

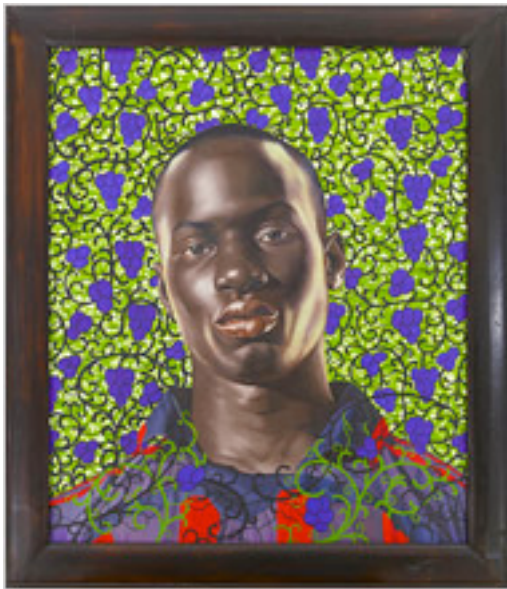
ART REVIEW | KEHINDE WILEY

# A Hot Conceptualist Finds the Secret of Skin

By [ROBERTA SMITH](#)

Published: September 4, 2008

Is Kehinde Wiley a Conceptual subversive who happens to paint or yet another producer of pictorial fluff that makes him our latest Bouguereau? Do his big, flashy pictures of young African-American men recast as the kings, dandies, prophets and saints of European portraiture subvert the timeworn ruses of Western art and its hierarchies of race, class and sex? Or are they just a passing art-market fancy, with enough teasing irreverence, dollops of political correctness and decorative punch to look good for a while above the couches of pseudoliberal pseudocollectors?



Courtesy of Kehinde Wiley and Deitch Projects

Kehinde Wiley, the World Stage: Africa, Lagos-Dakar at the Studio Museum features 10 recent works, including “Matar Mbaye.”

The answers to all these questions may be, Try again. “Kehinde Wiley, the World Stage: Africa, Lagos-Dakar,” a show of 10 of his most recent paintings at the [Studio Museum in](#)

[Harlem](#), proposes another possibility: Mr. Wiley is a young artist whose intellectual ambition and Photo Realist chops have allowed his career to get ahead of his art.

His stats include 15 solo shows in galleries and museums around the world since 2003, studios in New York and China and assistants who help him turn out scores of paintings that sell briskly. And yet at 31 Mr. Wiley is only now beginning to make paintings that don't feel mostly like campy, gaudy shams. This show — which would be more appropriate in a commercial gallery than in a museum, by the way — could mark the end of his first 15 minutes of fame and the beginning of his second, with an option to renew.

Until now the Conceptual rationale behind Mr. Wiley's paintings has tended to overpower their visual presence, which helps reduce them to illustrations. Like [Norman Rockwell](#)'s paintings they look better in reproduction than in reality.

His portraits initially depicted African-American men against rich textile or wallpaper backgrounds whose patterns he has likened to abstractions of sperm. Some of the subjects were famous (rap and sports stars), others not.

Their silken running suits, carefully creased jeans and bling reflected the sartorial codes of hip-hop, but their poses and props (thrones, scepters, rearing horses, religious attributes) were lifted from the portraits of Velázquez, David and Gainsborough or Renaissance images of saints. The substitution of black for white faces and low for high culture created all kinds of mind-bending twists and turns, especially since Mr. Wiley, who is gay, often brought out the homoeroticism implicit in much European portraiture and used it to undercut the machismo bluster of his subjects.

But the paintings' slick surfaces usually felt dead and mechanical, despite having been painstakingly handmade; their compositions were often fussy and unstable, and the men's posturing, however undercut, could seem defensive, if not misogynistic. Mr. Wiley's work also seemed overly indebted to artists and photographers working with issues like identity and celebrity, including [Andy Warhol](#), Barkley L. Hendricks, John

Ahearn and Rigoberto Torres, Robert Mapplethorpe, Annie Leibowitz, Catherine Opie, Kerry James Marshall, Yinka Shonibare, Malick Sidibe, Yasumasa Morimura and Seydou Keïta.

A lot of these problems are receding in the Studio Museum show because Mr. Wiley is doing what all painters have to do: developing a surface of his own. To do so he is starting where most figurative painters have started, at least since the invention of oil paint: with the rendering of human skin. He is beginning to paint skin in ways you can't stop looking at. And other things are falling into place too. The compositions are consistently calmer, and the spatial play between the figures and their backgrounds is more tightly controlled.

Whether these differences are traceable to the fact that for the first time Mr. Wiley's subjects are African rather than African-American men is an interesting subject for discussion. The young men here are more simply dressed and often more open in their expressions. Their poses are based on precolonial tribal figures and postcolonial public sculpture, which may not invite as much vamping as the more realistic poses and personalities of Western painting. And the skin of these men is consistently darker, which may present a greater range of chromatic possibilities and challenges. In any event, the figures seem more carefully worked and less rote and filled in.

The backgrounds, based on indigenous Dutch wax-resist fabrics once produced in Africa for European export, are also used to sensational effect, especially in the red flowers and indigo patterns that embrace the stalwart young man in "Benin Mother and Child." The textiles continue their sly asides: in this painting and others here, the vinelike patterns that break free of the backgrounds and coil across torsos are dotted with x's and o's that add up to the female chromosome symbol.

The small portraits have a special emotional directness and visual power. "Ibrahima Sacko" and "Matar Mbaye," in particular, have a wonderful balance between skin as

paint and as flesh. In addition, in the Mbaye portrait, the background is two distinct layers: carefully painted purple flowers over a loose green pattern that seems painted freehand. It appears to have no photographic source, which is something of a departure for Mr. Wiley.

The shows surrounding the Wiley exhibition are especially lively. “R.S.V.P.: Senga Nengudi With a Response From Rashawn Griffin” initiates a series of project shows of only two works: one from the museum’s collection and one by an invited artist inspired by it. On view in the museum’s new downstairs galleries are a lively show of art from the collection and the equally lively “Eye Notes,” which mixes photographs of Harlem by teenagers with vintage images by the great James VanDerZee.

On the second floor new work by the museum’s most recent group of three artists in residence is on view. It maintains this program’s impressive record and as usual offers insights into the nature of artistic development.



Courtesy of Leslie Hewitt

Leslie Hewitt's "Riffs on Real Time (2 of 10)," at the Studio.

Leslie Hewitt, the best known of the three, continues to blend postminimal sculpture and photo appropriation in ways that mine different levels of black experience — public and private, emotional and intellectual. Her sculptures here emphasize a weakness: They often suffer from dryness and obscurity. But her photographs of arrangements of found photographs and books laid out on the floor continue to be hauntingly evocative.

Saya Woolfalk, who is a whiz in several mediums (starting with sewing), makes environments that veer too close to kindergarten, and her current one is no exception. Yet it contains a video, "Ethnography of No Place" (made with Rachel Lears), that could move more quickly but is otherwise a little tour de force of performance, animation, born-again Pattern and Decoration, soft sculpture and anthropological satire.



Courtesy of Saya Woolfalk and Rachel Lears

An image from "Ethnography of No Place," a video by Saya Woolfalk and Rachel Lears.

Tanea Richardson presents three bulky wall pieces made of various stuffed and bound fabrics, pieces of net and sometimes tree branches. Initially they seem overly familiar, but they gradually become extremely particular and rather sinister.

All her forms have a twisted, writhing quality, and the titles — "In Protection of Our Bodies," "The Painting Escapes" and "Untitled (Loom)" — indicate Ms. Richardson's willingness to push this in very different directions. She is the least known and perhaps

the least developed artist here, but she has a basic faith in the communicative power of form that all the others — Mr. Wiley included — could learn from.

*“Kehinde Wiley, the World Stage: Africa, Lagos-Dakar,” “New Intuitions: Leslie Hewitt, Tanea Richardson and Saya Woolfalk,” “Eye Notes” and “R.S.V.P.” are at the Studio Museum in Harlem, 144 West 125th Street, (212) 864-4500, [studiomuseum.org](http://studiomuseum.org), through Oct. 26.*