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Art in Review

Kehinde Wiley: Rumors of War

Deitch Projects
76 Grand Street, SoHo
Through tomorrow

Kehinde Wiley is a history painter, one of the best we have. By this I mean that he creates history as much as tells it. He does so at Deitch Projects in four large new paintings that update the old-master genre of equestrian portraiture.

The paintings are based on canonical models - Rubens's portrait of the Duke of Lerma, Jacques-Louis David's of Napoleon mounted on a noble steed, and so on. In such pictures, aggrandizement is the point, and Mr. Wiley retains the trappings of it, right down to killer gilt frames. The change he makes is to replace the portraits of the original sitters, Old World power figures, with those of young African-American men.

This transfer seems, at first, a little too straightforward, too obvious. But it has complications. People once excluded from Western art, or reduced to the role of servants, are now in command: Mr. Wiley has used old cultural tools to create a new rule. At the same time, these young aristocrats are presented in settings and poses traditionally associated with masculine dominance, updated with hip-hop attire.

On one art-historical point there is no ambiguity: Mr. Wiley's witty David steal, "Napoleon Leading the Army Over the Alps," makes the original look like the blowhard art it is. On the whole, though, like any good historian, he balances contradictions where he finds them. And, like any good artist, he pushes the story ahead.

HOLLAND COTTER