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Prof. Hall

DOWN

A Review on the Collection of Kehinde Wiley

“If you look at all the paintings that I love in art history, these are the painting where great powerful men are being celebrated on the big walls of museums throughout the world. What feels really strange is not to be able to see a reflection of myself within that world”

- Kehinde Wiley (Morning 2105)

There is something special to be said about famed artist Kehinde Wiley. Raised in Los Angeles by his mother who owned a second hand store to help ends meet, Wiley found his love for art after she sent him to art class at the age of 11. Graduating with a masters of Fine Arts from Yale University and earning an opportunity to be an artist and resident at the prestigious Studio Museum in Harlem in 2002, Wiley came across a mug shot of a black man in the street. It was then, as if he conscience awakened he realized that he had an opportunity to give black men something that society couldn't...immortality.



In my opinion, his 2008 collection, “Down”, speaks to that notion and in volumes. Wiley takes the paintings of well known (and maybe not so well known artists, for the novice art appreciator); master artists like, Holbein, Mantegna and Houdon, and recreates them with black, male muses from the very same streets he found that mugshot. His work is colorful and has a message for the the art community, a message that seems to say, “ I’m ivy league, I’m talented, I’m black and everything I do is as dark as me or darker than me, I’m here to stay. Deal with it”. His larger than life portraits reference images painted by the masters who depict fallen warriors, saints, and characters of classical mythology. What I appreciate about this collection, in particular, is that while Wiley uses his classical technique and influences of old-world 16-19th-century European artists, he deliberately injects his “swag” into the very DNA of his pieces making the artwork current and relevant. While most of the portraits he creates are taken from paintings in art history of powerful white men created by white men he places people of color in their stead. How the original artist dressed his muse of that time, Wiley dawns his in urban ware with a cheeky nod to that artist by styling and posing his subjects in that same way.



Ten years after being put on national display, *DOWN* can also give artistic insight to today's struggle of black men at the hands of law enforcement. Taking from portraits and sculptures like “The Virgin Martyr St. Cecilia”, “Femme piquée par un serpent” (*“Woman bitten by a Serpent”*) by Auguste Clésinge and “Lamentation over the dead Christ” by Andrea Mantegna, the portraits in this collection feature models in fallen or slouched positions giving notion to the fact that they have died at the hands of an oppressor. Although “Down” was in exhibition in 2008 there is an eerie sense of current events in the pieces. Black men and women are murdered at the hands of their white counterparts and seeing the lifeless bodies against colorful floral wallpaper almost feels like homage is being paid to those slain. “In Wiley’s reconceptualization, Jesus’s body is fit, his skin radiant. Gone are the blue face, puncture wounds, and emaciation of the prototype. Art critics have recognized in this and many more of Wiley’s paintings a homoeroticism, reading them in light of Wiley’s sexuality. That’s their prerogative, but in the direct gaze and parted lips of Wiley’s dead Christ I hear not “Come hither” but “Look, white America, at what you have done, at what you are doing.” (Jones 2017) There is a strong feeling of role play and pride that one can also interpret if they dig a little



Top: Kehinde Wiley (American, 1977–), *The Dead Christ in the Tomb*, 2007. Oil and enamel on canvas, 30 x 144 in.
Borrow: Hans Holbein (German, ca. 1497–1543), *The Dead Christ in the Tomb*, 1522. Oil and tempera on panel, 12 x 78.7 in. Kunstmuseum Basel.

deeper into Wiley's mind. Kehinde's masterpieces are all inspired by by the powerful white men who have made and imprint on the fibers of art history. It's fascinating to see how he takes the very same painting of his European mentors and has now become that artistic figure of his time. Taking his place behind the canvas as one of the greats. To know that dreams can become realities with determination and passion should be the example that we all look to. What once seemed to be a members only institution, Wiley has opened and made a way for himself and other aspiring artist of color and it's clear by the reception he has received.



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