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## ***Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic***

**Jillian Russo, Curator, Art Students League of New York**

**Curated by:** Eugenie Tsai

**Exhibition schedule:** Brooklyn Museum, New York, February 20-May 24, 2015; Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Fort Worth, TX, September 20-January 10, 2015; Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, WA, February 11-May 8, 2016; Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA, June 3-September 5, 2016

**Exhibition catalogue:** Eugenie Tsai, ed. and Connie H Choi, *Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic*, Exh. cat. Brooklyn: Brooklyn Museum of Art, 2015. 192 pp; 123 color illustrations. Hardcover; \$49.95 (ISBN: 9783791354309)

The first museum survey of Kehinde Wiley's thirteen-year career, [A New Republic](#) is curated by Eugenie Tsai and spotlights the continued relevance of the artist's work to national and international conversations about race, sexuality, and power. Renowned for his portraits that restage Old Master paintings with black and brown protagonists, Wiley does not describe himself as a political artist. He has drawn attention to the tendency of the public to assume a political intention, "a politics of redemption," in the work of artists of color.<sup>1</sup> Yet, as an African American who has spoken frankly about the homoerotic content of his painting, his work is presciently and unapologetically in dialogue with contemporary issues. In Wiley's words, which open the exhibition, "Painting is about the world we live in. Black people live in the world. My choice is to include them. This is my way of saying yes to us."

In recent years, the world we live in has included increasing media coverage of violence perpetrated against black males and communities of color, from the death of Trayvon Martin on February 26, 2012 to the June 17, 2015 mass shooting at the Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. Over the same period, the fight for legalization of same sex marriage slowly gained traction, first on a state level and, nine days after South Carolina shooting, as a constitutional right. Although these events do not define Wiley's paintings, in [his recent NPR interview](#) he acknowledged the social-political context for his work:

What I wanted to do was to look at the powerlessness that I felt as—and continue to feel at times—as a black man in the American streets. I know what it feels like to walk through the streets, knowing what it is to be in this body, and how certain people respond to that body. This dissonance between the world that you know, and then what you mean as a symbol in public, that strange, uncanny feeling of having to adjust for...this double consciousness.

The title Wiley selected for the exhibition, as Tsai notes in her opening wall text, appears “corrective, utopian.”

*A New Republic* opens with eight new works in stained glass, which are installed in the Brooklyn Museum’s fifth-floor rotunda using an octagonal “altarpiece” constructed to evoke the structure of a central-plan church. The design creates a mood of contemplation and respect for Wiley’s subjects, who take on the roles of heroes, saints, and martyrs, highlighting the absence of representations of heroic or noble black men throughout European and American history. The artist’s move into the medium of stained glass intensifies the role of light in his paintings, which has been interpreted as a symbol of power, referencing both the techniques of Old Master portraiture and the “bling” of hip-hop style.<sup>2</sup> Wiley has emphasized a more spiritual interpretation, describing his use of light as having a “very religious and spiritual connotation” similar to “the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich...in which a rapturous light connotes the presence of God”.

This devotional quality is further explored in a series of small paintings based on Byzantine icons. Here, shimmering gold leaf backgrounds illuminate the black and brown holy figures, such as *Saint Gregory Palamas* (2014), who holds art history books in place of sacred texts. Juxtaposing the sacred and the commercial, bronze portrait busts installed nearby appear as counterpoints to the saintly imagery. Solid and weighty, the statues seem encumbered and branded by their contemporary attire such as a Nike sneaker or comb placed on top of a head or the straps of a backpack.

Since his first major exhibition *Passing/Posing*, which the Brooklyn Museum presented in 2004, Wiley has explored portraiture as a language of power. The second gallery of the exhibition examines the genesis of this theme in early work. In 2002, while he was an artist-in-residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem, Wiley’s painting took a new direction when he found a discarded FBI wanted poster on the street. In the artist’s words, the mug shot of a young African American man sparked a comparison with “a lot of the portraiture that I had enjoyed from the eighteenth century.” He “noticed the difference between the two; how one is positioned in a way that is totally outside their control, shut down and relegated to those in power, whereas those in the other were positioning themselves in states of stately grace and self-possession.”. This relegation of power is palpable in *Mugshot Profile in Blue* (2002) where the young black man’s gaze is nullified. The viewer is given only a rear view of his head.

Wiley began emphasizing the agency of his subjects through his method of “street casting,” which allows him to work collaboratively with his sitter. Possible models are scouted on the street and invited to participate in the project. In the studio, he has the model select an image from art history books to restage and photographs them in the chosen pose. Through this process, Wiley shares his passion for art history. He extends an opportunity for a personal encounter with art that mirrors his formative childhood experiences at the Huntington Library Art Gallery and in free weekend art classes at California State University. His subjects have a voice in how they are represented and ultimately become new protagonists within dramatic images with deep cultural and historical roots.

At the entrance to the third gallery, which pairs works from the series *Rumors of War and Down*, viewers encounter *Morpheus* (2008), a monumental recumbent male

figure based on Jean-Antoine Houdon’s sculpture. Wiley adjusts Houdon’s composition, rotating the shoulder of the figure ninety degrees so that the subject faces us directly in a pose that references Titian’s *Venus of Urbino* (1538). Morpheus’s eyes meet the viewer with a soft, provocative gaze usually reserved for representations of women. Wiley reinforces the sensuality of Titian’s painting with contemporary clothing. Low-slung jeans reveal a pair of boxer shorts and tight tank top exposes a glimpse of hip. This explicit homoeroticism is meant to push boundaries, placing *Morpheus* in the lineage of Édouard Manet’s *Olympia* (1863). It is a regrettable signal of their effectiveness that the *Down* paintings sparked a backlash in a prejudiced and poorly researched *Village Voice* review. Other works in the series depict sleeping, dead, or entombed figures, intertwining themes of sex and death. In *Veiled Christ* (2008), a white shroud clings to a lifeless muscular brown body. Commanding compassion and respect, Wiley’s fallen men are not victims.

In contrast to the horizontality of the *Down* canvases, *Rumors of War* is comprised of monumental equestrian portraits in ornate gilded frames with spermatozoa motifs that announced the portraits as blatant expressions of potency and wealth. Wiley acknowledges that he deliberately creates “a high-priced luxury good for wealthy consumers,” which appeals “to the aesthetic principles of a very elite social class whose aesthetic references are about exclusion, not inclusion, it’s an absolute celebration of decadence and empire.” In addition to attracting collectors, the paintings have a clear appeal for museums. The work addresses a diverse public and the artist’s use of historical references creates a dialogue with existing collections. Detroit Museum of Art curator Valerie J. Mercer explains in the exhibition catalogue that she selected the equestrian portrait *Officer of the Hussars* (2007) for its “ability to engage our public on many levels.” Eugene Tsai describes *Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps* (2005), as depicting a “contemporary black male subject, who could have walked in from the neighborhood this morning.” The painting typically hangs in the Brooklyn Museum lobby, a symbol of outreach and inclusion.

The second half of the exhibition explores the recent series *The World Stage* and *An Economy of Grace*, two ambitious projects in which Wiley expands his artistic practice. In *The World Stage* paintings, which began with the opening of a satellite studio in Beijing, he applies the street casting technique in different cultural contexts including China, India, Brazil, Israel, and Jamaica. As art historian Sarah Lewis has noted, “to point a camera at another individual around the globe can be a loaded act” that engages critically with the history of colonialism. From a purely visual point of view, this broader scope of approach at times evokes an international application of the Wiley filter, producing a sense of repetitiveness for which the artist has been criticized.

Wiley also ventures into new territory with his first portrait series of women, in which his sitters, dressed in couture gowns, radiate strength. In some paintings, such as *Mrs. Siddons* (2012) and *Mrs. Graham* (2012), the poses appear contrived and, as Roberta Smith noted in [her New York Times exhibition review](#), the women compete against exaggerated flowery backgrounds that encroach on their space. In contrast, *Princess Victoire of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha* (2012) is an elegant composition. Removing the terrace that separates the princess from the world around her in the original painting by Sir Edwin Landseer, Wiley’s broad-shouldered black woman is free to stride into a dense field of flowering vines. At the center of the painting, Wiley overlays the translucent train of her green dress on the floral background, showcasing his technical skills.

*A New Republic* concludes with the *Memling* series, based on the Flemish artist Hans Memling's famous Renaissance portraits of powerful merchants such as *Portrait of a Man in a Red Hat* (1465-70). Despite the secular subjects, the red carpeting and dim lighting in the small gallery evoke a reliquary. The intimate and sensitively painted portraits, such as *After Memling's Portrait of Man with a Coin of the Emperor Nero* (2013), are displayed in wooden triptych frames, inscribed with the sitter's name. This presentation has religious associations as well, referencing the tabletop altarpieces commissioned as status symbols and personal devotional objects.

The exhibition catalogue, edited by Tsai, includes an essay by Brooklyn Museum assistant curator Connie H. Choi, along with 35 short statements by art historians, curators, art critics, poets, and writers that accompany the plates. This format acknowledges the already considerable body of scholarship on Wiley. Rather than attempting to supplant the 2012 monograph published by Rizzoli, *A New Republic* offers a multiplicity of new voices, making it an essential companion to the earlier text.

Given the critical attention Wiley's art attracts, the international expansion of his studio, and the organization of a retrospective, it is easy to forget that his career is still young. It is to be hoped that his work will continue to evolve in original and substantive ways. *A New Republic* represents his voice as crucial to current conversations about art, gender, race, and history.

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations, except those noted in the text, are taken from the monograph *Kehinde Wiley*, (New York: Rizzoli, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Krista Thompson, "The Sound of Light: Reflections on Art History in the Visual Culture of Hip-Hop," *Art Bulletin* 91 (2009): 481-505.