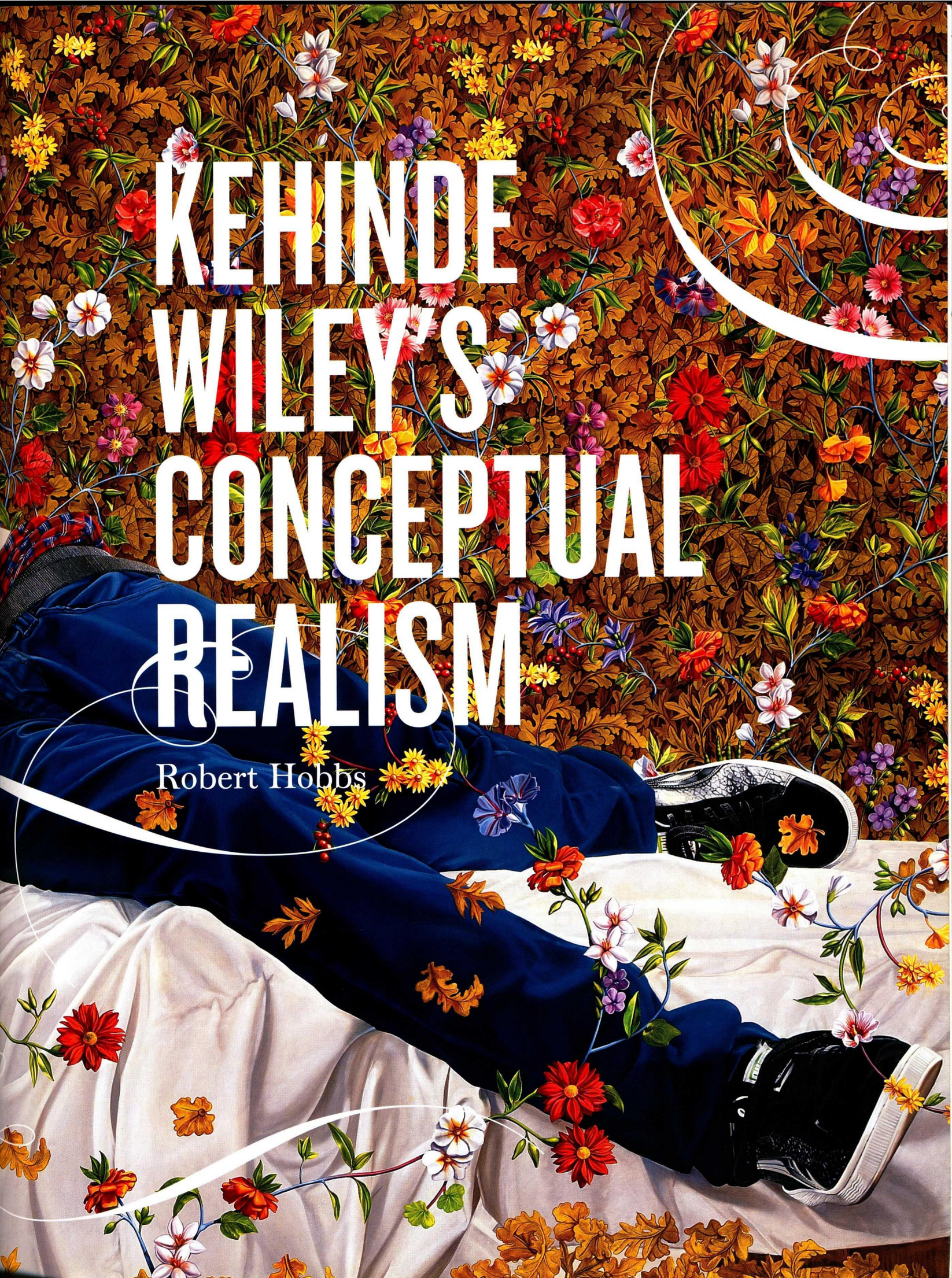
KEHINDE WILEY

with contributions
by
Thelma Golden, Robert Hobbs,
Sarah E. Lewis, Brian Keith Jackson,
& Peter Halley

RIZZOLI NEW YORK
New York · Paris · London · Milan


KEHINDE
WILEY'S
CONCEPTUAL
REALISM
Robert Hobbs

It was a mug shot of an African American man in his twenties that appeared sympathetic, attractive, and it had all his information on it—his name, his address, his Social Security number, and his infractions—and it made me begin to think about portraiture in a radically different way: I began thinking about this mug shot itself as portraiture in a very perverse sense, a type of marking, a recording of one's place in the world in time. And I began to start thinking about a lot of the portraiture that I had enjoyed from the eighteenth century and 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. The first paintings of Passing/Posing were the merging of those two lines.

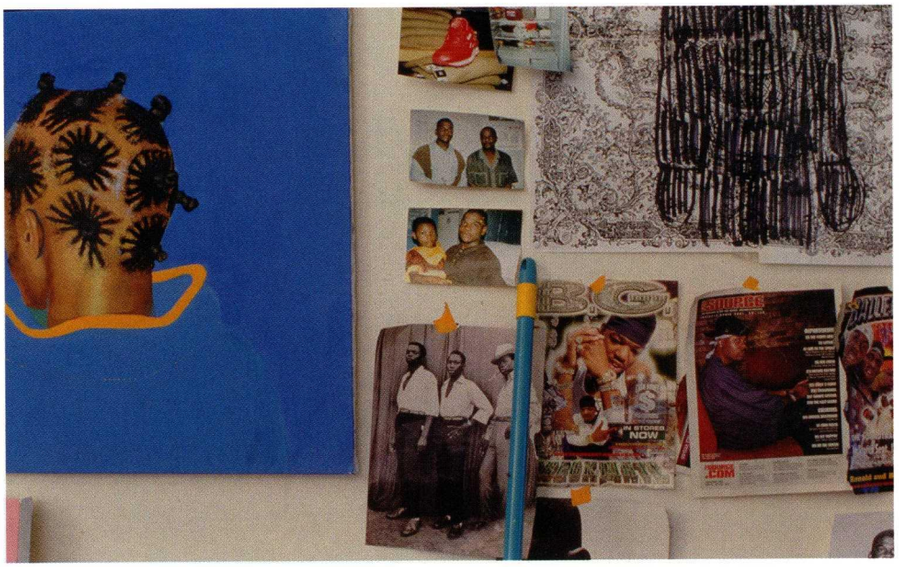
Kehinde Wiley, interview with Roy Hurst, National Public Radio, June 1, 2005

The imagery. It was sheer spectacle. . . . It wasn't until later that I started thinking about issues of desire, objectification, and fantasy in portraiture . . . and of course colonialism.

Kehinde Wiley in Christine Kim, "Faux Real: Interview with Kehinde Wiley," 2002

New York painter Kehinde Wiley's imposing portraits of alpha streetwise black males, dressed in characteristic hip-hop gear and inscribed within the grandiose traditional European painted stage sets originally empowering secular and religious figures, have been created only since 2001. And yet, in this short amount of time, these paintings have substantially redefined portraiture in terms of power relationships, so that its form of representation, which I am calling "conceptual realism,"[1] can be understood as coercive rather than simply mimetic, and its control can be regarded as a functional mode of address rather than an occasion of individual autonomy. Central to Wiley's practice is the subject of desire, outlined by French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan as a twofold yearning: first, to act out the role of traditionally ensconced authority and/or its contemporary streetwise incarnation, and, second, to be the subject of the other's need, the focus of its gaze, and thus a *performance* for it. As Wiley has noted, "the black body represented [in my work] is, to some extent, my own black body. I took a stance where the lines between artist as fantasizer and blackness as fantastic become blurred,"[2] therefore placing himself and his own vulnerability front stage center in history's imposing theater. Viewed in this way, desire can be understood in terms of the artist's own longing to assume an important role on the contrapuntal past/present, intertextual stages he depicts, and ontology can be considered

PREVIOUS PAGES *Morpheus*, 2008. Oil on canvas, 108 x 180 inches. Collection of 21C Museum Foundation, Louisville, Kentucky. Courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery, New York; Roberts & Tilton, Culver City, California; and Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago



View of Wiley's inspiration board in his studio while an artist in residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem, 2001.

in the terms of competing "discursive regimes," using French structuralist/poststructuralist Michel Foucault's term for legitimized forms of intelligibility to describe the overlapping traditional and contemporary modes of portraiture found in Wiley's work. In order to appreciate the desire for the special types of historically conditioned beings operative in Wiley's portraits, it will help to look briefly at portraiture in terms of the authority with which it formerly cast and naturalized individuals as autonomous figures under humanism's once-legitimizing ideology. Beginning in the late nineteenth century and continuing today, humanism has been unveiled as an extraordinary masquerade, and so has its hold on portraiture and this genre's ability to construct individuals as unquestioned representations of power.

HUMANISM: A CHARADE

Beginning in Renaissance Italy and continuing until the nineteenth century, portraiture in both Europe and the Americas following European colonization constituted a preeminent representational mode, second only to history painting. Portrait painting, in turn, was positioned above the category of genre views (defined as scenes from everyday life), which was followed, in descending order, by those of landscape, animal painting, and still-life depiction. In contradistinction to its former high standing, portraiture in the twentieth century suffered from the same disbelief in the reliability of individual perception responsible for the philosophical downgrading of empiricism and its seemingly self-evident certainties of closely attentive sensory receptiveness and everyday good judgment, which have increasingly been regarded as ideological rather than natural.

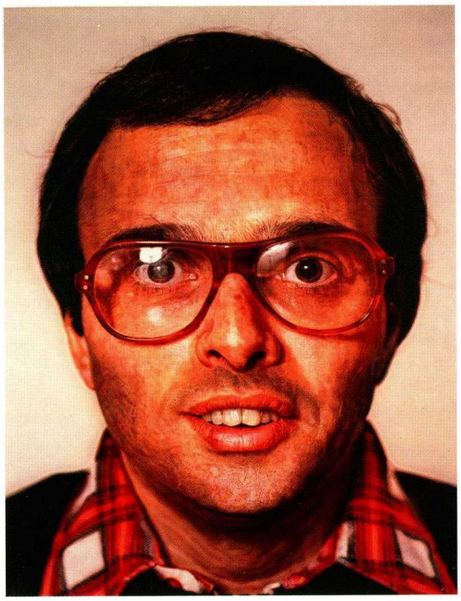
In addition to taking a definite hit from the deposition of empiricism as a reliable means for comprehending the world, portraiture also suffered from the related demotion of humanism. Having been unquestionably regarded for centuries in the West in terms of a universally stable, completely unique, and totally sovereign self, capable of freely determining its existence, the humanist individual's seeming intransigence was first undermined in the nineteenth century by Marxist theory, and in the next century it was given a coup de grâce by Freudian psychology, with its great emphasis on the largely unknowable and quixotic subconscious mind. Since the early years of the twentieth century, cutting-edge thinkers have regarded humanism as no longer relevant and considered its attribution of individuals' strengths to inborn core values as a simple and unmediated view of humanity.

Because of its reliance on superannuated empirical and humanistic truths, as well as its implicit vision of grand personages as the prime movers and/or catalysts of change, traditional portrait painting has been out of sync with contingent modern and postmodern approaches to the world and ad hoc conceptions of the self. It also has been at odds with Marxist understandings of the far-reaching consequences of dominant economic modes of production and has been inconsistent, moreover, with structuralist and poststructuralist theories pertaining to the figurative death of artistic authors and the very real loss of individual autonomy. Considered both separately and together, these modern and postmodern theories have had the net effect of replacing the determinative humanist individual—portraiture's primary subject—with an understanding of people as contingent beings, dependent on the indirect yet powerful force of semiotics and its concomitant mindset of specific linguistic communities.

Given the ability of these enormous theoretical and artistic changes to render the image of the once-supreme individual obsolete, if not expendable, portraits have surprisingly continued to be made by such progressive twentieth- and twenty-first-century artists as Chuck Close, Cindy Sherman, and Kehinde Wiley, whose entire oeuvres can be understood as profound reconsiderations of this genre. Regarding individuals first as no more important than the casual snapshots recording their visages, Close began in the late 1960s to employ the art of portrait painting as a diagnostic tool for revealing the idiosyncrasies of photography's depth of field and a means for undermining its presumed veracity. A decade later Sherman started utilizing herself as a screen on which to project and then photograph a range of stereotypical female roles. In the process she ironically plays with a subtle slippage between herself and the role she is assuming, a small yet crucial difference enabling her assumed personae to be understood as societal masks.[3] In his portraits dating from the beginning of the twentieth-first century, Wiley rethinks the outmoded unitary mode of aristocratic Euro-American portrait painting by reconceiving it as an eminently interactive approach capable of fully participating in a number of

RIGHT Chuck Close, *Mark*, 1978–79. Acrylic on canvas, 108 x 84 inches. Private collection. Courtesy The Pace Gallery; © Chuck Close

FAR RIGHT Cindy Sherman, *Untitled*, 1989. Color photograph, 30 ½ x 20 ½ inches (image size). Edition 1/6 (MP# 197). Courtesy the artist and Metro Pictures



timely debates. These include debunking the antiquated view of whites and blacks as occupying completely different spheres of existence, undermining the still-pervasive view of globalism as nothing more than old-style internationalism's latest face, and revealing the limitations involved in considering works of art as autonomous statements of unity and closure rather than envisaging them in terms of ongoing and open exchanges of difference.

KEHINDE WILEY: BIOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND

In looking at Wiley's portraits and the particularly meaningful contributions they make to ongoing conversations about the postmodern self, it will help to provide a verbal portrait of Wiley's background as the son of academics, with particular emphasis on the types of conversations it has afforded him, and in doing so to underscore several pertinent contradictory factors contributing to his art. I will start with his intellectually rich yet modest beginnings in South Central Los Angeles as the youngest of six children reared by a single mother. Kehinde was born, the second of a set of fraternal twins, in 1977 to two students at the University of California, Los Angeles: his father, Isiah Obot, a member of the Ibibio tribe from Nigeria and the first member of his family to go to college, came to southern California to study architecture, while his mother, Freddie-Mae Degrate Wiley, was a graduate student at the time, focusing on African linguistics, a field of study in sync with the Pan-African attitudes that were an integral aspect of 1960s art and politics. After Wiley's parents broke up before he and his brother were born, with his father returning to Nigeria, where he

would remain totally detached from his twin sons for more than two decades, Freddie-Mae Wiley subscribed to the Yoruba language tradition she was then studying and named his slightly older brother Taiwo, meaning "the firstborn," and him, Kehinde, connoting "the last to come." According to traditional Yoruba beliefs, Kehinde is perceived as the legitimate elder brother, having sent Taiwo as his emissary into the world to see if conditions were propitious for his own birth. Kehinde later learned of the Yoruba's great reverence for twins: they are placed under the auspices of the deity Orisha Ibeji and regarded as superhuman mediators between humans and the gods. Perhaps, because twins were thought to be so powerful, both the Yoruba and the Ibibio considered them taboo. In precolonial times both tribes would regularly put twins to death, and the Ibibio continue even now to regard them with suspicion.

After Wiley and his brother were born, their mother moved from studying African languages to exploring the relatively new disciplinary topic of Ebonics (a neologism joining the words "ebony" and "phonics") in order to understand some of the basic mechanics driving African American communities and to comprehend language's preeminent role in structuring identity. Early on Wiley picked up on his mother's strong commitment to language by becoming the family impersonator and mining, for humor, the intricacies and absurdities of codified speech, a process foundational for his mature portraits' contrapuntal interplays of radically different codes and a useful tactic for beginning the process of deconstructing monolithic views of culture. Later, in high school, Wiley's facility with language impressed his mother to the point of her encouraging him to become a preacher. In her move to Ebonics and the anthropological/folkloristic orientation it necessitated, Freddie-Mae Wiley also began to consider the cultural ramifications of time/space differences between African languages and Ebonics and to become involved in analyzing the ways black people conceptualize time. The problems of time/space distinctions have subsequently become crucial for Wiley's art, even though they have been oriented along a significantly different route from his mother's studies, since he has posited in his art the dialectic between the grand Euro-American tradition of portraiture and present-day hip-hop globalism.

As a single parent, Freddie-Mae Wiley needed to make a living for her family, and she managed to cobble together, with her children's help, two main ways of doing so: raising potted plants in a fiberglass greenhouse in the backyard and selling used clothing and furniture. Concerning the effect of this entrepreneurial venture on his art, Wiley would later recall how ersatz copies of imposing period furniture assumed a special childhood authenticity for him, enabling the semiotics of the false and the genuine to become intertwined:

> We had a lot of faux antique things around, ridiculous faux French furniture with plastic over it. It became a part of my own internal taste. There is a sincere part of me where I wanted to create those warm fuzzy memories of faux classic things.[4]

Wiley remembers replenishing inventory for the family shop from local yard sales, in addition to riding in the back of a moving van and stopping periodically to pick up castoffs on the street, "a hodgepodge of mid-century modern and faux Rococo tchotchkes."[5] After he began studying art, Wiley would on occasion enhance the value of secondhand pieces of furniture in the family's shop by decorating them with painted images of "little black baby putti and figurines."

These "faux Rococo tchotchkes" were soon intermixed in Wiley's mind with actual eighteenth-century prototypes when, in 1988, the year he turned eleven, his mother enrolled Taiwo and him in free weekend art classes at California State University, "to keep us off the streets," Wiley later joked. In these classes he learned how to paint and draw, and he received encouragement to paint landscapes and work from live models. In addition to scheduling these classes, Freddie-Mae Wiley arranged for her children to visit the local museums, including the Huntington Library art galleries, which had a profound effect on Kehinde. Regarding this introduction to traditional Euro-American fine art, he recalls,

> I loved the Huntington Library galleries. Joshua Reynolds, Thomas Gainsborough and John Constable were some of my favorites. . . . It was sheer spectacle, and of course beauty.[6]

He also points out that since his mother was a linguist, "art was another language to her"[7]; in a similar vein, he began over the years to regard different artistic styles as specific languages and learned to combine and contrast some of them in his mature work in terms of differently encoded and dialectically related structural statements.

Given Wiley's extensive knowledge of theory, the word "spectacle" (cited above in the artist's recollection of the art exhibited in the Huntington Library's galleries and at the beginning of this essay as an epigraph) is far more than a passing reference to the glitz and glamour of a bygone era; it refers to the specific meaning the self-proclaimed French Situationist International leader Guy Debord attributed to the word when he employed it in 1967 to refer to the wholesale cannibalization of objects in the real world by mass-media modes of re-presentation and simulation. Writing perspicaciously at a time when the hyping of commodities through unparalleled advertising was overwhelming and supplanting objects, thereby profoundly changing people's relationship to them, Debord noted, "The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images."[8] Apropos this view, Wiley has made remarks, on several other occasions, about art's spectacular qualities and has observed, "It wasn't until later that I started thinking about issues of desire, objectification, and fantasy in portraiture . . . and of course colonialism."[9] This replacement of reality with artistic images assumes a special poignancy in Wiley's recollection of his

Installation view, Thomas Gainsborough, *Jonathon Buttal: The Blue Boy*, c. 1770. Oil on canvas, 70 ⅝ x 48 ¾ inches. Courtesy the Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens, San Marino, California

response to the portraits of British aristocrats in the Huntington's art collection:

> They were artificial and opulent; there was this strange otherworldliness. As a twentieth-century, poor, black kid from Los Angeles, I had no way of digesting it. But at the same time, there was this desire to somehow possess it or belong to it.[10]

On several occasions he has mentioned experiencing a "complete disconnect in terms of cultural significance" when looking at such period portraits, and has speculated, "that alienation was a blessing in a way because

it acted as a way of accessing the work."[11] Most likely his reference to this estrangement underscores its usefulness as a means for separating these aristocratic images from their original legitimizing social and historical contexts, thereby releasing him from the assumed viewer's usual empathic response while transforming these works into molds or types, distinct conditions understandable in terms of the figurative quotation marks separating them from the worlds for which they were made and the contexts in which they originally accrued meaning.

In addition to frequenting the Huntington galleries, Wiley sometimes visited the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and, more frequently, the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena. His role model was Alice Hayward, a teacher in the California State University children's weekend art program, which he attended as a student in junior high and where he later served as a teacher while in high school. Hayward took her students on regular visits to local museums and also to artists' studios. At one point she introduced her class to the East LA artist known as Gronk, the pseudonym for the Chicano painter and performance artist Glugio Nicandro, who was respected for his murals and for making himself and his art accessible to students and locals.

The year 1989 was also a critical time for Wiley. At age twelve and only months before the fall of the Berlin Wall, he was offered the opportunity to participate in an art camp held in the tiny village of Lusevo, an old army station in the Russian forest outside St. Petersburg. The program, sponsored by the US/USSR Initiative, enabled fifty American children to study art with fifty of their Russian counterparts. The invitation to attend this camp came through the recommendation of the principal of his elementary school, and this administrator not only singled him out, but also assumed the responsibility of securing a grant to enable him to travel to the USSR and attend the camp. The camp's group art projects that year—painting murals for peace and sending candle floats into the Baltic Sea in honor of Hiroshima victims—had little, if any, lasting impact on Wiley's own work, perhaps because they were too self-conscious and didactic. But his brief view of the Hermitage Museum and the art in it corroborated his slightly earlier pleasure in visiting the Huntington galleries and proved far more significant by dazzling him with its wealth of gold leaf and splendid colonnades. Members of his family regarded his selection and participation in this camp to be a great achievement for the entire clan, and the experience was important for revealing to him the possibility of his potential success. The camp in Russia was followed in 1990 by a similar one in Pasadena with most of the original participants, so that the students could benefit from another summer with their counterparts and the Russian students could gain firsthand knowledge of the United States.

The lessons he learned at the regular Saturday art classes and the experiences of the two summers he spent at the US/USSR Initiative art camps enabled Wiley to qualify for acceptance into the Los Angeles County

High School for the Arts (LACHSA). Established in 1985 and devoted to excellence in both the arts and academics, LACHSA represented an important opportunity for talented students in the performing and visual arts. It spurred him, he has said, "to become better with representational subject matter by increasing my interest in the technical mastery of illusory work and also [its] content." Although its commendable technical training enabled him to hone his painting skills, strangely enough the school's mainly traditional view of art as technique proved far more parochial than the expanded understanding of culture afforded by his mother's research in African languages and their African American descendents.

While Wiley was in high school, he visited the studio of the African American sculptor Artis Lane, noted for her highly realistic depictions of heroic African American men and women, cast in bronze, patinated in black, and exhibited with their ceramic molds to connote, in her words, "generic man emerging out of material thinking into spiritual consciousness and symbolizing our own journey in life."[12] At the time, Wiley found her highly dramatic and determinedly allegorical art "elusive and fabulous" and was impressed to learn that one of her models was Benin-born actor Djimon Hounsou.

Soon after graduating from LACHSA, Wiley had the opportunity to experience curator Thelma Golden's important 1994 Whitney Museum of American Art exhibition *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*, when it was shown at UCLA's Armand Hammer Museum of Art. Organized at a time when controversies surrounding such prominent African American men as Marion Barry, O. J. Simpson, and Clarence Thomas were fresh in the public's mind and the beating of Rodney King by police officers was still recent news, the exhibition was topical and even controversial with both black and white audiences because of its threefold emphasis on sex, crime, and sports as well as its presentation of such traditional negative stereotypes of black men as muggers, homeless, pimps, and oversexed males, even as it questioned their continued veracity and viability by presenting them in new contexts.[13] Including more than seventy works by twenty-nine major artists from the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s such as Jean-Michel Basquiat, Robert Colescott, David Hammons, Lyle Ashton Harris, Barkely Hendricks, Robert Mapplethorpe, Adrian Piper, Andres Serrano, Lorna Simpson, Carrie Mae Weems, and Fred Wilson, the exhibition explored the timely issues of identity and social history. For a fledging artist who had only recently begun to focus on homoerotic subject matter by attempting to make his own paintings as titillating as he found John Singer Sargent's male nudes, Thomas Eakins' swimming figures, and George Bellows' boxers, Wiley regarded Golden's show, with Harris's "white-face" self-portraits from the late 1980s, as particularly incisive for bringing subject matter into sharp focus. Serrano's generous Cibachrome photographs of homeless men, which endowed their subjects with the poise of figures in old master paintings, appear in retrospect to have

Lyle Ashton Harris, *Constructs #11*, 1989. Gelatin silver print, 72 x 48 inches

served as important prototypes for Wiley's mature portraits. Overall, Wiley credits the *Black Male* show with having a major impact on his overall work, even to the point of enabling him to arrive at a new understanding of his gender and ethnicity.

Since several of his friends were already enrolled at the San Francisco Art Institute (SFAI), Wiley attended this school from 1995 until 1999, before making the crucial move to the East Coast to attend Yale University's MFA program. Surprisingly, with the single exception of being introduced to poststructuralist theories, Wiley spent his years in San Francisco assimilating traditional views of painting. At SFAI, Sam Tchakalian, an old-school Abstract Expressionist, encouraged Wiley to try his hand at abstraction. Although Wiley respected Tchakalian, he only managed to make, in his words, "dreadful abstractions," but the experience did have the residual benefit of encouraging him to look at Japanese and Chinese calligraphy as well as the work of the New York School painters Franz Kline, Robert Motherwell, and Clyfford Still. At the end of his first year, Wiley considered abstraction mainly useful as a decorative field in which figures could operate rather than a stand-alone proposition, and so it has remained in his mature work.

Wiley's second year at SFAI provided the opportunity to work with Ray Mondini, who inspired him to read widely in the area of art theory. His favorites at this time included the dissident French Surrealist Georges Bataille and Lacan. As we will see, some of the ideas of the latter thinker have played a formidable role in Wiley's mature work. Mondini also encouraged Wiley to investigate African and African American topics, including works by such writers as W.E.B. Du Bois, the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe, the Ghanaian British American theorist and novelist Kwame Anthony Appiah, and the Nigerian poet and playwright Wole Soyinka, among others. Wiley was particularly drawn to Appiah's critique of nationalistic and ethnocentric cultures in his often-cited essay "Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?," in which he distinguishes the two by regarding the postcolonial as too often mired in essentialism, while defining postmodernism in terms of its ongoing liveliness, continued irreverence, and dynamic open-endedness—qualities less important for Wiley's work at the time than in the future, when they would become foundational for his mature style. Appiah writes: "'postmodernism' is a name for the rejection of that claim to exclusivity, a rejection that is almost always more playful, though not necessarily less serious, than the practice it aims to replace." His definition is useful, even insightful, particularly when he advances the cautionary note that negations can often end up mirroring the propositions they set out to deny.[14] In addition to these African authors, Wiley found Robert Farris Thompson's milestone *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* a worthwhile art-historical pendant to the African and African American connections his mother had been investigating.

TWINNING, DOUBLING, AND DIALOGISM AS STRATEGIES FOR COMBATING REIFIED RACISM

In the course of these and other readings, Wiley began to contemplate the literal and figurative meaning of twinning in African and African American culture and noted the statistics regarding the impressive number of twins born to the Yoruba: 45 sets of twins per 1,000 births, as opposed to around 1 in 90 in overall human births. The subject of twinning led him to the important concept of doubling, a formative one for African Americans, and to Du Bois's famous and often-repeated turn-of-the-twentieth-century theorization of the American Negro's "double consciousness," found in chapter 1, entitled "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," in his book *The Souls of Black Folk*. Du Bois's brief, poetic, and revelatory statement is crucial to the development of late-twentieth-century African American studies in general, which found ways to move beyond it, and it also provides, as we will see, Wiley's work with a point of departure. Du Bois writes:

> After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.[15]

In spite of its sophisticated dialectics and subtly nuanced understanding of the problems incurred in living a contradictory and twofold existence, Du Bois's double consciousness is a debilitating assessment when looked at from the perspective of an idealized monolithic personality or from the progressive view of significant black contributions to mainstream culture.

A number of twentieth-century thinkers, including the outspoken French Martinican expatriate, Lacanian psychoanalyst, and mid-twentieth-century revolutionary Frantz Fanon, have considered Du Bois's doubled self to be problematic, since it has often produced a divided self completely at war with itself when it succumbs to the censorious dominant ideology of whiteness. One of Fanon's memorable insights in *Black Skin, White Masks* is his realization of the tremendously alienating effects caused by the traumatic primal event of being identified a Negro—an image then of irreconcilable Otherness—by mainstream white culture's socially constructed mirror. Fanon concludes:

> As I begin to recognize that the Negro is the symbol of sin, I catch myself hating the Negro. But then I recognize that I am a Negro. There are two ways out of this conflict. Either I ask others to pay no attention to my skin, or else I want them to be aware of it. I try then to find value for what is bad—since I have unthinkingly conceded that the black man is the color of evil. In order to terminate this neurotic situation, in which I am compelled to choose an unhealthy, conflictual solution, fed on fantasies, hostile, inhuman in short, I have only one solution: to rise above this absurd drama that others have staged round me, to reject the two terms that are equally unacceptable, and, through one human being, to reach out for the universal.[16]

Fanon's solution to the condition of black people as the dominant white culture's socially constructed and segregated polar opposite was to formulate the defensive, personally intuited transcendence of a color-blind universality.

Differing from both Du Bois's and Fanon's pessimism, a number of late-twentieth-century thinkers, including most notably Henry Louis Gates, Jr.—an author with whose work Wiley is intimately familiar—found the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogism useful in rethinking Du Bois's double consciousness as positive, participating, and empowering, providing the distinct advantage of an additional voice in an ongoing societal conversation, rather than as an alienating situation imposed on blacks by hegemonic whites. Instead of continuing to conceive double consciousness in terms of an unalterable divided self always at war with itself, Gates and others have reconceived it as a distinct perspective, capable of supplementing already established views and information, and thus a distinct asset for opening up new epistemological possibilities. According to literary specialist Dorothy J. Hale in her 1994 essay "Bakhtin in African American Literary Theory," for cutting-edge African American scholars in the late twentieth century the double voice had been relegated to the role of "merely a literary technique, a mimetic strategy for representing double consciousness,"[17] but Bakhtin's dialogism provided a means for recharacterizing the black perspective by viewing it as a positive supplement rather than a disenfranchised fringe.

This endorsement of Bakhtin's approach as a means for contending with African American double consciousness can readily be appreciated by reviewing the Russian theorist's classic statement in his landmark essay "Discourse in the Novel," regarding the dialogic relation of different languages employed by a simple, unschooled Russian peasant:

> An illiterate peasant, miles away from any urban center, naively immersed in an unmoving and for him unshakable everyday world, nevertheless lived in several language systems: he prayed to God in one language (Church Slavonic), sang songs in another, spoke

> to his family in a third and, when he began to dictate petitions to the local authorities through a scribe, he tried speaking yet a fourth language (the official-literate language, "paper" language). All these are *different languages*, even from the point of view of abstract socio-dialectical markers. But these languages were not dialogically coordinated in the linguistic consciousness of the peasant; he passed from one to the other without thinking automatically: each was indisputably in its own place.[18]

From the point of view of Bakhtin's analysis, the peasant's facility with the many languages comprising his everyday world would appear to idealize him as equipped with a remarkable openness to the world—that is, until one comes to the end of the paragraph, when Bakhtin points out ominously, "He (the peasant) was not yet able to regard one language (and the verbal world corresponding to it) through the eyes of another language."[19] This is the insight Gates and other African American scholars have chosen to omit in their efforts to reconceive African Americans' subaltern status by characterizing it as the foundation for enhanced societal understanding and insight.

As Hale points out, "Bakhtin's description of language as a container for multiple social identities means [for Gates and others] that the [earlier] invasion of the African American's physical body [by mainstream white culture] can be countered by the African American's own invasion of the hegemonic linguistic body," and she presciently adds, "[such] theorists . . . employ Bakhtin's theory of double-voiced discourse to transform the social conditions of self-alienation into the linguistic condition of self-articulation."[20] Because dialogues, according to Bakhtin, are predicated on sharing different points of view, they are already far removed from the oppressive burden of subaltern status afflicting the turn-of-the-twentieth-century Negroes Du Bois was describing and are therefore much more likely candidates for the substantially different world inhabited by African Americans at the end of the twentieth century and beginning of the new millennium. Although Gates and others have glossed over Du Bois's double consciousness in an effort to reconceive it in the generative terms of double voicing—making it an occasion of inflection rather than an imposed restrictive psychological and social situation—their transformation of this theory is actually more in sync with the pluralism enjoyed by African Americans in recent decades than is Du Bois's view. Thus, by extension, we can understand their transformation of Du Boisian double consciousness into Bakhtinian double voicing as useful for comprehending the dynamics of Wiley's dialectic portraits of twenty-first-century African American males who optimistically contend with the poses of Euro-American art-historical prototypes instead of facing the restrictions of a subaltern situation. Apropos this interactive mode, Wiley has recognized "the production of meaning to be related to unequal power relationships in social life," while emphasizing, "a sense of class struggle at the level of sign . . . a moral center itself at the level of sign."[21]

FIRST VISIT TO NIGERIA

No doubt Wiley's investigations of African and African American fiction as well as some of the remarkable literary criticism and art-historical literature pertaining to this topic encouraged him to decide, at age twenty, to travel to Nigeria during the summer between his junior and senior years in college in search of his father. Since his mother had destroyed all her pictures of Isiah Obot, Wiley had become obsessed with the image of his father. "In a very visceral sense," he has acknowledged, "there was this longing to know what he looked like."[22] After a number of futile attempts to find his missing parent in Nigeria, Wiley was able to locate him through his Ibibio tribal affiliation, and these leads brought him first to Uyo, the capital city of the Nigerian state Akwa Ibom, and then to the University of Calabar, where his father was a faculty member. He learned that his father had another family, and although the initial meeting was strained, Wiley has since established relationships with his father as well as with his half-brothers and cousins. During this initial trip, he visited the village house where his paternal family has lived for generations, and where his ancestors have been buried over a great period of time, giving the place a profound sense of continuity and Wiley a special appreciation for connections with the past that dovetailed well with the close family affiliations his mother and siblings in LA provided. While he was in Nigeria, Wiley made a number of photographs of his relatives as well as a series of straightforward paintings of his father. The portraits of his father were far more important as personal records than for any stylistic innovation, but the basis of Wiley's later paintings can be discerned in embryo in the subject matter of a strong black male, his father, an empowered and empowering figure aligned with both the contemporary world and an enduring tradition, constituting an interweaving of different spaces, cultures, and time periods, all of which would be of great importance in Wiley's mature work.

EFFORTS TO DEVELOP A TRADITIONAL AFRICAN AMERICAN ART STYLE

On his return to San Francisco and the SFAI, Wiley came under the influence of his painting teacher Jeremy Morgan. This instructor's classes and the example provided by his reductive and dark landscapes encouraged Wiley to work in a similar conservative direction. At the time, Wiley's goal was to become a classic African American painter, a modern-day Henry Ossawa Tanner, so to speak, by following the example of this famous black student of Thomas Eakins and making heavy-handed, chiaroscuro works intended to appeal mainly to upper-middle-class African American collectors. In addition to thinking about Morgan's works, Wiley created allegorical works predicated on such ponderous references as "war, love, loss, and longing, the [traditional] epitome of

what it means to be a painter." As Wiley has explained, "These [works] . . . are horrifically dark. . . . The entire point was to have a sort of yearning gravitas to it." He acknowledges his traditional views of art at the time in terms of a desire to communicate unmediated distilled emotions. "I believed," he has said, "painting could communicate not only the feelings of the artist but the person the artist is portraying. . . . I was looking at a lot of Betye Saar's work at the time and thinking it was 'meaningful' black art, and to some extent I still believe it is . . . really important to look at a negative history head on and integrate it literally."[23] The difference between this early work and Wiley's mature productions can be characterized in terms of his still-naive belief at the time that a painting should do most of the work for its viewers by presenting them with clarified and unified visions capable of instilling in them particular points of view rather than posing questions about important issues and requiring viewers to think for themselves.

Toward the end of his training at SFAI, as he became more involved with painting dark, minimal landscapes with a perceived connection to an imagined timeless realm, Wiley was frustrated because he thought he was moving away from racial issues. A number of these works, still made under Morgan's influence, were bleak and desolate, with a nod to Venetian painting. Wiley also created quasi-allegorical images of onions floating in space, without centers, as metaphors of complexity and a loss of self, and these paintings, in retrospect, appear to register his frustration with achieving any type of essential view of his ethnicity. At the same time he was making these works, he was attempting to understand the basics of Mexican muralist art, a task he had assigned himself since the work of a number of African American artists in the LA area had affinities with this type of art. In addition, because he had not entirely given up the idea of originating his own definitive black statement, he was reading a variety of texts pertaining to artists' political responsibility. He found writings by Appiah and by the African American scholar Cornel West, particularly his work on Anton Chekhov, enormously helpful in enabling him to understand the impossibility of restricting blackness to a single definition, a distinct essence, and a foundational certainty, since it has been and can continue to be understood in a great number of legitimate ways. Later, with the help of ideas advanced by the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss and other mid-twentieth-century structuralists, Wiley began to comprehend how images become meaningful through specific contexts and a given culture's implicit rules for interpreting them. His personal discovery of the open-ended semiotic of blackness correlates well with the contemporaneous rhetorical question "What is black culture?" asked in 1994 by African American studies professor David Lionel Smith, who pointed to Wynton Marsalis playing Hayden concertos and Leontyne Price's performance of Verdi operas, and conversely to Dr. John's penchant for blues and Travis Tritt singing soul.[24] Smith's question indicates an anti-essentialist view of race, a

reconfiguration of it in terms of the far less confrontational category of ethnicity, of inherited cultural practices rather than genetic reductionism. No longer singular, it began to be seen in the 1990s in terms of plural, highly complex, and contingent productions, dependent on ongoing negotiations based on such factors as gender, economics, personal history, and political affiliations.

WHITENESS AND ITS IMPACT ON BLACKNESS

Wiley's connection with Mondini proved tremendously important not only for acquainting him with poststructuralist texts as well as classic African and African American writing, but also for introducing him to the work of British film and queer-studies specialist Richard Dyer, who was then a visiting scholar at the University of California, Berkeley. In 1997 Dyer had just published *White: Essays on Race and Culture*, and this timely social and filmic look at whiteness as a naturalized code to be deconstructed enabled Wiley to consider not only whiteness as mainstream exoticism and its affiliated apotheosis of light as an ideological state of grace, but blackness itself as a highly erudite and carefully constructed codification of a specific ethnicity, together with the long-embedded racist attitudes toward it. Dyer's book, one of Wiley's favorites, enabled him to see how whiteness, over time, had come to be associated with purity, light, male rationality, the sublime, God, Christ's divinity and luminosity, and, of course, Caucasians, who had so naturalized their whiteness that they had become the norm. Blackness, white's polarity, was consequently equated with the unknown, irrationality, femininity, emotions, and disenfranchised others. A decade earlier Gates had felt secure in pointing to "the representation of the Black in the West . . . [as] the central icon for difference, at least for the past four hundred years,"[25] but whiteness studies upended the perspective of his observation by making blackness a function of whiteness, the colonized remains after the mainland had been claimed for whiteness, an ideology and consequently a naturalized allegory, so powerful it had long since gone unnoticed and was unquestioned as simply the natural and universal state of things. Wiley's personal insights regarding interconnections between these two racial ideologies was in sync with a contemporaneous sea change in African American studies, when whiteness—even before Dyer's landmark book—started to be interrogated for its social, historical, and political construction of not only blackness but also itself and its amazing ability to remain out of sight and yet still continue to be dominant.

An early, insightful understanding of the role whiteness assumes as the offstage director of an onstage, ongoing racial play is evident in art historian Kobena Mercer's 1991 review of Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs of black subjects:

> What is represented in the pictorial space of Mapplethorpe's photographs is a "look," or a certain "way of looking," in which the pictures reveal more about the absent and invisible white male subject who is the agent of representation than they do about the black men whose beautiful bodies we see depicted . . . because of the fantasy of mastery inscribed in the "look" which implies a hierarchical ordering of racial identity.[26]

The widespread transformation of black studies in the 1990s into ongoing interrogations of the many relationships and conversations between blacks and whites has been ably summarized by Stanford University American studies professor Shelley Fisher Fishkin in her historiographic overview "Interrogating 'Whiteness,' Complicating 'Blackness': Remapping American Culture" (1995), in which she points out:

> While the idea of the social construction of "blackness" was increasingly discussed in the 1980s, the idea of "whiteness" as a construct did not receive widespread attention until the 1990s. In the 1990s, scholars asked with increased frequency how the imaginative construction of "whiteness" had shaped American literature and American history.[27]

Tony Morrison's prescient slender volume of 1992, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, is a notable benchmark questioning the naturalization of whiteness in American literature. In addition, a number of other publications around this same time began asking similar questions, including Dana Nelson's *The Word in Black and White: Reading "Race" in American Literature 1638–1867* (also published in 1992), which similarly underscores the ways in which white authors have constructed whiteness as an authoritative and unquestioned discourse. That same year, 1992, New York Conceptual artist Adrian Piper dispassionately described the complexities of living in both black and white worlds in her essay "Passing for White, Passing for Black."

Two slightly earlier cutting-edge art-historical studies (both published in 1990)—Guy C. McElroy's *Facing History: The Black Image in American Art, 1710–1940* and Albert Boime's *The Art of Exclusion: Representing Blacks in the Nineteenth Century*—pointed to the past marginalization of blacks in mainly white group portraits and history paintings. These two groundbreaking publications have been crucial for Wiley's art and his interest in reinscribing in the white Western tradition figures of blacks, whose presence, in the past, has been either entirely excised or relegated to the margins. Put more directly by Wiley, this marginalization of blacks has enabled him in his art to question and even "brutalize" art history's unquestioned legitimacy, "to consume it, empty it out, and posit something that is completely unexpected and different. And that would be the black body in fine art, in painting."[28]

THE VISUAL ARTIST AS TRICKSTER

Because his encounter with Dyer's ideas and this critic's writings on film had such a tremendous impact on his thinking, Wiley spent the summer after graduating from SFAI trying to decide whether to attend art or film school. Intrigued by hip-hop music videos, he wondered if this genre might enable him to bridge the worlds of fine art and popular culture, thus ensuring his art of continued legitimacy as well as a broad contemporary following. During his time at SFAI, painting had seemed too academic and dated, and yet, even though film could definitely provide avenues to a more populist art, Wiley also wanted to introduce elements of painting into it. Although he ended up deciding to accept Yale's invitation to study painting, he wanted to suffuse the high-art tradition with popular culture, with the intense and rapturous light of Hype Williams' videos, and to upset the parameters between not only high art and popular culture but also whiteness and blackness.

At Yale, Wiley had an opportunity to serve as teaching assistant for Robert Farris Thompson's course on the black diaspora, during which time he came to terms with the image of the Nigerian trickster figure Eshu-Elegba. Described by Thompson in *Flash of the Spirit* as "the very embodiment of the crossroads,"[29] this figure is also characterized by Gates in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* as the preeminent trickster, and its antics are best understood through the rhetorical device of chiasmus, a mode for instituting and unifying differences through crisscrossing patterns involving reverse parallelism. A particularly clear example from the briefly aired quiz show bearing this rhetorical device's name is black baseball player LeRoy 'Satchel' Paige's description of his most successful pitching tactic: "Throw it here when they're lookin' there; throw it there when they're lookin' here." Not surprisingly, Gates regards chiasmus as the most commonly occurring historical trope in African American literature, starting with slave narratives.[30] For Wiley, this trickster and his chiasmatic tactics have served as particularly viable models for his position as an artist and also for his art, especially for its ability to remain poised on the cusp of change, where expectations are upset, truisms are overturned, and worn-out stereotypes are renegotiated and understood in new ways.

At the time that he was rethinking the artist's role in terms of this mythic trickster, Wiley filled a wall of his painting studio at Yale with reproductions of stills from some of the great hip-hop videos. He was intrigued by the "über-decadence of power, wealth, fashion, and fetishes" in which well-paid hip-hop stars could indulge, by the ways in which contemporary fashion—even among the downtrodden—attracted the intense feelings accorded religious fetishes, so that in 1989 the fifteen-year-old Michael Eugene Thomas could be killed by a classmate simply for the $100 pair of Michael Jordan sneakers he owned, and by the fact that while such fashion could become a life-and-death struggle in one social/economic group, in another it could become a means for

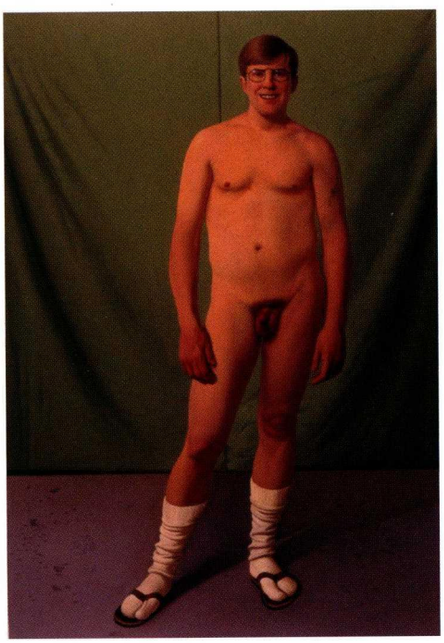
empowerment by refusing to subscribe to such wide-spread popular culture trends as buying and wearing Michael Jordan shoes.

Wiley became intrigued also by the notion of the surd, both as an irrational number and as a voiceless sound nonetheless capable of having a distinct effect, becoming a stand-in and a chiasmatic presence/non-presence on a par with the ongoing dialectics of Earth artist Robert Smithson's 1968 Site/Non-Site sculptures. The surd as an ultimate trickster came to represent a means for formulating figures in works of art where they could appear, as they subsequently would in Wiley's mature paintings, as present absences and absent presences, both figures and types, ricocheting back and forth like Bakhtinian hybridizations, mixtures of different social languages constrained by the limitations of single utterances, so that they oscillate between the traditions they quote and displace, between the different linguistic universes they represent, even as they themselves are dislocated by the different consciousnesses they reference. Wiley also asked himself if there could ever be a society of *real* people, or if all cultures needed chiasmatically to displace their citizens in the manner of Debord's ongoing spectacle so that they became mere representations of themselves rather than actual selves. Looking at his own mature work, he has inquired, "Is this a self-portrait, or is this a portrait index of an individual, or is it something else? Concluding, once you embrace the idea of the surd, it's OK to leave this series of questions open."

One of his favorite books at this time was Umberto Eco's *Travels in Hyperreality*, an engaging discursus on popular cultural examples of appropriation and its concomitant simulation, a book foregrounding chiasmatic riddles about authentic copies, absolute fakes, imagined and reimagined objects, cultures pregnant with ideas yet finding themselves to be only marketplaces of ideas, strange revisions in a world totally committed to the absolute fake. Apropos such entanglements, Wiley has said, "I'm interested in irony, but I'm also interested in sincerity and the question is how can I tie the two together,"[31] thereby giving voice to Eshu-Elegba's fabled crossroads. The interworkings of the two in his paintings can be characterized in terms of a chiasmatic oxymoron that works both ways, becoming at times the authentic theatricality of traditional Euro-American portraiture and at other times the outrageous and ongoing theatricalization of everyday life, punctuated by the streetwise fashions his subjects choose to wear. Wiley has spoken of the need to deconstruct authenticity by introducing into his work its polar opposite, fakery, simulacra really, noting in classic trickster fashion, "I want you to constantly guess as to what the authentic is in the painting. A big part of what I'm questioning in my work is what does it mean to be authentic, to be real, a genuine article or an absolute fake?"[32]

Rather than making works of art related to his interest in hip-hop while a student at Yale, Wiley felt constrained by the need to continue to search for a means and subject matter for making art referencing African Americans'

John Currin, *The Pink Tree*, 1999. Oil on linen, 78 1/16 x 48 1/16 inches. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. Joseph H. Hirshhorn Purchase Fund, 2000. © John Currin. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery



Kurt Kauper, *Self-portrait*, 1995. Oil on birch panel, 17 ½ x 27 inches. Courtesy the artist

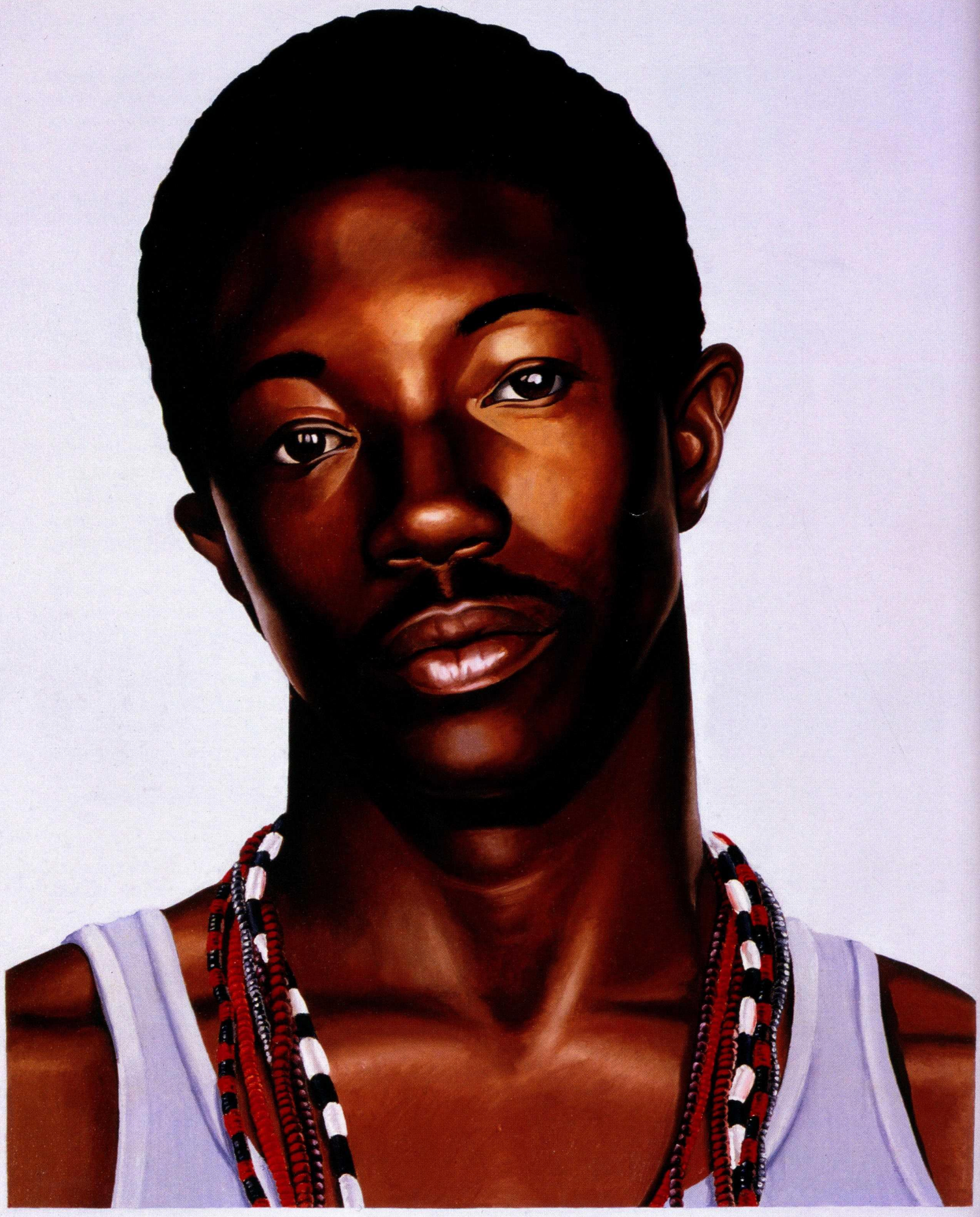
negative history. In an interview with Christine Kim, then a curator at New York's Studio Museum in Harlem, Wiley explained the double bind he continued to feel as an artist of color at Yale and how he had failed to realize a serious statement when he had attempted to reinvigorate and redirect the metonym of African Americans and watermelons:

> I was thinking about how on the one hand I wanted to use this watermelon as black pain, as the weight of representation, you know, the Reconstruction-era stereotype that Negroes like fruit, Negroes like warm climate, Negroes like trees, ripe fruit, watermelon. I didn't necessarily feel that this was the best material to use, but I hadn't anything else to use. I felt like I had no choice but to use the watermelon because there was this expectation that I was going to make my big Negro statement.[33]

His inability to introduce the right amount of gravity to the topic, which had long been the butt of racist jokes, may have been the best thing that could have happened to him at the time, because it enabled him to understand the need to work within the established purview of socially constructed signs rather than to try to reinvent totally new roles for them. Similar to Betye Saar's frustrated attempts to transform and empower the stereotype Aunt Jemima, Wiley's efforts to rethink and reframe the subject of blacks and watermelons faced the resistance of well-established clichéd images of blacks eating watermelons that reached back to the post–Civil War Reconstruction era, when mainstream society, threatened by the emancipation of slaves, intended to keep Negroes subjected through the creation of such heinous stereotypes. Together with other racist imagery, this subject was represented in the blackface collectibles that became prized in the 1980s among sophisticated African Americans who, in trickster fashion, recognized them as reflections of white racism and considered the real joke of this imagery to be on the bigoted white designers and manufacturers who had once thought they could wage full-scale ideological warfare through their production and wide distribution.[34] The main problem for Wiley's watermelon pictures was people's at-best ironic view of them, a perspective he was, at the time, unable to resist and redirect.

Recognizing this situation and also familiarizing himself with the work of several artists who were well schooled in irony's many intricacies and had attended Yale almost a decade before he enrolled in its MFA program, Wiley began to appreciate the toughness and resiliency of John Currin's and Lisa Yuskavage's paintings, which courted, trickster-like, the countering sensibilities of kitsch and fine art, intermixing the two in compelling and eminently dialogic works. Wiley has indirectly acknowledged this interplay between visual languages in Currin's art in particular. He has explained,

> John Currin . . . uses technique almost as a signifier of the power of western easel painting . . . as a vehicle of representation. One



> of the things I admire about his work is the way he was capable of at once using the language of painting as a rhetorical strategy and inserting his own, what you might call, perversions, into the picture. The two languages coexist and what you end up with is this third object.[35]

With only a few changes, this statement could also be applied to Wiley's mature portraits, and the "third object" he cites could be considered the viewers' special complement—their awareness of the work of art's dialogue between different artistic languages.

In addition to looking back to such Yale alumni as Currin and Yuskavage, Wiley had the opportunity to serve as painter Kurt Kauper's teaching assistant during both his first and second years at Yale. From Kauper, Wiley learned to create fully integrated and balanced rigorous representational works with a distinct conceptual bent, to focus on homoerotic topics without being embarrassed by them, and to work with a very dry and understated humor, a mode of joking deftly interwoven in the different traditions of grand-manner portraiture and contemporary exposure found in a number of Kauper's works. Wiley remembers in particular Kauper's naked self-portrait of 1995 with the capacious figure of the artist wearing long white socks and sandals, a work particularly memorable for setting up a playful chiasmatic tension between art's elevated pubic address and the artist's ability to laugh at himself.[36]

"STREET CASTING" IN HARLEM

Soon after graduation from Yale in 2001, Wiley became artist-in-residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem. The situation was crucially important for the additional time it afforded him for formulating and consolidating the basic terms of his overall approach, catalyzed in large part by the ongoing Felliniesque procession of highly inventive African American male dress and bravado he found taking place continuously on 125th Street, a world remarkably dissimilar from the far more distant and discrete LA car culture of his youth.

One day, when he was walking down a street in Harlem, he picked up a cast-off piece of paper, an FBI wanted poster of a young black man represented by a mug shot, and brought it back to his studio, where he pinned it to the wall. This image was significant for encouraging Wiley to rethink portraiture as a highly ideological genre and a broad semiotic field comprising distinct types of representation. His recollection cited above as an epigraph for this essay provides clues to his critical thinking at the time: it includes an awareness of how the FBI's bureaucratic style of portraiture undermines a subject's power, and, by contrast, how the eighteenth-century British approach he had revered since childhood makes its figures appear indomitable. Wiley's anecdote

Mugshot Study, 2006. Oil on canvas, 36 x 24 inches. The Sender Collection. Courtesy Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago

also indicates his appreciation of the protocols and effects endemic to categorically different types of portraiture, including, in his example, wanted posters and aristocratic portraits. Although he implies the ability of upper-class historical figures to wholly possess the mode of representation embodying them, his intimate knowledge of the many extraordinary aristocratic portraits housed in the Yale Center for British Art, only a few blocks from his New Haven studio, indicates an understanding of how the figures in these paintings are also subject to portraiture's constraints, enabling him in his own work to move the responsibility of portraits away from the sitters represented in them and in the direction of its mode of being painted, including most particularly its legislating sets of protocols, so that the portraits can be understood as both authoritative individual statements about the sitters being represented as well as meta-statements concerning the social pressures this type of art so ably signifies.

In order to find appropriate models for his works, Wiley began "street casting" in Harlem for black males between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five, a demographic that had great appeal for him, in terms of its ability to exhibit a certain type of alpha-male energy and even homoerotic beauty. On a number of occasions, he has conceded the role desire plays in his choices, though he does not wish his work to be limited to this particular reading. "I look for people who possess a certain type of power in the streets," he has pointed out. "You always look for that alpha male or alpha female character. But in the end it's about chemistry."[37] While Wiley has been on the lookout for street smarts, energy, and style in his models, thus playing up the positive aspects of their personal empowerment, the black British artist Isaac Julien has emphasized another and equally important side to this often macho bluster, an aspect also needing to be acknowledged as an ongoing sociological phenomenon when looking at Wiley's figures:

> What we were trying to say was that various strategies, or signifying practices, have been adopted by Black men to protect themselves. The posing and posturing of a machismo identity is a *re*active one, really. It conceals the fact that Black men are vulnerable on the street. Now we recognize those images and representations for what they are, "poses."[38]

Wiley generously compensates his amateur models for the approximately three hours he needs them. During this time period they are offered the opportunity to leaf through a number of lavishly illustrated art history books, publications devoted to Renaissance and Baroque art being particular favorites, and to choose a figure in a painting, either male or female and either secular or religious, to serve as the model for the pose they then are asked emulate in the photo session comprising the next step. "I've seen people choose small figures in large paintings," Wiley has recalled, "not even the stars of the show, and I've seen people who directly want to see themselves as Christ in heaven."[39] When

Wiley posing models for a photo shoot, 2011

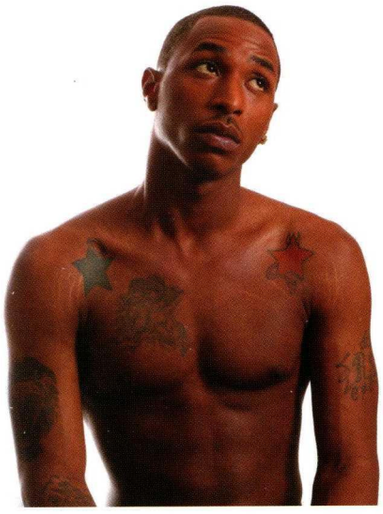
Wiley's models transpose their selected art-historical prototype into the tableau vivant of a photo shoot,[40] their choice of clothing is totally their own; Wiley points out, "There are no props or dressing people up."[41] He then uses the various views from the photo shoot as guides for making first a detailed drawing on canvas, followed by either a red or brown coat of underpainting.

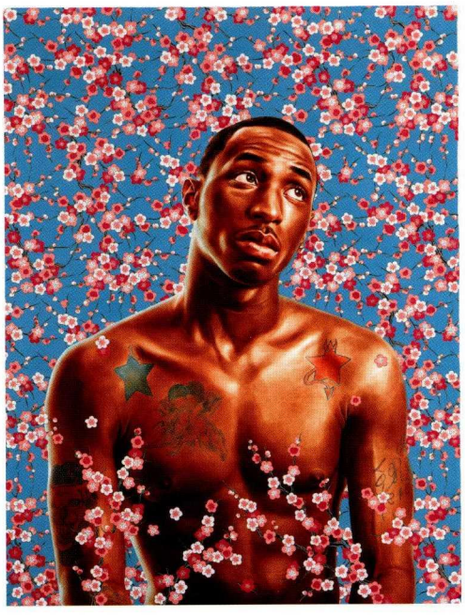
The process of identifying and convincing a complete stranger to model and encouraging this individual then to select the art-historical prototype for his portrait needs to be taken seriously as a power shift with enormous ramifications, enabling marginalized and ostracized black males the opportunity to choose how they wish to be inscribed in the grand Euro-American tradition and thus produced as one of its newest subjects. In addition, the underlying wry humor involved in this overturning of traditional power relations needs to be affirmed as an important aspect of the work. Strangely enough, critics and art historians have tended to overlook the absurd, yet well conceived digs constituting Wiley's wit, even though the artist has clearly stated, "humor plays a large part in the way that I see my work being seen. I try to point to those places where art takes itself very seriously and kind of take little jabs at it."[42]

CONCEPTUAL REALISM: META-PORTRAITS *ABOUT* PORTRAITURE'S MODE OF REPRESENTATION

As the conflation of street model and art-historical prototype suggests, Wiley's portraits are not simple depictions: they are conceptually based critical works that are *about* representation, eminently intertextual and self-reflexive critical works, rather than simple enactments of the process of representation itself. In addition to assimilating high-art and popular-culture orientations, as represented by the mug shot and the traditional Euro-American portrait, Wiley's works are concentrated analytical investigations, underscoring portraiture's incarcerating limits. This theoretical approach enables him to move beyond the still-compelling issues pertaining to the history of slavery in the Americas—already thoughtfully and provocatively explored by a number of prominent African American artists in the 1990s, including Glenn Ligon, Lorna Simpson, Kara Walker, and Carrie Mae Weems, among others—so that he can examine the more general and certainly insidious realm of representation's own distinct yet often unrecognized shackles. In doing so, Wiley realizes the impossibility of remaining a totally objective outsider to the art he is creating. Recognizing the circularity of this situation, in which he creates trenchantly critical representations that in turn subsume his art under its confining auspices, thereby producing his figures and settings as its subjects, he has pointed out, "There's a specific vocabulary concerning power. I've not only reproduced it, but in some sense I am critical of it, and complicit [with it]."[43]

Wiley's past/present and intertextual hybrids constitute a new





FAR LEFT Preparatory photographic study for *Sharrod Hosten Study IV,* 2010

LEFT *Sharrod Hosten Study IV,* 2010. Oil on paper, 40 x 53 inches. Private collection. Courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery, New York

type of chiasmatic *conceptual* realism, as opposed to its more straightforward counterpart. Not content to sustain the stranglehold of official or culturally approved forms of representation, Wiley's work relies on the strategy of *détournement*. First defined by the mid-twentieth-century European group known as the Situationist International; the term involves the establishment of ongoing interactions between images so that they critique and undermine the molds in which representation traditionally casts its subjects. In doing so, they manage to break up the second-order semiological chain French theorist Roland Barthes describes as myth. Instead of depicting images of supportive black males firmly entrenched on the scaffolding of traditional Euro-American portraiture so that the two work in concert to constitute concentrated images of ensconced power, Wiley's portraits of black males studiously avoid being "reduced to . . . [myth's] pure signifying function."[44] To understand the radical direction taken by Wiley's superimposed portraits, it helps to look at Barthes classic example of myth at work on a *Paris-Match* cover photograph. Barthes writes:

> A young Negro in a French uniform is saluting, with his eyes uplifted, probably fixed on a fold of the tricolor. All this is the *meaning* of the picture. But, whether naïvely or not, I see very well what it signifies to me: that France is a great empire, that all her sons, without any color discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors.[45]

Unlike Barthes' example, Wiley's figures are not compliant with established myths; they mime rather than enact these positions, which can be

considered structurally as allegories of power, going through the traces, so to speak, since they only mimic traditional protocols and thus avoid the trap of having to subscribe to either its motivations or its very real effects.

PORTRAITURE'S CAPTIVE SUBJECTS

We can also begin to understand Wiley's project of redirecting Michel Foucault's ideas by mentally substituting the word "portraiture" for "panopticon" ("pan" meaning "all," and "optic" meaning "seeing") in this theorist's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* in order to rethink traditional portraiture as a type of ongoing surveillance.[46] Foucault's "panopticon" refers to the far-ranging social effects of Jeremy Bentham's 1791 design for a new type of reforming prison, a design predicated on prisoners' internalization of the external censuring positions assumed by officials stationed in central towers where they would be able to watch the incarcerated without being seen. Permitting views of all prisoners' proscenium-like cells, the easy visual access of Bentham's panopticon as a mode of surveillance can be considered analogous to that of portraiture. Finding this privileged outlook formative to the organization of other modern social institutions, such as mental institutions, hospitals, and schools, Foucault describes the panopticon as "an important mechanism for automatizing and disindividualizing power."[47] He continues his discussion by pointing out,

> Power has its principle not so much in a person as in a certain concerted distribution of bodies, surfaces, light, gazes, in an arrangement whose internal mechanisms produce the relation in which individuals are caught up.[48]

Again, substituting "portraiture" for "panopticon," one can see how Wiley might reconceive this apparatus as the primary means for looking that this artistic genre, predicated on supporting hierarchical differences between classes, ratifies. Of the panopticon Foucault writes:

> It is a type of location of bodies in space, of distribution of individuals in relation to one another, of hierarchical organization, of disposition of centres and channels of power, of definition of the instruments and modes of intervention of power.[49]

From this perspective, both portraiture's crucial panoptic access and its power can be found in its enactment of an ongoing cultural mode—Foucault would call it a "regime"—for organizing individual bodies positively and productively in hierarchical arrangements based on the establishment of norms. Although we are not prone to think of portraiture when we recall the ways citizens are widely surveilled in our culture via ubiquitous cameras lo-

cated throughout modern urban areas as well as on cell phones, these types of ongoing technological panoptic views are in fact among the dominant modes of being seen in our society.

Portraiture's historical subjects are captives of the pictorial protocols habitually typecasting them in accordance with established and evolving stylistic norms. Viewed from Foucault's theoretical position, individual portrayals become accepted as legitimate portraits only after being subjected to instituted discourses—embedded, historically based sets of rules enabling or constraining casual depictions—so that standards of knowledge (i.e., socially sanctioned and often implicit rules) are upheld. When portraiture participates in dominant discourses or aids in innovating and policing them, it helps determine what constitutes or even has access to reality. Certainly not natural, reality is a carefully tailored construct made to conform to currently dominant or receptive academic standards, and it endorses as valid only those aspects of life complying with its precepts. In this manner, images with claims to reality constitute types of social slavery based on conventional categories of intelligibility, that is, representation's normative character at a particular time. A pertinent example of the inexorable force of stylistic customs on human portrayals is the early-eighteenth-century Sir Godfrey Kneller–type portraits of gentlemen described by Courtauld Institute art historian David H. Solkin:

> Personal display demanded and received serious attention from the men who governed eighteenth-century Britain. For a ruling class which depended more on culture than on force as a means of social control, appearances were a matter of inescapably political significance no less so in art than in life. . . . The Englishman who sat for his portrait expected to be shown as a gentleman.[50]

As gentlemen, early-eighteenth-century subjects were expected to conform to the distinct social norms such Whig writers as Joseph Addison, Lord Shaftesbury, and Richard Steele codified under the rubric of "politeness," an ideological construct helping to facilitate an equitable basis for exchanges between the landed aristocracy and prominent members of an emerging commercial class.[51]

THE CREATIVE ROLE OF THE *ÉNONCÉ*

Highly discriminate in their scope, portraiture's historically based stylistic norms can be considered in relation to Foucault's concept of the *énoncé*, explored in *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. Referring to the enunciated place or position capable of legitimating a subject's entry into socially condoned parlance at a particular time, as well as the direction of the equally time-specific creative imagination, the *énoncé* undermines the art-

ist's traditional position of origin by becoming its de facto cogito or author/artist function. The notion of the *énoncé* thus enables Foucault to demote individuals' creative roles by finding them no longer persuasive causes or legitimate foci of the historical process, as it supplants their former preeminence with underlying socially conditioned perspectives, enabling their information to be ratified as knowledge.

Instead of veering away from Foucault's *énoncé* and its concomitant usurpation of the artist's traditional creative role, Wiley's work appears to indicate a high regard for the concept's categorical ability to enhance our understanding of representation's creative and coercive role. Given the evidence of his work, we can say that his painting's apparent respect for representation's implacable force enables him to move in the new direction of rethinking the ways it can subsume ethnicity, class, and history under its coercive norms. This fresh starting point allows Wiley to work *categorically* with art-historical and contemporary types and *dialectically* with hip-hop strategies as well as Foucault's institutional theories. In doing so, he is able not only to rethink portraiture as a genre, but also to comment on the ways cultural norms can empower as well as disenfranchise young, self-assured twenty-first-century black males.

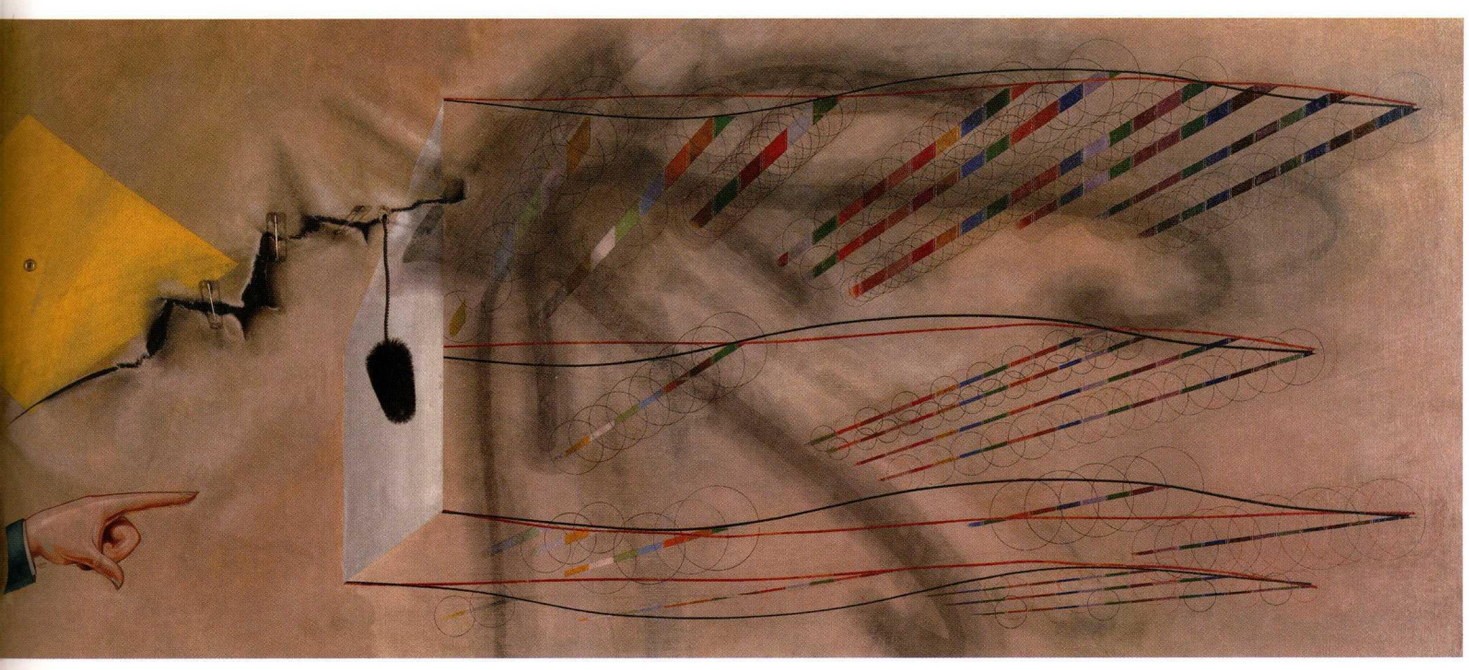
PORTRAITS AS TOMBS

After considering Wiley's anecdote about the mug shot and the circumstances formative to the development of his overall approach to portraiture as a dialectical and dialogic proposition initially predicated on differences between the FBI's and eighteenth-century Britain's ideas of portraiture, it is tempting to think of another division available to him during his years at Yale working toward an MFA. At that time, his love of canonical art-historical portraiture and desire to rethink the art of painting epistemologically presented him with two remarkably alternative options, and examples of both could be seen at Yale: at the Yale Center for British Art and the Yale University Art Gallery, two institutions located directly across the street from each other. In contradistinction to the Center's superb, imposing portraits is the Gallery's extraordinary Société Anonyme collection, with its vast holdings of early-twentieth-century vanguard art, including Marcel Duchamp's singularly important last painting on canvas, *Tu m'* (1918). An incomplete expression using the French familiar form of "you," the work's title can be construed as a pun characterizing painting categorically as a "tomb," since this highly perceptual artistic medium, in Duchamp's last painting, ultimately ends up interring or incarcerating itself and its formal means through the establishment of literal equivalents for painting's traditional pictorial means. In *Tu m'*, Duchamp found such visual equivalents for painting's traditional functions as employing color swatches to literalize color, an illusionistic rip in the canvas to signify art's illusions, a real

Marcel Duchamp, *Tu m'*, 1918. Oil on canvas, with bottle brush, three safety pins, and one bolt, 27 ½ x 119 5/16 inches. Collection Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven. Gift from the Estate of Katherine S. Dreier 1953.6.4. © 2004 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris / Succession Marcel Duchamp

safety pin and bottle brush to connote the limits of art's vaunted realism, a commissioned sign-painter's rendition of a pointing hand to denote art's reliance on signs and sign systems, and shadows cast by several of the artist's readymades to designate painting's reflective status. This reconsideration of art as a mode for burying ideas under epistemologically analogous signs, instead of ennobling them via traditional portrait painting's ontological claims, has an origin in the French Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé's series of "tombs," or poems, honoring and in turn interring such esteemed literary sources as the writings of Charles Baudelaire, Théophile Gautier, and Edgar Allan Poe. Viewed in relation to the Center's collection of portraits, Duchamp's punning title can also be regarded as a wry intertextual critique of British portraits as only representations, which, figuratively speaking, are either entombed or exhumed images of their sitters.

Through this Duchampian intertextual play with traditional painting, one can hypothesize a possible tactic for Wiley's art as the meta-painterly practice of literalizing and empowering painting's devices, an approach sustained and developed by a host of late-twentieth-century artists, including Robert Rauschenberg, Per Kirkeby, Sigmar Polke, Richard Jackson, David Salle, and Jonathan Lasker, among others.[52] Instead of finding lowbrow equivalents for painting's long-heralded devices and distributing them randomly across canvases, as Duchamp and many of these painters did, Wiley imbricates them in his work, hybridizing them, so to speak, so that his doubled images are dialectically related. Considered in conjunction with *Tu m'*, Wiley's paintings al-



lude to art-historical prototypes and their conventionally accepted reality, even as he emphasizes his streetwise models and painting's resilient self-referential ability by pointing to intense background patterns, which, prior to his *World Stage* series, related neither to his prototypes nor his models.

PORTRAITURE CONSIDERED ARCHAEOLOGICALLY

When Wiley began inviting prospective models, casually met on the street or in other public sites, to look through art history books in his studio and choose images to serve as iconographic templates for his paintings, he inaugurated a series of discontinuities and ruptures much like Foucault's archaeological approach. In *The Order of Things*, Foucault refuses to be hampered by the customary myriads of linear connections engaging historians. Instead, he theorizes an archaeological approach to compare discursive formations from different time periods. When Wiley populates a model's chosen artistic source with the person selecting it, the art-historical masterpiece loses its privileged status and becomes an image about power, rather than an enactment of specific authoritative positions. In his art, then, Wiley disengages discursively based representations from both art history and the urban environment, thereby undermining the coercive force of each type. Employing dialectics as a dissimulator, he *détourne*s—to use the Situationist International term describing the establishment of ongoing interactions between images—in order to critique and

undermine the molds in which representation traditionally casts its subjects, or else, one can say, he unmasks the traditional power of early art-historical representations, while shoring up their artificiality and pretentiousness. At the same time, his art draws attention to the theatrics of his models' interpretations of hip-hop street wear.

HIP-HOP AS URBAN/GLOBAL VERNACULAR AND FORMAL STRATEGY

In Wiley's art, hip-hop culture, a global phenomenon since the 1980s, is not just his models' preferred style of dress; it is also a modus operandi for structuring his art. Clear analogies can be drawn between hip-hop music and Wiley's painting, starting with the beats—the appropriated instrumental tracks or percussion breaks taken from hit songs—corresponding to Wiley's use of art-historical prototypes. This comparison between popular culture and high art in his work is even more compelling when one recognizes how hip-hop, in the twenty-first century, has similarly availed itself of a broad range of prototypical musical styles, including classical, jazz, pop, and reggae. In addition, this comparison between Wiley's art and hip-hop can be understood in terms of his preference for alpha-male models, the visual equivalents of rappers (originally DJs), with their characteristically mesmerizing and often über-masculine cadenced style of speaking over the beats.

Recalling the lush printed fabrics appearing in the photographs of the Malian artist Seydou Keita and the Dutch wax-printed cottons in the British Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare's paintings and installations, Wiley's insistent background patterns can also be regarded as analogous to the overall rhythmic quality of hip-hop music. Certainly they work well in this capacity, since they also assume the highly important abstract role of being both opaque and resistant to the representation of anything other than themselves. The process is key to Wiley's work, as the following statement indicates:

> For me it was interesting to take this figure-ground relationship [found in traditional portraits, where the landscape, buildings, and other accouterments of power reinforce that of the sitter] and, as opposed to reproducing those trappings of power, removing them and introducing a world of absolute taste-signifiers from any number of cultures. I started out actually using color swatches from the Martha Stewart Home Collection. That's the color she used for plates and towels, a tasteful Connecticut color. It's austere and pastel without being too southwest. The whole point of using it was to empty [it] out but fill it back up with something else without correcting much of anything.[53]

ABOVE LEFT Yinka Shonibare, *The Swing (after Fragonard)*, 2001. Life-size fiberglass mannequin, Dutch wax printed cotton textile, swing, and artificial foliage. Tate Britain, London; purchased 2001

ABOVE RIGHT Seydou Keita, *Untitled*, 1956. Gelatin silver print, 22 ⅛ x 15 ½ inches. Courtesy CAAC — The Pigozzi Collection, Geneva. © Keita/IPM

Once textile designs are drawn and painted, they are both depictions of themselves and actual designs. Their appearance in Wiley's art briefly halts the past/present contrapuntal reading of the illusions his art-historical prototypes and present-day models enact. In addition, when these distinctive patterns overlap parts of his figures, they pointedly demonstrate the conventionality of all representations and underscore how even the figures in Wiley's paintings are basically decorative configurations. While these designs function as formal elements to reinforce painting's self-reflexive state, the sheer exoticism and range of his ornamental backgrounds, referring often to cultures unrelated to either his subjects or their art, undermine some of these flat patterns' affinities with modernist conventionality. Thus, their disconnection from both hip-hop culture and the referenced and redirected art-historical models partially deconstructs Wiley's work, since these patterned configurations defamiliarize the other two components in his paintings and their past/present and prototypical/present-day polarities. "At times," Wiley has noted, "the ground is fighting. It's taking over the figure. It's jockeying for position." Referring to a work in his studio, he adds, "In this picture back here, the vine wrapping around his leg threatens to come forward there. There is a type of hostility there."[54] The "hostility" of

ABOVE LEFT *Labyrinth (Blue Diamond),* 2002. Oil on wood panel, 25 x 24 inches. Collection of Studio Museum in Harlem. Courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery, New York; Roberts & Tilton, Culver City, California; and Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago

ABOVE RIGHT *Labyrinth (Diamond),* 2002. Oil on wood panel, 25 x 24 inches. Courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery, New York; Roberts & Tilton, Culver City, California; and Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago

the disempowering patterned backgrounds, the element in Wiley's art purposefully unrelated culturally and historically to either his sitters or their selected art-historical models, is, then, an instance of abstract art's decorative and deconstructive power, its invasive ability to render the painting a flat, two-dimensional schema, a playful antagonism of unrelated sign systems and purposefully jerry-rigged parts. In addition to deconstructing the artistic prototype's metonymical power base, Wiley's decorative patterns ensure the mutual participation of his imbricated sitters and models in painted secular liturgies, distancing and honoring them while also ensuring them nontranscendent artistic status.

Instead of making the past conformable to contemporary views and using present-day figures to domesticate unfamiliar customs and attitudes from earlier times, Wiley's works heighten the differences between the two. These include the highly theatrical fashions associated with gangsta rap, its preference for the cavalier baggy pants and flapping shirt tails originally associated with prison inmates, as well as the black-ink tattoos and bandanas of Chicano gangsters: two types of transgressive fashion naturalized on the street through their ubiquity but looking once again extraordinary when seen in Wiley's art in conjunction with traditional iconographic poses. Since the 1990s hip-hoppers have topped off these ensembles with generous amounts of jewel-encrusted platinum and silver "bling," accoutrements in Wiley's art both playing into and differing from the ornamentation seen in traditional portraits of bejeweled nobles. Wiley has characterized his social-cultural embrace of bling in the following manner:

> With the work that I'm doing now, I am interested in history as it relates to "bling bling." In places like Harlem, people ornament their bodies, love Gucci, and Versace, baggy jeans, bubble jackets, hoodies. . . . I'm interested in architectural ornament, certain types of French Rococo façade ornaments, for instance, that end up as faux décor in shopping malls or Michael Graves faux neo-classicism for that matter.[55]

GUY DEBORD'S "PARODIC-SERIOUS STAGE"

The critical act of détourning or redirecting imagery to undermine itself is an ironic situation capable of devolving into mere parody unless one finds ways of maintaining the level Debord called the "parodic-serious stage." In order to see the world afresh and break representation's—that is, the spectacle's—stringent hold, Debord counseled:

> It is therefore necessary to conceive of a parodic serious stage where the accumulation of detourned elements, far from aiming at arousing indignation or laughter by alluding to some original work, will express our indifference toward a meaningless and forgotten original, and concern itself with rendering a certain sublimity.[56]

Imbued with the idea of capitalism's ability to encode any work rigidly, transforming it and its effects into reified images, Debord advised taking détourned parodies seriously by considering them from a rational and dispassionate perspective, a view we can analogize to Kant's sublime and its capacity for fending off feelings of engulfment. Instead of reinforcing the vicelike grip of representation, this parodic-serious strategy enhances human beings' ability to take comfort in reason's ability to bracket vision as a preeminent ideological mode, even if we can never entirely wrest ourselves free of its far-reaching chains.

In his art Wiley appears to be undertaking Debord's far more serious approach to parody as he works with officially sanctioned art-historical representations and present-day images of marginalized black men. The sheer absurdity, for example, of Wiley's replacement of the image of the emperor Napoleon Bonaparte on his throne with a portrait of the gangsta-rap star and *Law & Order: SVU* regular Ice-T in the nineteenth-century, Byzantine-like portrait by French academic painter Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres demonstrates the restrictive and not entirely in-sync purviews of these two representational regimes. By attempting to inscribe Ice-T within the strict confines of Ingres's stage set for Napoleon, Wiley not only undermines some aspects of these two nonalignable discursive orders, representing the past and the present, but also

creates spaces for possible new insights, including an appreciation of human beings' strange opacity and irrepressible variety.

Because traditional portraiture plays on Foucault's panopticon, as Wiley's work admirably demonstrates, it is as much a mode of seeing as a specific image seen and replicated in accord with a given set of historical practices. When he inverts the hierarchy between artistic means and completed representations, Wiley is able to emphasize the structural aspects of portraiture's enunciative faculty by presenting viewers with the ways one discursive formation (gangsta rap, for example) breaks or ruptures the protocols of another (an art-historically sanctioned style of portraiture). In this way, seeing, like representation, is a two-pronged process, involving coming to grips with the frames, assumptions, and protocols determining the position licensing popular culture or art-historical images as authoritative, as well as studying the particular hybrid images resulting from this process.

Ice T, 2005. Oil and enamel on canvas, 72 x 96 inches. Private collection. Courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery, New York; Roberts & Tilton, Culver City, California; and Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago

EARLY SERIES OF PAINTINGS

Wiley's first introduction to the New York art world was Thelma Golden's inclusion of his work in her 2001 exhibition *Freestyle* at the Studio Museum in Harlem. The exhibition set the stage for a new historical development in African American art history, called "post-black" in Golden's exhibition catalogue essay, a term she had originated in concert with Glenn Ligon several years earlier. According to Golden, the post-black aesthetic "embrace[s] the dichotomies of high and low, inside and outside, tradition and innovation, with a great ease and facility."[57] Looking for a new complexity as well as a way to move beyond the defensiveness of so much mid- and late-twentieth-century African American art, Golden emphasized the diversity of the artists in the exhibition and declared "post-black . . . [to be] the new black."[58] In this exhibition, she selected wonderfully outrageous works by Wiley: paintings of black figures with elaborately coiffed hair reaching to enormous heights. Wiley subsequently employed "post-black" as a means for looking at his own work. "Well," he began, "the very utterance of 'post-black' includes the term 'black,' which means there's a type of schizophrenia."[59] In his review of the show, critic Derek Conrad Murray commented on the reification and commodification of Wiley's black male bodies, and their parallels with the show's professed goals:

> Wiley is the prototypical exemplar of this new Post-Black avant-garde in his envisioning of blackness beyond abjection and racial trauma. The resplendent black male bodies in Wiley's paintings are branded iconic symbols with extreme marketing potential.[60]

In terms of playing on the increased financial wealth of African Americans in the last decades of the twentieth century and anticipating the

enormous riches and diversity of the global hip-hop phenomenon, both *Freestyle* and Wiley's art were totally in sync, and this cohesion may have been one reason Wiley's art was deemed an immediate success. "Ultimately," Murray concluded, in a statement seeming to constitute, in a particularly apt way, the intriguing paradoxes animating Wiley's work, "Post-Black is a region of contradictions where hip-hop's street nigger archetype is the 'new Nike Swoosh'—a sphere where the black male becomes a brand—and is indeed marketing gold—trapped within the panoptic house of mirrors that is multinational capitalism."[61]

Golden's inclusion of Wiley's work in her pendant exhibition the following year, *Black Romantic*, was, however, not as fortuitous, since the show attempted to present thirty academically trained middlebrow black artists for whom satire was anathema, and since the work she included by Wiley, *Black Eminence* (2001; see pg. 88 and work from same series below), a full-length portrait of a man in a business suit with hair exploding across its background,

The Committee, 2001. Oil on canvas, 60 x 72 inches. Courtesy Kehinde Wiley Studio, Inc.

Passing/Posing #1, 2002. Oil on canvas, 120 x 120 inches. Private collection. Courtesy Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago

is definitely ironic. While Wiley's paintings made only a few years before, at SFAI, would have correlated well with the conventional work in *Black Romantic*, his production at that time was clearly at odds with Golden's commendable mission to present art appreciated by mainstream black Americans and largely unknown to members of the cutting-edge New York art world.

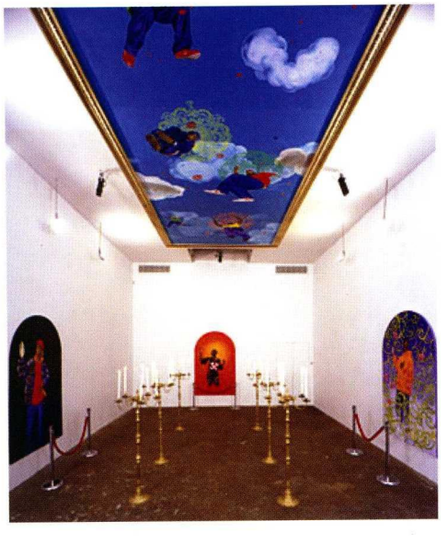
Because of his participation in *Freestyle* and also in Christine Kim's *Ironic/Iconic*, which featured him as one of the three 2001–02 Studio Museum artists-in-residence, Wiley's work came to the attention of the innovative New York gallerist and self-styled impresario Jeffrey Deitch, who immediately offered him a show in his SoHo gallery. According to Wiley, "Jeffrey . . . asked me what my wildest dream [was] in terms of realizing a project. I said, 'Doing a Venetian chapel,' and he said, 'Let's do it!'"[62] Wiley had recently traveled to Italy, and the resultant installation, completed in 2003 and named *Passing/Posing*, was an impressive collection of eighteen canvases, the largest being a 9 x 20 foot ceiling painting, which Deitch showed in its entirety. The intricately painted works comprising *Passing/Posing* had necessitated a corps of assistants to complete the elaborately de-

tailed decorative backgrounds, inspired by Celtic manuscript illumination, Islamic patterns, and Baroque and Rococo designs and also featuring thousands of sperm cells, an obvious play on the black masculine types featured in these paintings, figures modeled, however, on works by such painters as Ingres, Raphael, Sargent, Tiepolo, and Titian, and thus representing a far more genteel view of male power than the many sperm in these works would imply.[63] Like old master painters with large workshops, Wiley established early on the hierarchical process of hiring assistants to paint the labor-intensive patterned backgrounds in his paintings. For himself, he reserves the crucial task of completing the figures, working from projected photographs as well as freehand in order to discern character and calibrate the all-important relationship between external lighting and skin tones. Ever since he read Dyer's *White* and noted that photography is designed to be more responsive to white rather than dark skin, Wiley has searched for ways to paint men of color so that their faces radiate light.[64]

Because the large installation of these works, consisting of several rooms, was originally conceived as one piece and because there were no takers for such an ambitious project by a fledgling artist, Deitch decided to move *Passing/Posing* in December of that year to a building in Miami's Design District, so that its showing would correlate with the international Art Basel Miami Beach art fair. Arnold Lehman, director of the Brooklyn Museum of Art, was greatly impressed with this second installation and elected to exhibit it at his museum the following October, where it remained on view for four months. The opening of *Passing/Posing* at the Brooklyn Museum was a happening: it coincided with the opening of a John Singer Sargent portrait exhibition and included, in Wiley's "chapel," a special performance by the black drag queen and opera singer Shequida, dressed in an elegant period-styled Venetian gown, who presented, with great seriousness and decorum, a classical rendition of the Kelis song "Milkshake," to the accompaniment of a Juilliard-trained, black-tie-clad African American string quartet. This exciting event, predicated on formalizing hip-hop by transposing it into a period style, was made even more so that evening by the news that Lehman had convinced Wiley and Deitch to divide the work, thereby enabling the Brooklyn Museum to purchase five of the paintings for its permanent collection.

A number of writers and viewers thought the word "passing" in the installation's title connoted the blending or disappearance of light-skinned blacks into mainstream white America, and that the word "posing" referred to the assumption of a pose, a type of masquerade. While both these interpretations are certainly reasonable responses, they do not approach this work's affinities with the African American and Latino drag ballroom scene and their sponsored voguing competitions, with usually gay young men enacting elaborately stylized dance moves based on the outrageous poses traditionally struck by high-fashion models in *Vogue* and other such magazines.

Installation view, *Faux Real*, Deitch Projects, 2003. Courtesy Deitch Archive and the artist



VOGUING: PERFORMING RACE, CLASS, AND GENDER

Voguing, a dance form that originated in Harlem gay ballrooms in the 1960s, provides an important diagnostic for assessing Wiley's work, revealing a way to understand its complex and subtle critique when his sitters attempt to "vogue" the positions assumed by figures in old master paintings rather than emulate high-fashion postures. It will help to begin an investigation of this type of dance and its significance for Wiley's art by looking at several published suggestions about possible relationships between Wiley's high art and this pop-culture phenomenon. In addition, this analysis of Wiley's work's relation to voguing will benefit from the clues the artist himself has provided, before moving into a consideration of the heretofore uncharted ways this connection with voguing both explores and builds on poststructuralist philosopher Judith Butler's theories in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) and *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (1993) pertaining to traditional gender polarization as a largely unexamined and little-understood ideology.

In his review of Wiley's 2004 show at the LA gallery Roberts & Tilton, critic Bruce Hainley wrote, "I've read only a single thing on Wiley's paintings that bothers to mention an erotic, despite the voguing so flamboyantly apparent."[65] The following year critic Susan Ross provided a more pointed reference to Wiley's art and the drag-queen ballroom scene when she observed:

> Wiley's fascination with the construction of racial identity led him to focus on hip-hop gear, which he likens to a kind of drag. Like the black and Latino gay men in Jennie Livingston's 1990 documentary "Paris Is Burning," which Wiley cites as an inspiration, his portraits question "realness."[66]

Although she does not mention voguing, art historian Krista Thompson in "The Sound of Light: Reflections on Art History in the Visual Culture of Hip Hop" provides a complementary understanding of the importance posing assumes in Wiley's work. "Wiley's paintings," she observes, "highlight how African American youth often perform visibility and represent themselves through visual effects. . . .," and notes, "[Wiley began posing his models this way] after observing 'a runway element' in how black men moved through urban pedestrian neighborhoods like Harlem."[67]

In 2006 Wiley described his work in terms of cross-dressing. "I'm not really so concerned with the meaning of the original [source] painting. . . .," he explained, "Ultimately, what I'm doing is jacking history. I'm emptying out the original. It's almost a type of drag in a way."[68] A year later he responded to a question regarding the role power assumes in his art by quipping, "it's all a charade."[69]

If Judith Butler's term "performative" is substituted for Wiley's "charade" and her analysis of this less pejorative word is understood as a means

for indicating the coercive social, historical, and political norms serving as the basis for any intelligible style of portraiture, we can begin to appreciate the ongoing type of masquerade Wiley has in mind when he characterizes his work as both "charade" and "drag." Butler's use of "performative" comes from J. L. Austin's posthumously published book *How to Do Things with Words*, in which he refers to such societal acts as saying "I do" in a wedding ceremony as performatives because they are determined by social and linguistic conventions, not personal intentions.[70] Relying on this definition, Butler theorizes gender itself as a performative, a way of enacting the imposition of societal norms through which one's gender is constituted in advance, making it cultural rather than natural, and a compulsory act, not a personal choice. If gender relies on a cultural foundation too broadly based merely to be put on and off like a suit of clothes, the cracks in its apparently seamless formation can be revealed through the theatrics of "reflect[ing] on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced,"[71] a process Butler views as a significant contribution of drag balls and voguing. Wiley is in complete agreement with Butler and has even required Harvard students attending a lecture he was giving there to view Livingston's *Paris Is Burning* prior to his visit so they could more easily comprehend how class, race, and gender are social scripts that can be performed and thus produced in the contemporary world.

Although most people think voguing competitions consist solely of cross-gender impersonations, with males imitating females and females mimicking males, there is also a less well-known, subtle, and particularly revealing gender parody whereby males enact or replicate straightness for gay audiences. This is the type of drag performance Murray may have had in mind when he pointed out, "masculinity is performed in European painting, but not only as a mythmaking gesture. It also served to both ideologically and historically solidify a set of power relations utilizing the visual image."[72] If viewed from Butler's perspective, straight voguing can be considered a low-key form of simulation (rather than imitation) tantamount to the French poststructuralist theorist Jean Baudrillard's "image . . . bear[ing] no relation to any reality whatever . . . [because] it is its own pure simulacrum."[73] According to Butler, the reason for this is men performing or voguing aspects of male heterosexuality denaturalize this "hyperbolic norm," enabling it to be seen as an extreme stylization of the body, which over time has been "dissimulated as the heterosexual mundane."[74] Such drag "categories," she writes, "[can] include a variety of social norms, many of which are established in white cultures as signs of class, like that of the 'executive' and the Ivy League student."[75]

To understand the type of reality-based drag performances serving as a source for Wiley's drag charades, it helps to consider the macho theatrics occurring nightly at the New York City dance club Aurora. The following portrayal of its habitués by ethnomusicologist Stephen Amico could, in fact, serve as a description of a number of the figures in Wiley's paintings:

> Muscles are, in fact, abundant at Aurora, perpetually and conspicuously on display. Men are often shirtless, or perhaps in "muscle" tanks from the waist up, with jeans, Adidas, warm-up pants, combat fatigues or shorts from the waist down. Many sport tattoos, especially the angular, abstract sort which have become known as "tribals," accentuating, by their placement and design, the muscularity of the body; rings around large biceps, figures circling the navel on taut and chiseled abdomens, V-shaped designs on V-shaped backs. Bodies are uniformly hair free—the results of waxing, depilatories, shaving or electrolysis, thus making the muscles even more visible.[76]

At Aurora a specific type of masculinity or realness posturing is regularly enacted as a highly contrived norm in this demimonde of macho gays. The style of dress and body articulated in Amico's description represents a carefully orchestrated set of constructed codes intended to produce a specific type of actor on this club's nightly stage. Together with the drag ballroom scene, the extremely stylized poses comprising voguing and the drag charades in Wiley's paintings, the self-styled theatrics of Aurora's clientele serves the important social function of heightening the artificiality of a number of contemporary masculinist discourses, which have been ratified as social norms for differentiating genders through polarization, by "troubling" them, as both Butler and Wiley have noted on several occasions. By being viewed as highly theatrical and even hyperbolic constructions of a specific type of male gender role, Aurora's patrons represent glitches in the apparently seamless ideological universe constituting heterosexual gender norms, since they set up pointed comparisons between the naturalized and the patently artificial, thereby underscoring the artifice in both. Even though these presentations of male prowess might appear extreme when compared with their "real" prototypes, which, in fact, are also highly contrived, hegemonic masculinist norms remain socially sanctioned while their artificial counterparts are not.[77]

Like the nightly scene at Aurora, Wiley's art also undertakes the very important cultural work of demonstrating enormous similarities and differences between so-called reality and artificiality, thereby pointing up both as elaborate ruses. In addition, his work takes this dissimulation of engendered prototypes into a new direction by contrasting masculine norms in the past with those in the present and by playing off historically sanctioned modes for representing mainstream white leaders with the ad hoc ones assumed by young black males today. While Wiley's art certainly enriches our understanding of the ways gender has been acculturated so that its ongoing coercive norms are historically situated, it also provides a basis for extending our appreciation of what it means to be human, even if it does so by demonstrating humanity's necessary submission to a given culture's restraining views.

THE ART OF SEEING AND BEING SEEN: LACAN'S GAZE, ELLIPSES IN THE VISUAL FIELD

Thus far, this essay has mainly outlined a Foucaultian approach for looking at the discursive norms crucial to portraiture's intelligibility and legitimacy. In doing so, it has theorized representation as a restrictive mold capable of revealing certain socially accepted conventions for representing power while sealing off others. In addition, this examination has looked at the strategies Bakhtinian dialogism has been employed by certain cutting-edge African American scholars, notably Henry Louis Gates, Jr., to move beyond the psychological impasse of W.E.B. Du Bois's internalized double consciousness, and it has explored some of the ways Wiley's work employs double voicing to shift the emphasis from singular monologues to ongoing conversations between the grandiosity of Euro-American traditional portrait painting and the hip-hop, self-styled posturing of extraordinarily confident black males.

Considered now in terms of Jacques Lacan's Symbolic coefficients for the past and the present—those cultural elements beyond an individual's manipulation—we can focus on how the symbolic structures in Wiley's paintings end up excluding an unaccounted remainder created by a lack of sync between these two restrictive time-based modes of representation of Euro-American prototypical portraits and contemporary hip-hop protagonists. The nonassignable residue between the two can be understood in terms of Lacan's theorization of the Real, which he locates as an external paranoiac-inducing gaze—his famous *objet petit a*, the letter "a" standing for "autré," meaning "other." Lacan theorized this condemning unknown gaze of an unidentified other in terms of the sensation one can have of being looked at without being able to identify the onlooker—either human, animal, or inanimate— that is observing one from a different and hence unverifiable perspective. Lacan both theorized and analyzed the gaze in terms of the completely different perspective provided by the anamorphic skull in Hans Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors* (1533) in the collection of the National Gallery, London.

DETAIL (TOP) AND FULL VIEW (BOTTOM) Hans Holbein the Younger, *The Ambassadors*, 1533. Oil on oak, 81 ½ x 82 ½ inches. The National Gallery, London. © National Gallery, London / Art Resource, NY

Lacan elaborated on his theory of the gaze in the spring of 1964 in a course subsequently published as *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. This was the first time he had worked with university students, the invitation to teach at Paris's esteemed École normale supérieure having come from such prominent thinkers as Louis Althusser, Fernand Braudel, and Claude Lévi-Strauss, among others, after the controversial removal of Lacan's name from the list of analysts approved by the Société Française de Psychanalyse. Considering these circumstances, including, most particularly, Lacan's perception of a new, highly educated yet general audience for his work, it is not surprising that this innovative psychoanalyst would base his first course at this institution on a topic bound to impress his new academic colleagues by rethinking the recently published posthumous book *The Visible and the Invisible* by his close friend Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In doing so, Lacan

rethought certain fundamentals, including, most notably, the drive created by the imagined force of an outside other, representing a substantial reconsideration of his early work on the Mirror Stage.[78] Like Merleau-Ponty, Lacan found art an excellent mode of analysis, but Lacan was looking at the nonempirical properties of the gaze, rather than positing unities between embodied perception and the object contemplated as had his phenomenologist colleague. In formulating his theory of the gaze, Lacan considered the function of the skull in *The Ambassadors* to be a trap or frame for this imagined, uncanny, external, and nonsymbolizable perspective. He consequently understood the gaze as a hole in perception, attained through a lack of sync in discursive realms, between the painting's straightforward representation of the emissaries and the anamorphic projection constituting the skull.

Lacan's description of the unsettling external drive giving rise to the gaze can be used to pinpoint the crucial gap in Wiley's competing and overlapping semiotics pertaining to figurative styles and highly decorative elements or their unaccounted remainder:

> In our relation to things, insofar as this relation is constituted by way of vision, and ordered in the figures of representation, something slips, passes, is transmitted, from stage to stage, and is always to some degree eluded in it—that is what we call the gaze.[79]

In terms of an individual's history, the gaze originates in that portion of his or her drive incapable of being reintegrated into its symbolically engineered self. In other words, its origins are to be found in the infant's highly cathected and wholistic participation in the force field of its mother's nurturing embrace, a condition largely rejected during the subsequent imperialistic Symbolic stage when the child acquires language skills affiliating him or her with an acculturated world. The unaccounted remainder, unable to be symbolized within language's autocratic purview, constitutes the gaze's unsettling and haunting force, since it comes from the estranged Real, making it particularly arresting, baffling, and potentially very dangerous, given its ability to upset an individual's psychological makeup. Just as the anamorphic skull—representing death, the ultimate mystery, figured as a break in the straightforward perception of *The Ambassadors*—is encircled by the concrete signs of the emissaries' skills and accomplishments, so in Wiley's work, *power*, a category understood in terms of its effects and able to be represented only in terms of its accouterments, remains a great unknown—relatable to Kant's noumenon—that can be encircled and framed but not directly represented.

Lacan's understanding of the gaze includes his theoretical view of narcissism. Rather than regarding narcissism as mere self-love, the state of being enraptured and totally engrossed in one's image, Lacan considers it in terms of the hiatus or glitch in reality (represented by the gaze or *objet petit a*)

that the narcissist is trying to fill. Narcissism, then, can best be understood in terms of the missing element of the Real, unable to be contained in representation, including self-representation. Not only does the concept of the gaze help us to understand the lack of egoism in narcissism and, by extension, Wiley's posturing young males, but it also provides a means for appreciating the driving mystery of the indefinable other—the Real haunting today's global world—including the worldwide hip-hop phenomenon enriching hundreds, if not thousands, of African Americans in terms of both the music and its many commercial spin-offs, as well as the important project known as *The World Stage*, with which Wiley has been involved since 2006.

GLOBALISM AND THE WORLD STAGE

During Wiley's time as a graduate student at Yale, he took advantage of the opportunity to enroll in an innovative graduate seminar entitled "The World Picture," taught by the eminent Vassar College art historian and visiting professor Molly Nesbit.[80] Assigned readings included texts by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Catherine David, the curator of Documenta X (1997), specifically, the eight-hundred-page catalogue to that exhibition, entitled *Politics/Poetics*, focusing on the world of art on the eve of the new millennium. Nesbit's class was structured around two open-ended questions: "Who and what defines a world?" and "What would a Nietzschean aesthetic look like now?" Although the artists, architects, and filmmakers specifically investigated in the course, including Matthew Barney, John Cage, Johan Grimonprez, Rem Koolhaas, Chris Marker, Gabriel Orozco, Gerhard Richter, Rirkrit Tiravanija, and Rachel Whiteread appear to have nothing in common with Wiley's mature work, the subject of globalism and the challenge of originating a world picture, with its own disconcerting gaze or gazes resulting from a cobbling together of global developments and local responses to them, have been extraordinarily important to him and his art, making him one of the few artists to focus so concertedly on this subject.

The same year he took Nesbit's course, Wiley discovered Goldman Sachs' global economics paper entitled "Building Better Global Economic BRICs" (2001).[81] The report forecast spectacular economic developments in four countries—Brazil, Russia, India, and China (BRIC)—in the fifty years ahead, basing its prognostications on their natural resources, trained workers, and stable governments, and argued for these countries' inclusion in forums such as the G7 due to their majority role in generating gross world product. The paper intrigued Wiley so much that in August 2006 he initiated *The World Stage* by establishing a satellite studio near Beijing and planning two more, in Rio de Janeiro and Mumbai—thus accounting for three of the BRIC countries, with Russia being excluded because a number of economists wondered if its

Threefold Defence, 2007. Oil on canvas, 7 x 8 feet. Private collection. Courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery, New York; Roberts & Tilton, Culver City, California; and Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago

Chinese propaganda poster

autocratic government would impede growth rather than foster it. In addition to these nations, Wiley has supplemented his "world stage" with series of paintings made in Lagos, Nigeria; Dakar, Senegal; and Israel. His reason for including Nigeria in the group is its large oil production and of course his own historical connections with the country through his father, and no doubt in consideration of this fact he has pointed to Senegal as "a place many Americans visit to go back to their roots."[82]

Wiley's *World Stage* is predicated in large part on African American hip-hop's emergence as a preeminent global phenomena. Contrary to internationalism's traditional sustained yet ad-hoc hold over often vastly different territories, cohered under the banner of shared ideas and goals and often based on mutually effective trading patterns as well as the development of supra-national styles, globalism's almost instantaneous reach has been achieved through the new communicative technologies of the Internet and cell phone. Predicated on permeable boundaries, most dramatically conveyed negatively through the terrorists' 9/11 attacks on the U.S. and positively through the eradication of Cold War-era first, second, and third world hierarchies, globalism creates strange conjunctions of the international and local, since its new ideas are embraced differentially: often readily understood, they are then subjected to the tests of local needs, traditions, and prejudices, so that hip-hop developments in the United States and Japan, for example, are vastly different enterprises.[83] Aware of the global/local tensions involved in the spread of any idea across the planet, Wiley's *World Stage* paintings are jigsaw puzzles of superimposed past and present traditions, which can be read vertically in terms of time and horizontally or laterally as collaged elements pointing to distinctly different world views. Certainly not melting pots, they work to maintain differences in terms of their imbricated compositions where his black or brown-skinned male players mime a number of different customs, ranging from political posters to national and local works of art, pointedly accentuating their artificiality in the process. Although one might cavil that such a subject as new technologies should be represented in a digital format, painting, an analogue medium, has the distinct advantage of remaining detached from this more advanced technology and thus is able to re-present and critique the implications of these new modes of communication without being implicated in them. The situation parallels Chuck Close's reliance on painting, a medium outside his proclaimed subjects of photography and four-color printing, as an ideal means for investigating these topics. In addition to privileging painting, Wiley moves beyond the musical elements contributing to the global embrace of hip-hop even as he develops visual analogues for some of its chief characteristics—in particular, its raps, beats, and DJ's, as discussed earlier—as well as overlook its connections with graffiti writing in his *World Stage* paintings. In his art he continues to rely on his models' choices of hip-hop street wear, liberally mixed with local styles, to convey this popular culture phenomenon's global expansion.

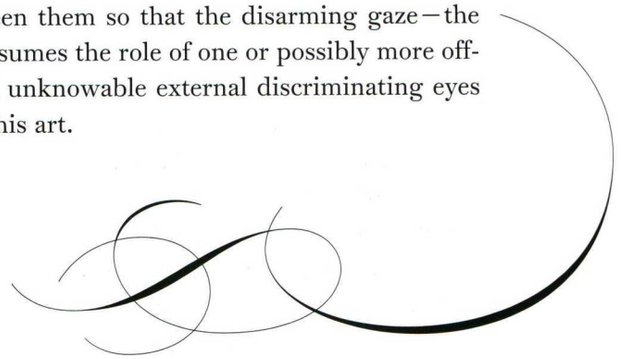
For his first *World Stage* series, made in China, Wiley continued to rely on black men as models, but now they assume the poses of Maoist-era socialist realist propaganda posters. He employed students from the Central Academy of Fine Arts as assistants to paint, in glowing detail, his backgrounds, inspired by Chinese silks and Ming Dynasty decorative arts, thus continuing his former interplays of different social, historical, political, and economic norms by finding ways to achieve dialogic exchanges and resistances among all the elements in his art. The many substitutions comprising these different layers and imbricated parts create, as in his other works, haunting vertical and horizontal glitches bespeaking possibly a number of still-omniscient gazes—powerful sets of Real(ities) that his often intuitively selected array of legitimizing norms is incapable of ever fully encompassing and understanding.

In terms of their ability to defamiliarize both the past and the present and to ratify at the same time haunting ellipses between the two on a par with Lacan's gaze, Wiley's paintings serve notice to age-old ideas of a collective and well integrated *humanitas* cohering all individuals into a single "family of man" on a par with Edward Steichen long acclaimed mid-twentieth-century photographic exhibition organized by the New York's Museum of Modern Art. In light of globalism's preeminence, Wiley's works strongly underscore the permeable boundaries forged through market economies as the order of the day, and just as importantly they refrain from eradicating these embattled borders under the banner of a superannuated nation-statism. This idea is abundantly evident in the African segment of Wiley's *The World Stage*, since the Dutch wax-resist fabric (and its local offshoots) worn by Wiley's models bears a compelling intertextual relationship with its prior appearance in the work of Yinka Shonibare. There, as in Wiley's art, it indirectly affirms the global economic chains joining Southeast Asia's inspiration for these textiles; the Netherlands' and United Kingdom's subsequent manufacture of them; and West African nations' ultimate endorsement of these fabrics as national emblems.[83] The artificiality of Wiley's "world stage," with its clear nod to globally connected localized centers of exchange, reenacts this highly ironic situation of far-ranging manufacturing and marketing networks, coupled with regional needs, and this multi-storied and disparate global state of affairs is evident in notable rifts along the interstices of the jigsaw-like parts comprising Wiley's overall compositions.

Film studies historian and Lacanian specialist Joan Copjec has noted in a statement about Lacan's approach to *form* and *informe*, fully in line with the interstices found in Wiley's *World Stage*, with this series' ready acknowledgment of the often competing goals of global reach and local response that:

> Contrary to the idealist position that makes *form* the cause of being, Lacan located the cause of being in the *informe*: the unformed (that which has no signified, no significant shape in the visual field). . . . The subject [then] is the effect of the impossibility of seeing what is lacking in the representation.[85]

Constituting a known but distant referent, idealist form is far removed from the Lacanian gaze's insinuatingly eerie oxymoronic presence/absence, the framed *lacunae* that *art*—the Imaginary's decoy—is incapable of incorporating, even as it continues to mask, circumvent, or allude to those elements unable to be subsumed under its auspices. Although the gaze is situated as a key missing component in Wiley's artistic structure, it itself is not cultural; thus the gaze must be conceptualized as that which escapes the veil of representation as well as that which cannot be imagined or symbolized. And yet, despite its allusiveness, the gaze—this haunting and ghostlike resurrection of the Lacanian Real—gives rise to an uncanny and even paranoid feeling of being watched, of being inadvertantly cast and produced as a particular type of actor on history's series of limited stages. Lacan theorized this *objet petit a* as a discomforting strangeness generated by the unapproachable and unassignable contents of the Real, the stain of the anamorphic skull in Holbein's *The Ambassadors*, which can also be understood in terms of the glitches and irresolvable disjunctions found in the ideological parts of different puzzles comprising Wiley's paintings. As a missing yet still haunting Other, the gaze is a crucial aspect of Wiley's doubled portraits, and yet it is evidenced as an eloquently silent lacuna in terms of the slippage and lack of sync between his different components. Unlike the ethnic Other theorized by traditional racism and reified into a known contingency, Wiley's Other occurs as a series of crucially significant rifts in the composition of his art, a means for understanding looking dialectically in terms of presences and absences and dialogically in terms of many voices and the space ensuing between them so that the disarming gaze—the all-important hole in perception—assumes the role of one or possibly more offstage modi operandi, unknown and unknowable external discriminating eyes or voids haunting and invigorating his art.



ROBERT HOBBS, "KEHINDE WILEY'S CONCEPTUAL REALISM," PP. 18–65.

The author gratefully acknowledges the thoughtful and conscientious assistance of two Virginia Commonwealth University Rhoda Thalhimer Graduate Assistants, Rachel Dalton and John Hebble.

1 Credit for the understanding of Wiley's art as an eminently conceptual pursuit goes to Jean Crutchfield; the coinage of the term "conceptual realism" is the author's. An earlier explication of this idea is found in Robert Hobbs, "Kehinde Wiley: Détourning Representation," in Samir S. Patel, ed., *Kehinde Wiley—The World Stage: Africa, Lagos ~ Dakar* (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 2008), 24–29.

2 Christine Y. Kim, "Faux Real: Interview with Kehinde Wiley," in Thelma Golden, *Black Romantic: The Figurative Impulse in Contemporary African-American Art* (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 2002), 51.

3 Emil Wilbekin, "Master Class," in Brian Keith Jackson, ed., *Kehinde Wiley: Columbus*, 2nd ed. (Columbus, Ohio: Columbus Museum of Art, 2006), 25.

4 Kehinde Wiley, interview with the author, December 9, 2009. Unless otherwise noted, Wiley's statements are from either this interview or one that took place the next day.

5 Celia Mc Gee, "Artist Going for Baroque in Harlem," *New York Daily News*, October 7, 2004, p. 52.

6 Robert Knafo, "Kehinde Wiley," *Studio Visit*, November 2004, http://www.studiovisit.net/ (accessed October 1, 2010).

7 Ibid.

8 Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1994), 12.

9 Kim, "Faux Real," 48.

10 Kehinde Wiley quoted in Mary Abbe, "Going for Baroque," *Star Tribune*, February 18, 2005.

11 Katrina Kaufman, "Kehinde Wiley: In the Company of Masters," *Venice* (June 2006): 95.

12 http://www.artislane.com/ (accessed February 10, 2011).

13 A possible source for the show is the following observation made by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in 1987:

> *No Black man, whatever his class, is exempt from superstitions about Black men, a situation which causes anxiety and which probably accounts for the fact that Black men suffer disproportionately from cancer, strokes, heart attacks, and other stress-related illnesses, including suicide and murder, which are being viewed in the same manner as disease epidemics.*

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "The Black Person in Art: How Should S/He Be Portrayed?" *Black American Literature Forum*, vol. 21, no. 1/2 (Spring–Summer 1987): 8.

14 Kwame Anthony Apiah, "Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 17, no. 2 (Winter 1991): 342.

15 W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co.; Cambridge, MA: University Press John Wilson and Son, 1903; Bartleby.com, 1999), http://www.bartleby.com/114/ (accessed January 15, 2011).

16 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1967), 197.

17 Dorothy J. Hale, "Bakhtin in African American Literary Theory," *ELH 61*, no. 2 (Summer 1994): 446–47. Hale points out that the epigraph for Gates's introduction to *"Race," Writing, and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986) is a quotation from Bakhtin's "Discourse in the Novel," one of his primary statements on dialogism, and that one of the epigraphs in Gates's *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) is a Bakhtinian statement as well. She also cites Michael Awkward's *Inspiriting Influences: Tradition, Revision, and Afro-American Women's Novels* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

18 Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel" (1934–35), in Michael Holquist, ed., *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 296.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid., 460.

21 Kim, "Faux Real," 50.

22 Wilbekin, "Master Class," 26.

23 Kim, "Faux Real," 49–50.

24 David Lionel Smith, cited in Shelley Fisher Fishkin, "Interrogating 'Whiteness,' Complicating 'Blackness': Remapping American Culture," *American Quarterly* vol. 47, no. 3 (September 1995), 453.

25 Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "The Black Person in Art: How Should S/He Be Portrayed? (Part II)" *Black American Literature Forum*, vol. 21, no. 3 (Autumn 1987): 330.26. Kobena Mercer, "Review: Looking for Trouble," *Transition*, no. 51 (1991): 186–87.

26 Kobena Mercer, "Review: Looking for Trouble," *Transition*, no. 51 (1991): 186–87.

27 Fishkin, "Interrogating 'Whiteness,' Complicating 'Blackness,'" 430.

28 Joe Houston, untitled essay, in Jackson, ed., *Kehinde Wiley: Columbus*, 7.

29 Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1983), 19.

30 Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 172. Gates refers to chiasmus as Frederick Douglass's "favorite" trope and cites his statement, "You have seen how a man became a slave, you will see how a slave became a man," before explaining:

> *Indeed, Douglass's major contribution to the slave's narrative was to make chiasmus the central trope of slave narration, in which a slave-object writes himself or herself into a human-subject through the act of writing. The overarching rhetorical strategy of the slave narratives written after 1845 can be represented as a chiasmus, as repetition and reversal.*

31 Kim, "Faux Real," 54.

32 Kaufman, "Kehinde Wiley: In the Company of Masters," 92.

33 Kim, "Faux Real," 50.

34 For a fuller discussion of blackface Americana, see Robert Hobbs, *Kara Walker: Slavery! Slavery!* (Washington, DC: Fund for U.S. Artists at International Festivals and Exhibitions, a public/private partnership of the United States Department of State, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Pew Charitable Trust, 2002), 9–16.

35 Kim, "Faux Real," 51.

36 Kauper is so relaxed about this image of himself, he has included it on his website: http://www.kurtkauper.com/works/other_works/selfportrait_95.html (accessed July 24, 2011).

37 Thelma Golden, "Kehinde Wiley," *Interview* 35 (October 2005): 163.

38 Bruce Morrow, "An Interview with Isaac Julien," *Callaloo*, vol. 18, no. 2 (Spring 1995): 411.

39 Mia Fineman, "The History of Art, in Baggy Jeans and Bomber Jackets," *New York Times*, December 19, 2004, http://www.nytimes.com/2004/12/19/arts/design/19fine.html?_r=1&scp=3&sq=&st=nyt (accessed September 20, 2010).

40 Wiley's series of photographs entitled *Black Light* needs to be considered as tableaux vivants and dialectical ekphrastic productions whereby photography with the help of digital manipulation is able to emulate Wiley's paintings.

41 Christopher Mason, "Venice & 125th Street: Kehinde Wiley Populates a New Intersection in Formal Portraiture," *Whitewall*, 1 (March 2006): 59.

42 Kaufman, "Kehinde Wiley: In the Company of Masters," 91.

43 David Colman, "Kehinde Wiley," *Elle Decor* (March 2006): 56.

44 Roland Barthes, "Myth Today" in Susan Sontag, ed., *A Barthes Reader* (New York: Hill and Wang, a division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1982), 99.

45 Ibid., 99 and 101–02.

46 Michael Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977). Jessica Schimmel writes of Wiley, "When asked to summarize his work in one word, the artist simply says, 'Panoptic.'" See Jessica Schimmel, "Art Walk: Art Imitates Life on the Streets and in the Museum," *Item* (June 2006): 44.

47 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 202.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid, 205.

50 David H. Solkin, "Great Pictures or Great Men? Reynolds, Male Portraiture, and the Power of Art," *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 19, no. 2 (1986): 42.

51 Ibid.

52 Robert Hobbs, "Richard Jackson: Expanding Painting's Limits," in *Richard Jackson: New Works 2006–2007* (New York: Yvon Lambert, 2007); and Robert Hobbs, "Jonathan Lasker's Dramatis Personae," in *Jonathan Lasker: Paintings, Drawings, Studies* (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in association with K20

Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf, 2003). Both essays can be accessed at http://roberthobbs.net.

53 David Lewis, "The Art World: Kehinde Wiley," *Prophecy Magazine 9* (Summer 2006): n.p.

54 Ibid.

55 Kim, "Faux Real," 50–52.

56 Guy-Ernest Debord, "Methods of Détournement," *Les Lèvres Nues*, 8 (May 1956), http://library.nothingness.org/articles/SI/en/display/3 (accessed April 20, 2008).

57 Thelma Golden, *Freestyle* (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 2001), 15.

58 Ibid., 14.

59 Scott Indrisek, "Q & A with Kehinde Wiley," Anthem (December 10, 2008), http://anthemmagazine.com/story/Q-A-with-Kehinde-Wiley (accessed October 9, 2010).

60 Derek Conrad Murray, "Kehinde Wiley: Splendid Bodies," *Nka*, 21 (Fall 2007): 92.

61 Ibid., 97.

62 Mason, "Venice & 125th Street," 65.

63 For an excellent look at this installation, including a description of the several rooms of paintings comprising it, see Sarah Lewis, "De(i)fying the Masters," *Art in America* vol. 93, no. 4 (April 2005): 120–25.

64 Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (London: Routledge, 1997), 89. In the section titled "Lighting for Whiteness," in the chapter "The Light of the World," Dyer writes:

> *Human skin does have different colours which reflect light differently. Methods of calculating this differ, but the degree of difference registered is roughly the same. [Gerald] Millerson . . . , discussing colour television, gives light skin 43 per cent light reflectance and dark skin 29 per cent; [Kris] Malkiewicz . . . states that "a Caucasion face has about 35 percent reflectance but a black face reflects less than 16 percent." This creates problems if shooting very light and very dark people in the same frame. . . . The problem is memorably attested in a racial context in school photos where either the black pupils' faces look like blobs or the white pupils have theirs bleached out.*
>
> *Recognizing this problem, Wiley takes great pains to depict the skin tones of his black models so that they will work in the painting. It may be one reason, among many, why he has chosen to replace the backgrounds of his historical sources with flat decorative hues and patterns.*

65 Bruce Hainley, "Kehinde Wiley: Roberts and Tilton," *Artforum* vol. 42, no. 5 (January 2004):159.

66 Susan Ross, "The Kehinde Wiley Experience: 'White,'" *NY Arts*, July/August 2005, http://www.nyartsmagazine.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2496 (accessed October 8, 2010).

67 Krista Thompson, "The Sound of Light: Reflections on Art History in the Visual Culture of Hip Hop," *Art Bulletin* vol. 91, no. 4 (December 2009): 493. Thompson's particularly felicitous phrase "the importance of being seen being seen" could be taken as a description of the layers of self-consciousness involved in voguing, even though she uses it to describe hip-hop as a preeminent visual phenomenon.

68 Paul Young, "The Re-Masters," *Variety*, June 2, 2006, p. 33.

69 Paul D. Miller, "New World Portraiture: Kehinde Wiley," *Art Asia Pacific*, 55 (September/October 2007): 143.

70 See Jonathan Culler, "The Fortunes of the Performative," *Poetics Today*, vol. 21, no. 5 (Fall 2000): 507.

71 Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 125.

72 Murray, "Kehinde Wiley: Splendid Bodies," 101.

73 Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra," in Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext[e], 1983), 11.

74 Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 237.

75 Ibid., 128.

76 Stephen Amico, "'I Want Muscles': House Music, Homosexuality and Masculine Signification," *Popular Music*, vol. 20, no. 3 (October 2001): 361.

77 See Phillip Brian Harper, "'The Subversive Edge': *Paris Is Burning*, Social Critique, and the Limits of Subjective Agency," *Diacritics*, vol. 24, no. 2/3 (Summer–Autumn 1994): 96. Harper astutely points out:

> *The subject that emerges through enactments of drag-ball Realness is phantasmatically constituted, but this in and of itself does not distinguish it from the normative subjects that it recalls. For they, too—and this is what Realness posturing exposes, according to Butler—are "phantasmatically instituted and sustained." Rather, the critical difference between normative subjects and those produced in the enactment of Realness is that the former are discursively constituted as recognizable within the governing social structure and thus are legitimated in a way that the latter are not. In other words, normative subjectivities comprise "sanctioned fantasies." . . . "Realness" is what is recognized in the ball context but not beyond it; "realness" . . . might usefully be understood in Lacanian terms as corresponding . . . to the realm of the symbolic.*

78 Charles Shepherdson, "A Pound of Flesh: Lacan's Reading of *The Visible and the Invisible*," *Diacritics*, vol. 27, no. 4 (Winter 1997): 71.

79 Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: W. W. Norton, 1973; reprinted 1998): 73.

80 The author gratefully acknowledges the information Professor Nesbit shared about this class, including a copy of the syllabus for it.

81 Sequels to the original study are found on Goldman Sachs' website: www.goldmansachs.com/ideas/brics/index.html (accessed May 2, 2011).

82 Brian Keith Jackson, "Native Son," *Giant Magazine* (June/July, 2008): 101.

83 Susan E. Cook, "New Technologies and Language Change: Toward an Anthropology of Linguistic Frontiers," *Annual Review Anthropology*, 33 (2004): 108.

A University of Pretoria anthropologist, Cook lists several considerations needing to be addressed when thinking about local responses to globalism's technologies:

> *Scholars of global hip hop must resist the tendency to essentialize "local," "foreign," or "global" culture. . . . The implications for the study of new technologies and language change are three. . . . First, studying technologies with global reach and global impact does not require or justify foregoing attentiveness to situated practice and localized meaning. . . . Ethnology reveals that the information itself, or the cultures it conveys, does not permeate all societies simultaneously, nor is it consumed in an identical fashion everywhere (or anywhere). The impact on language and communication of these technologies, then, is necessarily context-specific. . . .*
>
> *Second, global hip hop is not the sum total of its products. . . . Focusing only on the linguistic patterns, trends, and artifacts of new technologies does little to inform us about the lived experience of communicating via these new modes. . . .*
>
> *Third. . . . one can infer from the studies of hip hop around the world that global flows of aesthetic forms, cultural movements, and political stances (especially those mediated in some way by new technologies) are centered around youth."*

84 For more on this topic, please see my essay in Robert Hobbs and Rachel Kent, *Yinka Shonibare*, MBE (New York: Prestel, 2008).

85 Joan Copjec, "The Orthopsychic Subject: Film Theory and the Reception of Lacan," *October*, 49 (Summer 1989): 69–70.

SARAH LEWIS, "CELEBRATION AND CRITIQUE," PP. 86–91.

1 Darcy Grigsby, *Extremities: Painting Empire in Post-Revolutionary France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

2 Kehinde Wiley, interview with the author, December 16, 2010. All statements by Wiley are from this interview unless otherwise indicated.

3 M.I.A., "Kehinde Wiley," *Interview* (November 2008): 68–73.

4 Perhaps the most famous example is J. C. Nott and George R. Gliddon's *Types of Mankind* (1854), the most widely discussed racial science treatise of the antebellum period, which compared the head of the Apollo Belvedere—then widely recognized as the male standard of beauty—with the head of a Negro and the head of a chimpanzee.