. The

first room contained the foundational elements of Wiley's portraits: four framed photographs of his models posing, a selection of books on European portraiture and Renaissance painting, and a single portrait, *Jean de Carondelet* (2004), accompanied by a thumbnail reproduction of its identically titled source painting, a ca. 1530 work by Jan Cornelisz in the collection of the Brooklyn Museum.

These items hint at Wiley's artistic process. In preparing the series, he approaches African-American men passing by him in Harlem and shows them images of his work. If they are pleased with his paintings, he asks permission to make a portrait of them imitating a figure in a painting of their choice by artists such as Raphael, Titian, Tiepolo, Gainsborough, Ingres and Sargent. At the studio, the volunteer flips through monographs to select a character to imitate, and Wiley takes a photograph that

Strategic omissions of pictorial elements, in effect deflating the power of the source image, become as important as Wiley's appropriations.



Mercury After Raphael, 2003, oil on canvas mounted on panel, 96 by 60 inches. Private collection. Courtesy Deitch Projects, New York.

becomes the guiding image for the figure in his painting. While staying faithful to the appearance, facial expression and clothing of each participant, he establishes a size and format of his own and strategically suppresses or alters the remaining elements of the source painting, often adding intricate background decoration executed with the aid of assistants. The treatment of the figure, however, Wiley reserves for himself, working sometimes from projection, sometimes freehand.

Wiley's figures are presented in graphic photo-realistic detail, while the backgrounds are relatively painterly. Omissions of pictorial elements, in effect deflating the symbolic power of the source image, become as important as the appropriations. Wiley customarily titles his work after the source image he has altered, while his portrait subjects remain anonymous. "Everyone is treated as a type," the artist told me in an interview in his studio. This approach results in what he calls "anti-portrait paintings."

As organized by assistant curator Tumelo Mosaka, the exhibition included a few images based on secular works but concentrated heavily on those that reference saints and angels. The second gallery gained formal coherence through the structural similarities of the five pieces on view. Each is a vertical painting with an intense orange-red field against which the model imitates a religious figure such as St. John the Baptist or St. Symphorian. The pictorial illumination is eerily artificial. Wiley bathes his figures in a vibrant red glow, as if the background color were actually radiant. The dizzying optical illusion is further enhanced by the repetitive patterning that surrounds each character. In *Morfene* (2003), which is atypically titled with the model's stage name (a misspelling of "morphine" that the rapper has tattooed on his abdomen), a grid of electric blue fleurs-de-lys, set against an equally bright red, creates a vibration of the sort generated by Bridget Riley's Op art paintings. Meanwhile the figure, as the only part of the canvas free of this movement, becomes a site of heightened visual focus.

The next small room, unified by the square format of the paintings and their palette of light green and blue, served as an antechamber to the final gallery. Two of the paintings in this threshold space were designed to be hung diagonally. As if echoing this rotation, the eight-pointed rosette in *Easter Realness No. 5* (2004) is rotated off its axis slightly to the right, behind a figure duplicating the pose of the Madonna at prayer. This room also continued Wiley's use of uniform framing. With one exception, each work in the first three galleries bore an ornate gilded frame with scalloped, two-tiered patterning.

The final room was a faux chapel installation: eight large vertical works, sharing an

identical arch-shaped format, were hung on the walls beneath a 9-by-20-foot ceiling painting titled *Go* (2003). Peering upward, viewers could contemplate, in place of the customary religious worthies in ascent, young African-American men breakdancing in a sky with billowing clouds. All are garbed in casual street wear, their perspectively large feet clad in brand-name boots or sneakers. Some of the accompanying wall paintings imply buoyancy by fading out the figures' legs up to the knees. But several others emphasize the model's lower extremities, recalling the highly attentive treatment of angels' feet in Renaissance paintings.

Two works placed at the end of the room, in the position of an altarpiece, feature a spiritual iconography not only of gesture but also of light. In *St. Clement of Padua* (2004), after a stained-glass window by Ingres, a halo of gold encircles the model's head while his arms are held partially outstretched in a sign of religious wonder. Although there might seem to be discord between the chapel-style presentation and the driving rhythms that echoed throughout the gallery space, the self-mythologizing that undergirds hip-hop culture makes Wiley's mimicry of religious works apt.

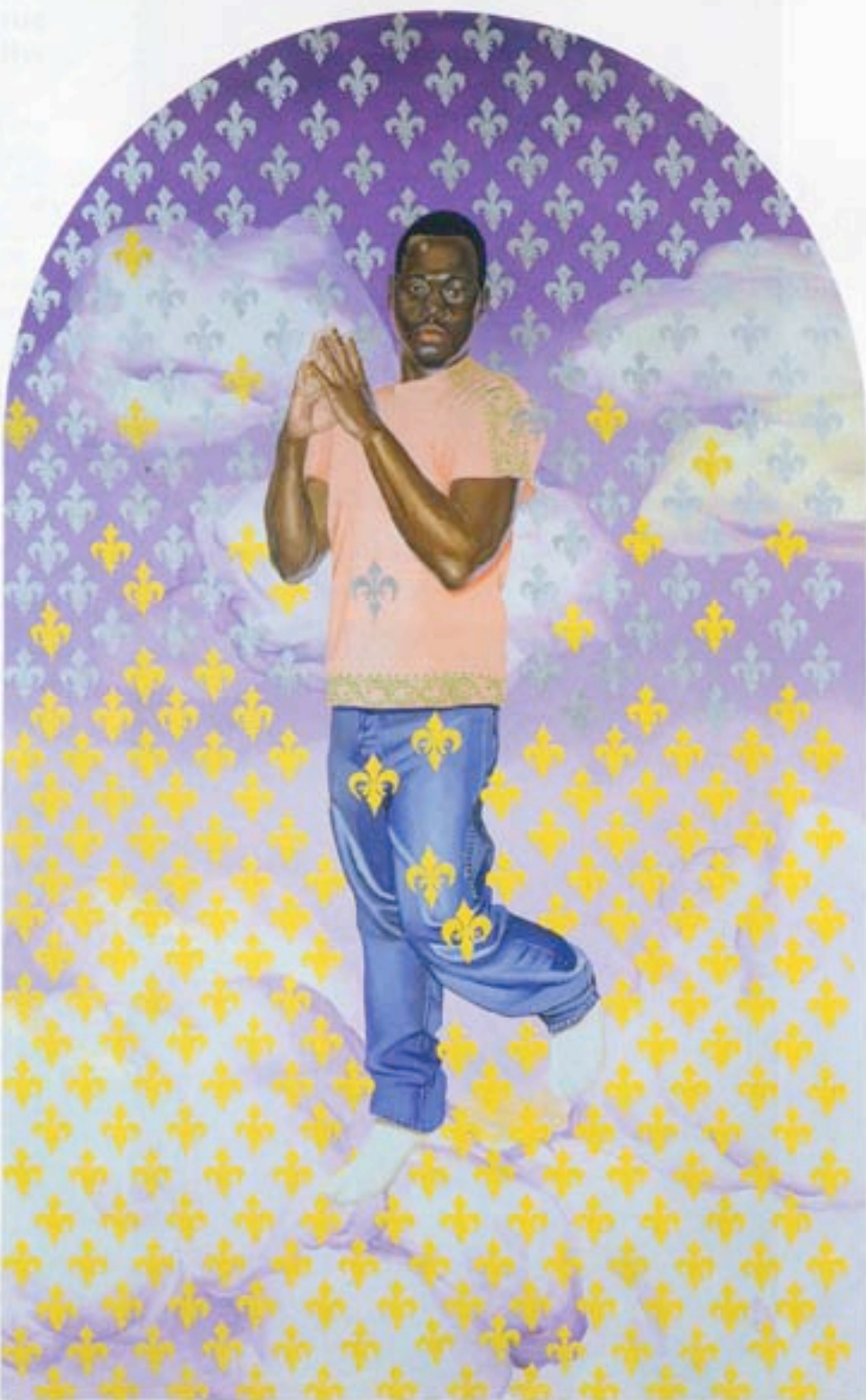
A trip to Italy originally prompted the "Passing/Posing" series, and Wiley's work in some ways recalls that of Fred Wilson at the 2003 Venice Biennale—a presentation in which Wilson explored historical depictions of Africans in that once-powerful multicultural city. In his use of figure substitutions, Wiley also manifests a thematic affinity with Yinka Shonibare, who posed coolly as the eponymous hero of "Diary of a Victorian Dandy," his 1998 photo series of elaborate period vignettes.

In addition to placing black models in European paintings, Wiley often engages with these source works in a far more transformative way, undertaking both a close examination and a critique of Europe's grand tradition. "What's most important in my work, to my own mind," the artist says, "is that the history of Western European painting is the history of Western European white men in positions of dominance." So in *Decoration of the Sacrament in the Chapel of Udine, Resurrection* (2003), he has taken away the flag featured in the original Tiepolo painting but kept the pole, adding a bulb at the bottom to convert it into a staff. Wiley alters the pole's orientation and design to signify a cultural shift: slung over the black model's back, the staff becomes a potential weapon.

Wiley's borrowings also create a surprising vehicle for commentary on hyper-masculinity in black culture. "Black masculinity has been codified in a fixed way," he remarks. "I'm not trying to provide a direct corrective, but I am trying to point to a history of signs as they relate to black

people in the media. . . . There is a certain desire in my work to tie the urban street and the way it's been depicted with elements that are not necessarily coded as masculine." What he calls "floration"—ranging from Islamic to Baroque to Rococo design—overflows onto the figures in

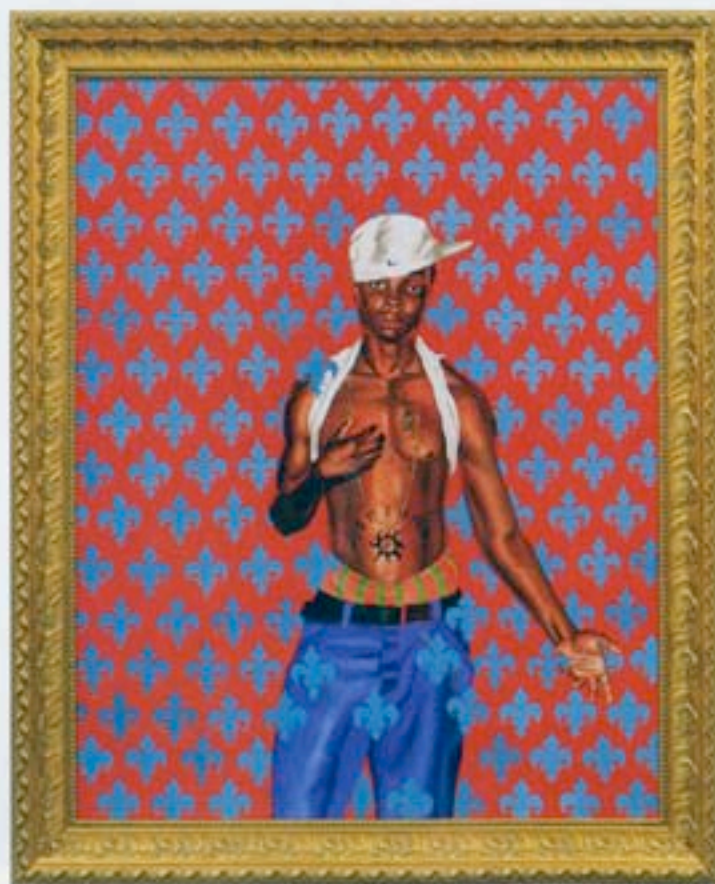
telling ways. In *Investiture of Bishop Harold as the Duke of Franconia No. 2* (2004), after Ingres, the confident figure is accompanied by floating yellow roses, and could as well be the recipient as the generator of the sperm teeming around him. (Wiley describes this much-used



Immaculate Consumption, 2003, oil on panel, 90 by 60 inches.
Courtesy Brooklyn Museum.



Female Prophet Anne, Who Observes the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple, 2003, oil on canvas, 82 by 72 inches. Sam and Shaul Schwartz, California.



Morfeus, 2003, oil on canvas, 60 by 48 inches. Collection Hort Family, New York.

Pictorial illumination here is eerily artificial. Wiley bathes his figures in a vibrant glow, as if the background color were actually radiant, and surrounds each character with repetitive patterning.

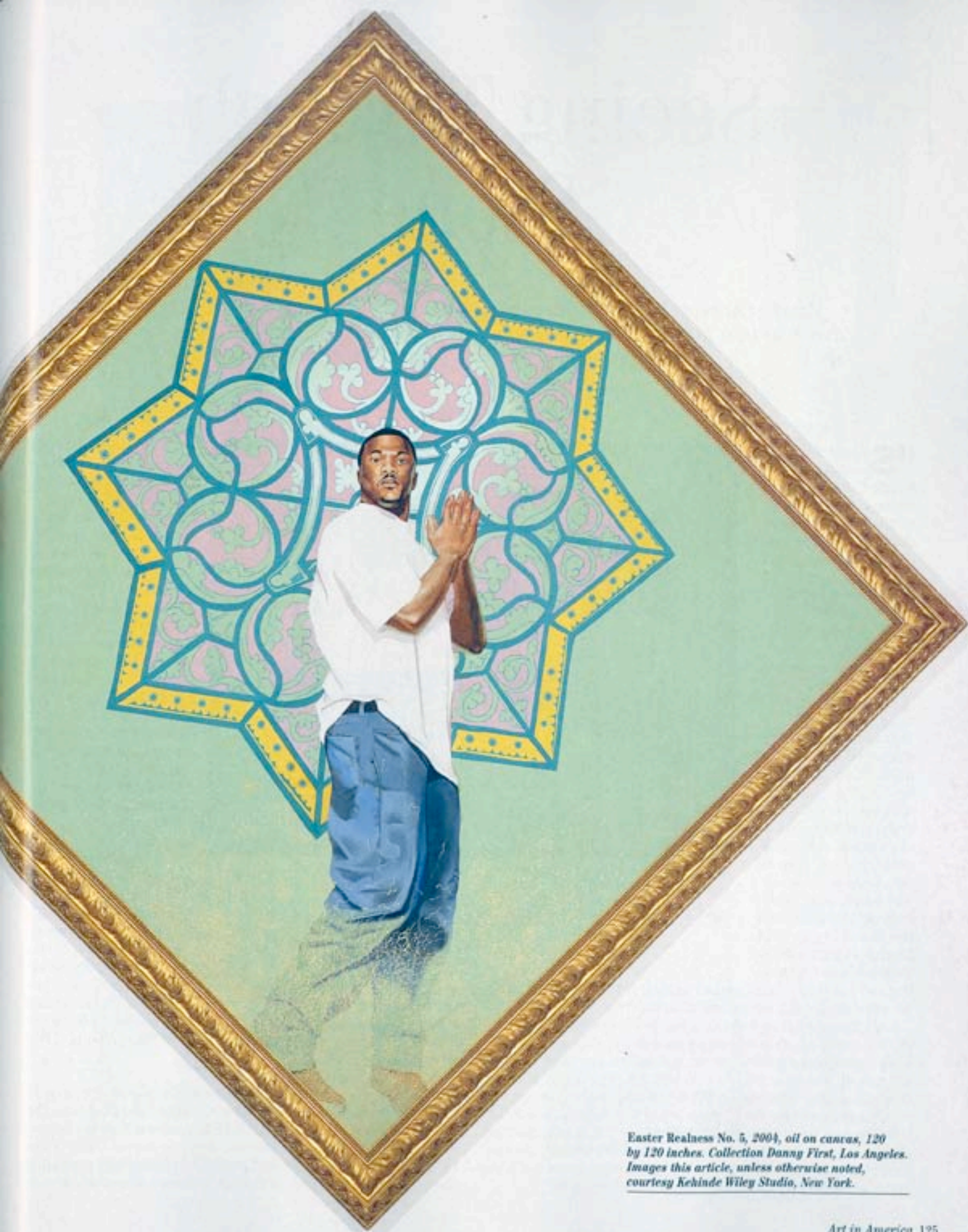
device as "a send-up of old master painting as the ultimate cum shot.") And for all of the machismo that Wiley's figures exude, he frequently labels them with female names or descriptors from the original image.

Wiley's most humorous double-edged commentary came on opening night, when he arranged for the appearance of the drag queen and opera singer Shequida, dressed in a Venetian gown. Along with black male performers classically trained at the Juilliard School of Music, Shequida performed hip-hop hits in the faux chapel. In such a context, "passing" can be read as more than a heavily loaded racial term. It also points to sexual posturing within masculine identity itself, and to the striking difference between open gayness and life "on the down low."

Wiley's engagement with art history is as ambivalent as his take on gender conventions. His first solo museum show coincided with the Brooklyn Museum's John Singer Sargent portrait exhibition. Both artists look to European precedents for an authoritative template for their American subjects. But Wiley—who admits to being "in awe" of the technical command of his source artists—nevertheless asserts that he is "interrogating this tradition and, at the same time, emptying it out." He systematically takes a "pedestrian" encounter with African-American men, elevates it to heroic scale, and reveals—through subtle formal alterations—that the postures of power can sometimes be seen as just that, a pose. □

"Passing/Posing: Paintings by Kehinde Wiley" appeared Oct. 8, 2004-Feb. 5, 2005, at the Brooklyn Museum. The exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue consisting of a boxed set of 18 reproductions and a brochure with texts by organizer Tumelo Mosaka and critics Franklin Sirmans and Greg Tate. Works by the artist will appear in the group shows "Maximum Flavor" at the Atlanta College of Art Gallery [May 26-Aug. 7] and "Neo-Baroque" at the Eglhas Art Gallery, Verona, Italy [October 2005]. Wiley also has upcoming solo exhibitions at Conner Contemporary Art, Washington, D.C. [May 6-June 11]; Deitch Projects, New York [October 2005]; and the Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus, Ohio [2006].

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Easter Realness No. 5, 2004, oil on canvas, 120 by 120 inches. Collection Danny First, Los Angeles. Images this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy Kehinde Wiley Studio, New York.