

Pieces of a Man

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At the Huntington Library in Pasadena, Thomas Gaingsborough's Blue Boy and Sir Thomas Lawrence's Pinkie sit perennially posed in their gloomy little worlds. Here portrait painting was done with capital P's, as the unities of time and space were diligently stroked into place by their masters. Like many of his generation, the cannon remains a source of energy for Kehinde Wiley. An LA native who no doubt saw these and other such paintings at a young age, Wiley is now developing useful reconfigurations of the historical practices that have shaped his imagination and his chosen medium. Through painting, Wiley is arbitrating the aesthetic disputes of a form that depended for centuries upon a recently dismantled truth. In this effort, Wiley is among a generation of artists who are building new domains of providence in which "the real" may continue to exert its force over the irony of art making.

Central to LA civic life at present is the Warhol retrospective on display downtown at the museum of contemporary art. Here one finds Warhol in his radiantly reductive surfaces; one revels in repetition and two dimensional desires. Here also lie roads to Wiley's work. In his paintings of handsome men, Wiley is rendering both an idealized reflection of himself and a projection of what he desires in others onto his brightly colored, two dimensional spaces. The power of the surface is inescapable as is its efficiency as a depository of complex histories. The surface does its work bestowing a diminished immortality upon each of its inhabitants.

At the end of my block in Echo Park, a small photography gallery is showing a group of found photos from the fifties: erotic shots of Mexican women posing playfully in states of undress, with velvety curtains and lacey undergarments playing their own prominent roles. While Wiley seems to be collecting and possessing his subjects in the manner of such kitschy photography, he also disrupts this familiar play of seeing. His realistically alluring subjects are disconnected from physical laws; ornamental patterns upon garments reach forward out of their planes and hair grows perpetually in smoky signals. While fetishes punctuate his scenes, the displacements of these layered worlds make new relationships out of familiar objectifications.

Wiley sifts through the remnants of his culture and, most impressively, is able to build a whole from these many cluttering parts. While having already located a visual language of his own, Wiley now stands in prime position upon a mound of representations, icons, and facades, all of which are waiting patiently for a caring hand to mine them for re-use. With the stroke of his brush, Wiley brings his black boys to life, giving them just enough strength to contend with the terrible and beautiful pasts that continuously encroach upon all of us.