The Power of Décor: Kehinde Wiley’s Interventions into the Construction of Black Masculine Identity

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary artist Kehinde Wiley creates portraits that employ conventional representations of young black males in varying degrees of hip-hop inspired attire placed against intricate, botanical patterns. Criticism of the artist’s work claims that the subjects of his imagery are the old master paintings which often function as the artist’s templates. It also implicitly suggests that Wiley accepts racialized typologies. In my analysis of the artist’s distinct style, I argue that these images confront the construction of black masculinity and its reduction to a limited set of possibilities through its decorative system. I discuss the black male subjects in combination with the decor woven around their bodies. Interpreting botanical ornamentation as a visual analogue to American consumerism, I expand the subject of the paintings to include contemporary culture. These patterns act as social capital and function as an extension of the body. In addition to light, prints recalling an ethnic “other” and hip-hop attire, Wiley’s decorative elements imbue the sitters with power and prestige through their references to history and their transgressions through race, class and gender. While Wiley’s portraits do not completely revalorize black masculinity, they disrupt the reductive enframing from which it suffers.
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INTRODUCTION

The *Portrait of Pablillos de Valladolid, Jester of Phillip IV, II* (2006) (fig. 1) is typical of portraits made by contemporary artist Kehinde Wiley. This image displays the interrelated compositional elements that pervade almost the entire body of Wiley’s work. The title comes from a 1636 painting by Spanish Baroque portraitist Diego Velazquez, after which Wiley modeled his image. The only alteration Wiley made to the title is his addition of the number “two” to the end of the phrase, signaling that his painting is the second of its kind. The artist also replaces the figure of Pablillos de Valladolid with a black male subject. As in other paintings, he stands in the center of the pictorial space, looking directly at the viewer.¹ This figure constitutes just one part of a group of elements that all work together to address the construction of black masculine identity.

The artist’s portraits also utilize the flat, abstract décor of interior design and its markers of good taste to address popular notions of black masculine identity. By décor, I am not referring solely to the objects and elements of interior design such as the wallpaper and upholstery to which Wiley’s patterns also refer. In this discussion, décor denotes a wide array of items and accessories added to one’s body and the space around the body for the purpose of embellishment. These can have a variety of functions and they do not always convey beauty, but most frequently serve as an extension of the body itself.² Décor is a set of physical aids that help

¹ In addition to making additions to the title, Wiley also subtracts extraneous parts of the background and larger landscape of the original images. For example, in the original *Portrait of Pablillos de Valladolid* the male actor who is the subject of this image stands in a hazy brown space.

² The term embellish holds a Latin origin. Like the French verb *embellir*, it literally means “to make beautiful.”
in a process of identity construction. Often, subjects desire to conform to a specific, already standardized type. At other times, outside influences impose types upon sets of bodies which seem all to possess the same characteristics. Wiley’s portraiture confronts the construction of black masculinity and its reduction to a limited set of possibilities. When he merges the décor of hip-hop with the décor of consumerism and good taste, his images intervene into the acceptance of racialized types. While these interventions do not completely alter black masculine identity, they do draw attention to the agency of black males and the ways they also use bodily décor to articulate resistance to a modern economy that consistently fixes their identities, refuting their individuality.

Wiley’s portraits include bodily décor such as clothing, shoes and accessories like belts, hats, bandanas and jewelry. The décor they wear, in popular culture and media frequently serves as a representation of hip-hop culture despite the ways contemporary hip-hop and its aesthetics differ from that of the 1980s. This décor functions to represent the bodies of his subjects as standardized types. Its close relationship with hip-hop fixes black male bodies within a set of ideas about their identity. The *Portrait of Pablillos de Valladolid* provides an example of this décor. In the image the male subject wears a black, short-sleeve sports jersey with the word ‘Harlem’ spread horizontally across his chest in bold yellow letters. In addition to the prevalence of sports jerseys in urban, hip-hop attire, the subject’s logo literally locates his body within Harlem. Since Harlem is a historic locus of hip-hop culture this situates his body within hip-hop identity. Jewelry also appears as part of the subject’s décor. He wears a silver-toned necklace

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4 The artist formerly known as Mase was just one popular rap artist who was from Harlem and frequently referred to this site in his music.
with a dog-tag; a gold-toned, braided bracelet; a large, gold-toned wristwatch; and an assortment of rings that includes a pinky-ring. Combined with the jersey, loose-fitting jeans and matching sneakers, the use of bling also locates this body within hip-hop culture because bling is the cornerstone of the visuality of contemporary hip-hop. The genre’s visual products such as its music videos prove that it’s dominant concern is not the material products of representation (such as photographs) as much as the moment of representation itself: when the camera flashes and the light that bounces off the subject’s ring causes it to shine. The Harlem jersey and blingbling jewelry all produce an image of a black body normalized within hip-hop culture. These types of bodily décor suggest that black masculinity is hip-hop. Simultaneously, other iterations of corporeal decor, different configurations of attire and accessories, can also suggest an intentionally crafted unique identity that may retain the appearance of hip-hop but also suggests individual agency.

A second painting, *The Dead Christ in the Tomb* (fig. 2), made a year later, is also typical of Wiley’s style as it utilizes a similar composition. It displays a type of corporeal décor, however, that the sitters bring with them to Wiley’s studio: tattoos. A male subject lies horizontally across a long, flat table against a patterned background. He wears nothing except a pair of navy blue briefs. Only a set of tattoos decorate his body. One tattoo of a rose covers half of the entire mid-section of his upper arm, just below his shoulder. Across the lower region of the rose is a sash with the word “MAMA” written in capital letters. Above this, the viewer can make out the faint impression of another tattoo. While tattoos hold deep associations with hip-

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hop culture, they also function as evidence of the ability of black males to create their own unique identities.

In addition to the bodies of the male subjects and their corporeal décor, a type of spatial décor appears in the *Portrait of Pablillos de Valladolid*. This décor is made up of botanical patterns which make the construction of identity apparent. Unlike the hip-hop fashion and “bling-bling” jewelry normalized as constituting black masculinity, the botanical patterns and the decorative objects to which they refer appear to have no relationship to the bodies they surround. These patterns place a premium on artifice and visual excess because of their flat quality and intricate rendering. Moreover, these patterns closely resemble those found in wallpaper and carpets. Indeed, it appears that Wiley appropriates the patterns from these objects. Thus, the botanical décor represents objects of good taste that pervade the realms of interior design. This spatial décor locates the black male body in a system of building identity which already holds the value of good taste and prestige. This décor functions in this way because the patterns weave around the bodies of the subjects. In the *Portrait of Pablillos de Valladolid* a pale tan, curvilinear print appears in a regular pattern. In the lower half of the canvas, the vines move horizontally from the left side towards the center of the space. There, they begin to coil vertically. In this area, however, the spiral moves around and over the left leg of the male while another vine curves downwards, over his black sneakers. In this sense, although the subject does not literally wear the pattern, Wiley appropriates its elements and this indicates that the subject conceptually wears it.

Wiley’s use of prints with patterns that appear to come from a cultural ‘other’ constitute a variation in his portrait’s spatial décor and function as another conceptual part of the artist’s decorative system. Those patterns, for example, incorporated into the portraits of “The World
Stage: China” series have the distinct visual qualities of Chinoiserie. Chinoiserie is a set of visual elements developed by Westerners for their decorative objects such as textiles and pottery and domestic spaces such as gardens. Used to decorate European and American interiors, these objects feature a variety of Asian influences. The patterns have strong outlines – the thickness of this line varies from portrait to portrait - and their flat deployment of color resembles the painted ceramic vases and textiles from which Wiley appropriates them. While seventeenth-century explorers, colonialists and nineteenth-century textile producers such as John Ruskin thought of these designs as constituting Chinese style, such a style did not exist for the individual groups living within the vast region. Similarly, those patterns of “The World Stage: Africa, Lagos – Dakar” series also approximate what reads (to an eye unfamiliar with the history of such patterns) as an African textile. These prints have a complex, transnational history, however, that complicates the notion of a purely African identity. They became symbols of African identity through a system of global commerce and domination. Originally produced in Indonesia, these patterns come from Batik cloth. Dutch merchants then mass produced the textiles and sold them on British markets. British colonial merchants then traded them with various ethnic groups in Africa. Thus, an inequitable balance of power, of domination and oppression, colors the history of this textile circulation. In both “The World Stage: China” and “The World Stage: Africa, Lagos – Dakar,” the development of the patterns took place against a backdrop of inequitable socioeconomic interactions. When these patterns weave around the


8 Impey, Oliver R. *Chinoiserie: the impact of oriental styles on Western art and decoration* (Smith College Museum of Art, 1965). 173.

9 Although Wiley counts as his inspiration the independence monuments scattered throughout the city of Dakar and traditions of Dogon societies, the patterns used by Wiley closely resemble Ghanian Adinkra cloth created and used by the Akan/Asante peoples. See *The World Stage: Africa, Lagos – Dakar.* (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 2008).
bodies of subjects in his portraits, they imbue the bodies with the power associated with colonial domination.

The final conceptual part of Wiley’s decorative system is the white light that the artist paints on to the bodies of his figures. In *The Dead Christ in the Tomb*, for example, light bathes the male subject’s torso and thighs giving his entire body a luminescent quality. Wiley painted his ribcage and abs, for instance, much brighter than his shoulder. Similarly, his entire arm is full of deep contrasts between light and dark areas. This light acts as a type of décor that literally pronounces the visibility of his subjects.

Weaving around the bodies of the male figures, the vines of Wiley’s botanical patterns create a visual juxtaposition and tension that calls into question popular, collective notions of black masculine identity. The botanical patterns of the *Portrait of Pablillos de Vallodolid* are abstract and flat and exude strong two-dimensionality. The photo-realist rendering of the male bodies offers the illusion of three-dimensionality. This décor visually collides with the corporeal décor that the subjects wear to Wiley’s studio. Together, these elements and dynamics comprise Wiley’s unique decorative system and they ask: How do others understand black masculinity? How do black males understand who they are? Do all black males subscribe to hip-hop culture? Unlike the patterns, American culture almost uniformly envisions hip-hop décor as an inherent part of black masculinity. Wiley’s inclusion of ethnic prints and intricate, graceful, botanical patterns of good taste, wealth and upper-class status suggest that this is a reductive interpretation.

In the following discussion of Wiley’s *oeuvre*, I examine his male sitters in combination with the varying types of spatial and bodily décor that appear. I argue that Wiley’s portraiture confronts the construction of black masculinity and its reduction to a limited set of possibilities. Contrasted to previous scholarship and criticism of Wiley’s artworks, in which art critics argue
that Wiley’s paintings only recast the white sitters of his templates as black figures and that Wiley’s work is about the history of portraiture, I complicate the subject of the paintings and expand it to include popular, contemporary culture, American consumerism and historically embedded and socially constructed notions of race.10

While the sitters literally wear clothing and jewelry, they also metaphorically wear the botanical patterns that weave around their bodies. This ornate decor represents an upper-class culture of consumerism and constructs an alternative black masculine identity through class. When the artist appropriates these lush patterns and combines them with black male bodies the resulting image critically intervenes into normative notions of black masculine identity engaging critically with U.S. conventions of race, gender and wealth. This is because the accumulation of objects of good taste signifies upper-class status, prestige and moral character. Thus, Wiley’s décor creates subjects who represent a wider array of identities beyond (but also including) hip-hop culture. Similarly, because the patterned décor competes with the hip-hop décor, consistently an equally prominent element of the artist’s portraits his bodily décor calls attention to the actions that the sitters perform (that do not exist within the frame), which already articulate a critical position towards mainstream culture as well as a desire to create alternative subjectivities within the modern economy.

The physical objects that appear in a subsection of portraits, such as books, wreaths, and other symbols of privilege, complement this visual intervention by presenting practices used to produce alternative narratives of black masculine identity. These images display the consumption of decorative objects to which the patterns refer, making it apparent that these

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10 Bruce Hainley, “Kehinde Wiley,” *ArtForum*, January 2004, 159. Poet and Professor Bruce Hainley is one of the first critics to note that most discussions Wiley’s portraits are preoccupied with Baroque, the Renaissance and the artists of these art historical periods as Wiley’s influences.
portraits locate the black body within the system of value signified by the objects. Wiley creates a visual intervention into the construction of black masculinity by strategically altering the verbal language used to identify and define the black male. By only offering the title of the painting on which each portrait is modeled, Wiley creates a narrative where one must work through the history of art, European history, their pivotal events and figures to identify the black males in his portraits.\textsuperscript{11}

Finally, the play of light on the subject’s torsos also functions as a type of décor and further strengthens this intervention. Like the decorative objects, Wiley uses this artificial light as an extension of the sitters’ bodies. Light creates the body’s opulence and literally enacts a visibility for this array of alternative subjectivities.\textsuperscript{12}

Much previous criticism of Wiley’s imagery implicitly and explicitly claims that the subjects of his imagery are the old master paintings which often, but do not always, function as the artist’s templates. Others naturalize black masculine identity with hip-hop culture, participating in the re-articulation of this standardized type. Finally, while some critics neglect to remark upon the presence of the numerous elements that make up Wiley’s decorative system, published criticism reveals little analysis of the effects of this décor, such as his botanical patterns.

The attention critics place on recasting black male figures into the poses of the subjects within old master paintings imply that his work is about this portraiture as a genre of art


This narrative figured prominently in a 2003 review published in *Art New England* as he recounted in detail how Wiley found sitters for his Passing/Posing series by walking up and down New York’s 125th street. In this review the author claimed that Wiley reaches into hip-hop culture to find images that revise and re-imagine the works of masters like Titian, Gainsborough, and Chagall. This statement implicitly argues that Wiley’s primary concern is the original painting rather than his black subjects and a critical reappraisal of black masculine identity. Wiley uses this particular process, in which black males actively choose the pose that they wish to adopt for their portrait, to reveal the individuality and agency of his sitters and to challenge fixed typologies imposed upon them. The 2004 “Passing/Posing” exhibition catalog presented this idea as well. In its first essay, the author asserted that “the placement of black youth dressed in urban street gear within the tradition of…portraiture contradicts the history of portrait painting as a genre reserved for the wealthy.” While this is true, this perspective partially obscures the presence of the black males that occupy Wiley’s surfaces.

When criticism does focus on the effect of Wiley’s stylistic and compositional choices on his subjects, it often suggests that Wiley accepts the depictions of black masculinity presented, participating in the production of racialized typologies. *ArtForum’s* treatment of Wiley’s portraits exhibited at the Studio Museum in Harlem’s Artist-in-Residence show suggests that they do not question the construction of black masculine identity. Describing Wiley’s work, the author states that “numerous canvases are simple framings of black men with cornrows and

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sweatshirts.”

His use of the term “simple” treats these representations not only as commonplace, but also as natural. It is as if, this is how a black male body should look.

Similarly, The Art Newspaper’s treatment of the artist’s work also naturalizes hip hop and black masculinity. Curiously, the text never mentions that black males constitute Wiley’s subjects. The first sentence of this passage only states that “renaissance paintings, urban street culture, the African-American community, and contemporary representations of power and masculinity” inspire his portraits. There is no description of how these elements come together. The title and adjacent image, however, create a narrative that fills in these gaps. An image of Wiley’s Napoleon Leading his Army over the Alps sits next to the words “Kehinde Wiley: Hip-Hop Royalty.” With no caption, these terms seem to describe the image, subtly suggesting that the black male sitter who appears on a horse is also an embodiment of hip-hop.

A large amount of those reviews and articles that discuss his botanical patterns, the second most prominent element of his work overlook how this element relates to the bodies it surrounds. While a 2002 issue of FlashArt included Wiley’s botanical décor, the editorial spotlight used the artist’s voice to explain his portraiture only noting that the décor was “graphically disorienting.” Nicole Rudick mentioned Wiley’s decorative backgrounds in her review of the “Black Light” catalog. She provided no clues, however, about them when she discusses his earlier painting Le Roi a la Chasse (2006). Critic Ken Johnson, writing at almost the exact same time, mirrored these actions when he remarked upon the botanical patterns of

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Wiley’s portraits in a group show but stopped short of offering ideas about how they function. Furthermore, in a 2008 interview with Wiley, the artist neglected to comment upon the highly patterns embellishment that he paints. Many previously published interpretations lack a treatment of the dynamics between the most important elements of the artist’s imagery, botanical décor and how this décor modifies the bodies it surrounds. Thus, criticism of Wiley’s work requires an analysis of how Wiley’s decorative system addresses the construction of black masculine identity.

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THE PROBLEM: THE CONSTRUCTION AND CONSTRAINING OF BLACK MASCULINE IDENTITY

Wiley’s images articulate that the problem of black masculinity originates in its construction. His portraits suggest that those who view black males suffer from a distorted vision or simply do not see them. Instead, they only see fixed representations of poverty, criminality, gang culture, hypersexuality and hip-hop identity. “Spectragraphia,” a word defined by Maurice Wallace, captures this distorted vision as it collapses together a variety of meanings that, together, begin to convey the problem of conceptualizing black masculine identity. I do not use the term stereotype, frequently employed to describe the problem of blackness, because this word can hold black males accountable for the ways others view them. Martiniquan psychoanalyst Frantz Fanon echoed this in his book, *Black Skin, White Masks*. In one story that the author recounts, Fanon sits on a train and a little girl sitting near him states to her mother, “Look, a negro!” As Fanon notes later, when the child made this statement, she did not just notice Fanon’s skin color, she also assigned to his body a set of seemingly empirical ideas drawn from his social behaviors about his ability and intellectual capacity. The young girl implicitly claimed she made a logical judgment because, in her mind, Fanon represented these behaviors. In this sense, racial stereotypes assign fault to the subject. Stereotypes, however, require an

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24 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 93, quoted in John P. Bowles, *Ever After Whiteness* (Chicago: Chicago Gallery at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2003), 5. Fanon states later on that in that moment was “battered down by Tom-Tom’s, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, racial defects, slave-ships and above all sho’ good eatin’.”
audience that accepts the semblance of objective truth they propose. For this reason, spectragraphia is more accurate in comprehending the problem of black masculinity.

The notions of vision embedded in spectragraphia do not propose that the problem lies solely with the behaviors of black males. It locates the problems of black masculine identity in how others see and conceptualize black males as well as in how black males see themselves. The latin root specere means “to look or regard.” The word spectre, also a part of the term spectragraphia, suggests invisibility because it is a synonym for the noun ghost. Combining the notion of seeing with invisibility, spectragraphia indicates that there exists a problem even when this figure is physically present. Is the problem of black masculine identity that no one can truly see black males? Is it possible that black males are, in fact, invisible?

The last part of the term spectragraphia (-graphia) proposes that the problem of black masculinity is the result of fixity. The suffix ‘graph’ denotes “a record of.” While records can be textual and visual, in this case “-graphia” designates a visual record because specere refers to visibility. More specifically, it invokes visual representations of black males which encourage a type of photographic vision. Photography is central to Wiley’s aesthetic project because he models his final products after initial photographs of his subjects. Despite the larger-than-life scale these portraits, this use of photography is visually evident in the realism, meticulous details and three-dimensional modeling of the subject’s bodies. Photographic records enframe their subjects ascribing to them a limited set of visual signifiers. Wiley’s photographic portraits present a delimited, standardized set of ideas and images, which both construct and constrain


black male identity.27 This fixity obscures other possibilities for black male figures, such as the ability to assume agency within society’s margins.

Wileys photographic images refer to the normalized, regulated set of behaviors and configurations across gender, class and sexuality which produce black masculine identity. In other words, there are specific characteristics and behaviors and other visual signifiers that create blackness and male-ness. In this discussion, I will refer to this set of productive elements as a regulated, normalized or standardized ideal.28 To be a black male, for instance, one cannot take part in activities that produce accepted, standardized ideals of feminine identity. For much of the twentieth century, across American culture, this included a variety of domestic tasks. Straying outside of the established, ritualized performativity of black male identity denies one membership in this category.29 I speak of it as a regulated ideal not to signal that it is positive or beneficial (a way that all black males necessarily want to be) but to convey that this narrow conception of black masculinity has authority and social imperative which causes it to reproduce itself. Black males participate in performative practices which produce this identity because they produce the body as authentically black and male.

Wiley’s portraits consistently offer clues that suggest these images explore the visuality associated with the black male body. These works “belong to that class of pictures, which in their strongest forms don’t merely serve as illustrations to theory,” they are actually images of the spectragraphia.30 Passing/Posing 14 (figure 3), created in 2002, demonstrates that his


29 Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, x. I use the term performativity to refer to the reiteration of norms required by the restraints of black masculine identity.

portraits address the distorted vision from which the black male body suffers. The position of the body in the image communicates that this portrait does not take issue with the particular identities of the sitter as much as with how others may see his identity. *Passing/Posing* 14 depicts an individual whose back faces the viewer. No distinct facial features are visible. While the subject’s representation is present, he is shrouded in anonymity. Wiley’s 2008 portrait *The Veiled Christ* (figure 4) reproduces this visuality. It provides an image of an anonymous figure, his body covered in a long, thin, white sheet, beneath which there appear only faint impressions of his musculature and facial features. These images suppress individuality and instead, refer to all black men as a typology.

Portraits in which the sitters face the viewer, such as the *Portrait of Pablillos de Valladolid* also function as images of the spectragnostic gaze through their accentuated flatness and titles. The flatness with which he deploys paint accentuates the two-dimensionality of the painting’s surfaces. Together, these visual qualities optically resist the inclination to access the individuality of the sitters.31 Despite the photo-realist, detailed representations of the subjects in these images, Wiley discloses little information about them. In almost all of the artist’s portraits, the subjects do not have conventional names. It is only possible to identify them through the titles of the images. Indeed, in this essay, I am only able to refer to the subjects through the titles of the portraits or generically as ‘black males’. Even in places where Wiley seems to offer more information such as the titles of specific locations, the subjects remain obscure. For example, a 2008 portrait by Wiley, that features two sitters, holds the title *Place Soweto (National Assembly)*. Although the poses come from a monument located in Dakar, Senegal, there is

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nothing that definitively links the two sitters with this nation state or Senegalese identity. Furthermore, in cases where the artist does offer the audience the name of his subjects, such as the 2009 digitally altered photo-portrait, *Abiel Mcintosh, Mark Shavers*, the canvas remains impenetrable to accessing the interiority and identity of the sitters. Without any personal information other objects and in some cases conventional names, the artist subsumes each of his individual male sitters under the umbrella of a generic type. 32

Wiley also signals that his portraits address the employing standardized representations that draw on racialized typologies. In this case, Wiley chooses to use men in hip-hop and urban attire. The *Portrait of Pablillos de Valladolid* demonstrates this. With his “Harlem” jersey, loose jeans, silver watch, gold bracelet and matching sneakers the artist represents this individual as hip-hop. Through these representations, Wiley conveys a normalized identity, one reproduced and stabilized by black males who find value in and adopt this décor and one that is then racialized by other social groups. This fixity clouds all other identities and in this way, his portraits address the construction of black masculinity.

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KEHINDE WILEY’S CRITICAL INTERVENTIONS INTO BLACK MASCULINE IDENTITY

Wiley’s portraits disrupt the forces which constrain black masculine identity through their decorative system. His images appropriate lush botanical patterns and prints, drawn from expensive objects of interior decor. These prints evoke a culture of consumerism, collecting (a particular form of consumption) excess and the value ostentatious consumption of such décor adds to one’s body, being, character, and identity.\textsuperscript{33} Contrary to the notion that Wiley combines the old and the new, the formal qualities of these patterns function as a visual analogue to the idea present in contemporary culture that the objects one owns are an extension of one’s self. While the bodies and patterns appear to be completely distinct, abstract patterns merge with the photorealist imagery of the black male body in different parts of the pictorial space. This blurs the separation between background and foreground and conceptually combines the bodies with the power and upper-class status of consuming objects of good taste. Wiley’s portraits further stage this intervention through their titles and poses, which identify their subject’s though allusions to the history of art as well as to events and figures from European history. Finally, Wiley’s paintings complete this aesthetic project by visualizing the decorative objects to which the patterns refer.\textsuperscript{34} The arts and crafts depicted, normally gendered as feminine, complicate notions of what masculinity can constitute. This suggests that there exists alternative

\textsuperscript{33} I say American rather than any other cultural context because Kehinde Wiley exhibits most of the paintings that he creates here and abroad, in the United States. There have been few large scale exhibitions abroad. The fact that he has a wide array of international collectors would suggest that he has had at least one opportunity to exhibit his work abroad.

\textsuperscript{34} Examples of the commoditization of the black body include Aunt Jemima and the Cream of Wheat man.
configurations of black masculine identity, ones which are unfamiliar and unforeseeable within the proliferation of ritualized performances of a standardized identity.

*Portrait of a Venetian Ambassador, Aged 59, II* (fig. 5), like most of Wiley’s images, visually iterates the problem of black masculinity. In this image, the artist produced a painting of a black male figure shrouded in anonymity. The figure is both visible and invisible, communicating the constraints and limits of identity production. Wiley also utilizes a representation of a male that will seem natural to audiences because of his bodily décor. The sitter’s makes him a conventional representation of a black male: the embodiment of hip-hop culture. For example, the subject wears a red t-shirt emblazoned with the G-unit logo and loose-fitting pants. His red and white bandana and matching red baseball cap recall the colors of the notorious gang, the Bloods, and further locating his décor in hip-hop culture. By offering a representation of a young black man in hip-hop attire Wiley draws upon an image broadcast over and over again throughout media so much that it has become a type. The dominant characteristic of this visual genre is its fixity – a static form that negates other possibilities. By re-visualizing a type, Wiley raises the problem of misrecognition that enframement, fixity and the types they produce pose for black males.

*Portrait of a Venetian Ambassador* addresses this problem by merging the prints, which evoke socioeconomic dimensions of American consumer culture, with the representation of a black male figure. The formal qualities of the botanical décor in *Portrait of a Venetian Ambassador* recall decorative objects used to build an identity synonymous with wealth and prestige. This is because the botanical patterns of are excessive. In this painting, lush vegetation and fruit springs forth in bright neon orange, pink and green. Clusters of plant groups repeat continuously throughout the pictorial space. Furthermore, details and intricacy reign as Wiley
layered motifs upon motifs. Together, these formal qualities function as a metaphor for excessive consumption.

The pattern also resembles wall-paper or the decorative patterns of a carpet, objects that decorate interiors but also serve as incarnations of the identity of the owner. The neon-like colors, however, signal that this imagery is not a creative representation of nature. Rather than abstraction, the dizzying repetition of forms communicates artifice. Since Wiley’s print in *Portrait of a Venetian Ambassador* lacks the illusion of depth created by light and shadow, the pattern also mark the print as a surface, firmly placing it within the realm of the decorative. The way the vines weave around, and in front of, the bodies accentuates the malleable qualities of these wallpaper which, one can manipulate to fit spaces of varying proportions.\(^{35}\) The repetition of motifs, textile-like patterns, and malleability of the print’s elements the materials all establish the print as decoration and Wiley’s patterns as a type of bodily or spatial decor.

Wiley further locates his aesthetic project in the language of fashion and décor in other portraits by employing its materials. The portrait *Cheick I* (fig. 6), for example, uses oil and enamel on canvas.\(^{36}\) While enamel is a type of paint, it costume jewelry and other metal accessories that decorate the body frequently employ enamel as well. In all cases, enamel “a semi-transparent or opaque composition of the nature of glass, applied by fusion to metallic surfaces…to ornament them in various colours” is a material of decoration.\(^{37,38}\) Additionally,

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\(^{35}\) Krista Thompson, “The Sound of Light: Reflections on Art History in the Visual Culture of Hip-Hop,” *Art Bulletin* 91 (December 2009): 481-503. Northwestern University Art Historian Krista Thompson’s is one of the first texts to note that the notion that the intricate patterns against which the figures stand show an obsession with surface (the scholar terms this calls a “surfacist aesthetic”).

\(^{36}\) Krista Thompson, “The Sound of Light,” 491. Thompson also notes that Wiley uses metallic paint in his portraits.

\(^{37}\) For examples of enamel used in Jewelry, see the work of Kenneth Jay Lane and Miriam Haskell.

the wide-grained canvas that Wiley uses is also a type of textile. Those materials, compounded with the proliferation of meticulous patterns, locate the viewer in the realms of interior décor, fashion, and taste. Wiley, himself, stated in an interview that these images are “a comment on consumption patterns.” Indeed, the accumulation of commodities used to decorate the body and domestic space is a visual practice.

The artifice of Wiley’s patterns indicates that he did not invent them. Their decorative qualities and semblance to wallpaper suggests that the artist appropriates these designs from the objects of interior décor and a culture in which these objects play a productive role. The “premium on sheer visual accumulation,” that the repetitive pattern in Portrait of a Venetian Ambassador (fig. 5) displays indicates that collecting and consumption have significance beyond the places and physical bodies that the objects decorate. The luxurious, decorative objects that Wiley’s prints refer also function as an extension of the body. They become the building blocks of its identity. In particular, these objects are a part of a system of signifiers of upper-class normative identity. Thus, the patterns in Wiley’s paintings mobilize the idea of decorative objects as valuable social capital used to construct and convey a subjectivity that fits into a regularized ideal of citizenship.

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Wiley’s *Portrait of a Venetian Ambassador* works against the normalized construction of black masculinity because it combines the power and prestige associated with luxurious decorative objects with the representation of a black male figure, one reduced to limited possibilities. The mechanism through which objects exterior to the body become extensions of the self involves the obliteration of the original context of production and the replacement of this history with a personal history. Even though consumers do not exert the physical labor necessary to manufacture the objects they acquire, commodities become signifiers of personal identity through the “false labor” of arrangement and classification. In other words objects become valuable signifiers for the self through organization and classifications. These activities construct narratives about the objects in which the owner is the subject, actor and end (whether they are for their bodies or the spaces they inhabit). Thus, a private or personal space is one that does not just include objects, but houses a distinct arrangement of objects that metaphorically and metonymically allude to the self.

Wiley’s appropriation of patterns of conspicuous, upper-class consumption into the bodily décor of the subject in *Portrait of a Venetian Ambassador* is the visual effect produces a new narrative. In this painting various parts of the print move out of the patterns order mixing with the body of the subject. Thus, the patterns function like his clothing. In this way, the power of consumption that the patterns signify, allude to the body and identity of the sitter. While Wiley’s portraits do not give specific details of this narrative, they transgress that poverty is

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inherent in black masculine identity. In this way, *Portrait of a Venetian Ambassador* expands the construction of black masculine identity through class.

Further, the combination of the patterns with the figures draws attention to the way the subject of the portrait already assumes a critical position towards mainstream culture through the bodily décor of hip-hop culture. Robin D.G. Kelley argues that “even the most impoverished black youth do no choose styles solely on the basis on what is affordable. Young men wear starter jackets, hoodies, L.A. Raiders caps, baggy pants, and occasionally gold chains not only because they are in style but because it enables them to create their own identity—one that defines them as rebels.”

The stylish use of colors within the ensemble of the sitter in *Portrait of a Venetian Ambassador*—a mix of red and black interspersed with white from the piping of his hat and the light that shines off of the metal from his wristwatch—emphasizes aesthetic control and individual agency. The male in this image is sharp as he evinces “a keen sense of style.”

Most of all, his black and grey sneakers, which contain lattice structure designs of four semi-circles that recall the classic Gucci monogram, articulates a sharp dissent from a set of normative identity produced by the signifiers of wealth that borders on mockery. Items featuring the monogram of Italian clothing and accessories company Gucci are highly sought after for the status ownership of their leather and canvas products bring. Like many elements of hip-hop style, however, the subject in *Portrait of a Venetian Ambassador* wears his own version of this monogram on his sneakers. Where the two G’s appear in the Gucci monogram, the young male

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46 Richard J. Powell, *Cutting a Figure* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 4.
has two contiguous images of the letter ‘B’ (one is a mirror reflection of the other). His decision to wear a pair with ovals, rather than the G’s, articulates a sharp dissent from fully accepting the system of value that this print portends. Thus, these shoes strengthen the notion of the subject’s calculated self-presentation. They are an act of rebellion against a modern economy that consistently classifies black males as criminals, refusing to acknowledge individuality.

Finally, Portrait of a Venetian Ambassador stages an intervention into popular notions of black masculinity because it requires one to identify the subject through history and art history. To speak about this work, one must simultaneously utter the name of a painting created by an artist of the Italian Renaissance who may have studied at the School of Verona. In this case, Portrait of a Venetian Ambassador is a portrait of a black male in the guise of an important dignitary. As such, it complicates a monolithic, reductive vision of black male identity that only encompasses hip-hop culture. By associating this figure with another place (Italy), another time and another lifestyle, the artist suggests alternative configurations of black masculine identity.

By appropriating intricate, excessive botanical décor Wiley evokes the power that the consumption of expensive objects has to produce an upper-class, wealthy identity. When he paired a representation of a black male body with this décor in Portrait of a Venetian Ambassador he created a new narrative of the identity of this black male as the object consumption that the patterns refer to now function as an extension of the sitter’s body and his identity. The power these objects possess also highlight the agency of this black male sitter. This is an agency that is already present in the subjects sartorial choices and his own self-styling, an area of the painting in which the artist has no control. By expanding socioeconomic ideas, Portrait of a Venetian Ambassador offers transgressions of the construction of standardized black masculine identity.
Support the army and look after the people (figure 7), a painting from Wiley’s “The World Stage: China” series intervenes into the construction of black masculine identity through a specific type of consumption: consumption of the cultural other. This is because the portrait uses a botanical décor that can be understood as Chinoiserie. Consumption in Support the army differs from that of other Wiley paintings because it refers to a historically specific set of moments. In this period, an inequitable set of social relationships circumscribed this consumption. The Chinoiserie-style prints in Support the army, good taste, agency and power, visually produce new narratives about the two black male bodies that form the subject of this portrait. Thus, this portrait appropriates the power embedded in consuming the cultural other. The painting also reinforces its intervention into the construction of standardized black masculine identity by visualizing the types of consumption that the portrait’s intricate patterns represent; types of consumption which do not fit within naturalized conceptions of black masculine identity. This combination explodes the fixed, delimited set of identities consistently associated with black male bodies.

Despite Wiley’s hyper-realistic depiction of the bodies of his sitters, his representations of them in Support the army and look after the people communicate the problem of envisioning black masculine identity. Wiley presents two visually conventionalized male subjects by utilizing males in hip-hop attire. The individual on the left side, for example, wears a shirt with a SEAN JOHN logo. This logo situates him in hop-hop culture because the brand takes part of its name from owner and famous rapper Sean “P. Diddy” Combs. The subject’s counterpart displays a green polo, an olive green and white bomber jacket and a tight head-wrap under a black and white baseball hat. Together, these elements constitute a distinctly urban style. Many urban fashion styles are synonymous with hip-hop, whose entertainers and fans all appear to be
from or located in American inner cities. By using representations of black men in hip-hop attire, Wiley employs a standard type and highlights the fixity imposed upon the black body when these representations repetitively circulate throughout the public sphere. Thus, Wiley visualizes distorted and reductive constructions of black masculine identity.

Support the army, like all images in Wiley’s “The World Stage: China” series, invokes the power of a particular type of consumption to intervene into the production of standardized types: consumption of the cultural other. The decorative botanical patterns consist of thick, pale green, pink and blue pastel vines. This pattern, with its thick outlines, resembles a Chinoiserie-style print.47 Developed by Europeans, Chinoiserie appropriates and interprets aesthetics from embroidery and other fine art objects imported from a variety of countries across Asia. Those who decorated domestic spaces used this style in conjunction with Baroque and Rococo styles featuring gilding and lacquering.48

Wiley’s use of Chinoiserie appropriates the power of consuming the cultural other for his portraits subjects because power and dominance are an intrinsic part of this aesthetic. This is because its development occurred within the context of European imperialism in Asia as Christian missionaries and European merchants ventured to China in increasing numbers from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries.49 Colonial officials from European and American governments, socioeconomically dominant societies, who were sent on expeditions to areas of Africa, Asia and South America, acquired a wide array of textiles and pottery from the locales


48 Oliver R Impey, Chinoiserie: the impact of oriental styles on Western art and decoration (Smith College Museum of Art, 1965), 173.

49 Sharon Leece and Michael Freeman, China Style (Singapore: Periplus Editions Ltd, 2002), 67.
they visited.\textsuperscript{50} In the process of establishing their empires these explorers collected information
and material objects from cultural groups they colonized. Articulating European identity and
power, merchants arranged and manipulated information as they collected these souvenirs.
Many times, these objects became the foundations for Wunderkammer or Cabinets of
Curiosities.\textsuperscript{51}

Before these groups explored these foreign locales, many already possessed fictional
constructions within their imaginations of the identities of the constituent cultural groups. They
maintained that the people they would find were primitive and exotic. Thus, as they collected
information and materials, colonialist merchants and explorers they transformed and molded the
information to fit the original conception the dominant society had of the groups.\textsuperscript{52} For these
colonialists, who inhabited normalized roles that conformed to a regulated ideal with respect to
race, class and gender (most were economically well-off white males), the creation of those
objects took place in a mythological pure culture, a geographic area inhabited by a group of
people who were perceived to live in a pre-historic state, untainted by modernization and
industrialization.\textsuperscript{53} Thus, these collections reasserted a European dominance over peoples
thought to be primitive.\textsuperscript{54,55} Thus, the flat Chinoiserie-patterned decor of Wiley’s \textit{Support the

from the end of the eighteenth century until the end of the nineteenth century. Expansion affected continent but
none more so than Africa and Asia. The two greatest empires were those of the French and British governments.
Their foreign holdings were adjacent and at times they fought over territories. One example of a colonial expedition
is Napoleon’s expedition to and occupation of Egypt in 1798. Most importantly, these countries shared ideas about
the cultural other.

\textsuperscript{51} These rooms, which were most often parts of domestic spaces in Europe, held scientific and aesthetically
interesting objects.


\textsuperscript{53} Susan Stewart, \textit{On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, The Souvenir and The Collection}

\textsuperscript{54} Susan Stewart, \textit{On Longing}, 136.
army communicates the politics of consumption. This decor draws attention to the fact that consumption is “more than what to buy, or even what to boycott. It is a valenced social relationship infused with the dynamics of domination and subordination.\textsuperscript{56}

Just as these objects elaborated a powerful European identity through the Renaissance, they also represent power and agency of the sitter in Wiley’s portraits.\textsuperscript{57} In this case, however, the Chinoiserie refers to the narrative of European conquest. By this, the sitters acquire the agency implicit in those narratives. For example, the main actors in colonialist narratives are wealthy men, those who had the favor of their sovereign. This arrests the normalized idea that universally, blacks are not people with material resources. Thus, Wiley changes the narrative of black masculine identity through the ideas of class.

With this power and agency, Wiley endows his subjects in Support the army with another distinct method of expanding the narratives of black masculine identity. In this case, the sitters visually appropriate two practices which are not part of the conventional construction of black masculine identity. They include exploring art literature and knitting. Whereas, other images have a template that recast the black male into the pose of the sitters of a portrait by an Old Master, Support the army’s template image is a 1976 propaganda poster of the same name. The Revolutionary Committee Nanjing textile factor produced the work under then Chairman Mao Zedong. As such, in the original painting, one subject read the widely circulated red book.\textsuperscript{58}

\textsuperscript{55} The exotic object, like other objects of consumption, can also signify the owner’s identity is because it can represent the direct experience of the owner. When collected, these trophy objects become extensions of the self through decontextualization and replacement of the narrative of their production.\textsuperscript{55} Dissociated from the culture, the traveling consumer replaces its history of production with the owner’s personal history.


Wiley’s rendition, the young, smiling male on the left holds a large, full-length art history text devoted to the French painter, Jean Auguste Dominique-Ingres. The thick volume is open to a page towards the middle of the book. His counterpart in Support the army holds a needle, pink thread and a pink sweatshirt which he knits. Together, these two practices broadly visualize arts and crafts. Throughout western history, the arts have at different times designated as feminine. Knitting is a practice that evokes social propriety and domesticity. It is synonymous with the domestic interior. In American society, the home has been the domain of females since the House Beautiful movement and the rise of sentimental culture. By showing black male bodies engaged in these practices, Wiley’s image gender conventions black masculine identity. He literally complicates the “masculine” part of black masculine identity by presenting males who appear to transgress gender norms.

Wiley created Support the Army for his “The World Stage: China” series. Support the army represents the power consumption of objects from the cultural ‘other’. The botanical décor of this image highlights the duality of the term ‘China.’ This décor locates the viewer in a specific set of physical objects used to construct an as their designs resembles that of a vase, or the plates, saucers and bowls used in china. This décor also refers to China, a homogenous locale in the “Western” imagination. By employing aesthetics that refer to its decorative arts and putting them into a new context, Wiley suggests the power of the consuming objects of an ethnic group constructed as ‘other’.

Wiley’s Saint Sebastian II (2006) (figure 8) reiterates this visual strategy of intervening into the distorted vision of racialized black masculine identity. Saint Sebastian offers more evidence that Wiley revisualizes representations of black male figures by altering and exploding the narratives that construct these identities. Like the Portrait of a Venetian Ambassador, Saint
Sebastian II presents the problem of spectragraphia. The artist also portrays the young subject as a standardized type by showing his bare, muscular torso. The representation of the muscular, black male body is central to hip-hop’s imagery. The sitter also wears hip-hop attire with pants that hang low around his waist and clearly visible underwear. Thus, Wiley depicts a type which fixes the black male body and obscures the wider-set of possibilities for black masculine identity.

Saint Sebastian II stages a critical intervention into standardized notions of black male identity because it reconceptualizes the black male body through the verbal language available to identify its subject. This painting, like many others, requires one to identify the subject through history and art history. Saint Sebastian II infuses this language with a multiplicity of meanings that combine the prestige of fine art with that of European history. Because Wiley refuses to give the names of his sitter and titles this portrait using the template painting, to identify the subject of this portrait means that one must simultaneously refer to a painting by a Flemish artist that was made in 1510. While the artist of the original painting is unknown, Wiley makes it clear through the title that he did not invent elements that appear in his portraits. Furthermore, his use of a saint, a holy figure, complicates the idea of the black male figure as only associated with entertainment roles. This type of conceptual décor provides another type of dress as well as a different narrative of black masculine identity.

The interactions between the botanical patterns and the body of the subject alter the construction of black masculinity because the spatial décor in this image also serves as a visual analogue for the value of accumulation and consumption. The curvilinear vines of this botanical decor weave around the torso and limbs of the sitter’s body. For example, in the upper left quadrant of the pictorial space, a long curvaceous, leafy vine winds down and intersects with the right arm of the black male covering his round bicep just above his underarm. Similarly, another
vine wraps around the left side of his lower-torso, just above his waistline. Congruently, a long
vine moves from behind the subject’s back and winds around his left forearm, just below his
elbow. The botanical patterns and tattoos share a similar gray color. This visual semblance
reinforces that these patterns function conceptually like his own tattoos, becoming part of his
bodily decor. Thus, in Saint Sebastian II the botanical patterns are not just spatial décor, they
appear to be a critical component of the subject’s self-styling. This décor imbues the black body
with the visibility associated with surrounding oneself with products of good taste such as ornate
wallpaper, lush carpets and sumptuous satin upholstery. They confer upon him the elevated
identity associated with accumulation one the rich and famous stars of hip-hop have recently
claimed.

Two types of décor work together in Saint Sebastian II to create a new narrative for black
masculine identity. The botanical patterns function as a type of bodily décor. By utilizing them
as dress, Wiley associates the power, prestige and agency with the sitter in the portrait. Finally,
by making references to the original painted after which Wiley modeled his more contemporary
version, Wiley alters the narrative of masculine identity. These references to the original, old
master painting becomes apparent through the title of Wiley’s image. Thus, Wiley associates the
older European genre as well as a holy figure with the identity of his subject. In Saint Sebastian
II, Wiley also uses light as a type of décor to visualize and accentuate the effects of his
intervention. Diffuse light appears in specific areas across the sitter’s body. This artificial light
(there is no visible source) makes his skin luminescent. He looks, in some senses, brand new.
The sitter’s left arm, which he holds above his head reveals three areas where light strikes his
arm and light bathes his right breast and the right side of his torso. Finally, his left arm body
gleams and glistens as it is also hit by the rays of an unidentified light source. By painting
artificial light onto the surface of the bodies, Wiley depicts the moment of visibility.\textsuperscript{59} Against the limited conceptions from which black males suffer, Wiley symbolically showers his subject in light. All of these decorative elements produce a new narrative of black masculine identity, one which is endowed with agency and the power produce alternative configurations of its bodies.

\textit{Charles I and Henrietta Maria (After Anthony van Dyck)} (2006) (figure 9) directly visualizes the decor Wiley uses to intervene into the construction of black masculinity. But this painting stands apart from those previously mentioned in this analysis because the artist metaphorically makes through architecture, the acts of building so necessary to the production of a regulated ideal. This architecture also underscores that Wiley’s project uses a pre-fabricated apparatus to complete the reconstruction of black masculine identity.

In this image, Wiley presents the problem of black masculine identity. The two sitters appear in casual, urban attire. Both subjects wear a form-fitting sleeveless shirt and pair of loose blue-jeans. Because these elements and the silhouette they create is urban their bodies become synonymous with hip-hop culture. The earrings that each sitter wears accentuates further locate the two within hip-hop culture. Wiley also conveys that this image includes representations of black male types by displaying their bodies in the similar outfits. The use of standardized, type-casted identities conveys the issue of the reduction of black masculinity to a homogeneous identification with hip-hop.

Furthermore, Wiley depicts the building and construction so essential to identity; by locating his subjects within a built interior. The large brown narrow panels at the top and very edges of the pictorial space indicate that the male figures stand in front of a painting. This image

features an open courtyard that occupies the majority of the pictorial space. On both sides, four Corinthian columns frame the space. The image is so large, however, that it looks like the space in the frame is an extension of the space in which they stand. For example, a gable with climbing vegetation hangs over their heads. On the very left side, at the bottom of the pictorial space, a long green, leafy vine with a cluster of white, pink and orange flowers appear outside of the painting. The vines hang over its edge, past the wooden frame almost touching the jeans of the young male in the white tank top. Like previous paintings, this disrupts the separation between background and foreground and subtly implies that the two subjects can enter this pastoral, columned space. Underscored by the wooden, wainscoting that makes up the bottom third of the pictorial space, Wiley depicts the building and construction so essential to identity; by locating his subjects within a built interior. *Charles I and Henrietta Maria* also places the subjects as the inheritors of neoclassical and antiquities revivalist periods of European history. The portrait’s sitters transcend this problem through the construction of new expanded narratives. Through the title of the painting, *Charles I and Henrietta Maria*, Wiley imagines the two sitters through history as well as the history of art. In particular, he appropriates the prestige associated with a famous king, Charles I. By naming his black male sitters using a wealthy, white monarch, Wiley presents a transgression through race and class. The title also features the name of the artist of the template painting: Anthony Van Dyck. Van Dyck was a leading Flemish painter in the second half of the seventeenth century scholarship often compares him Peter Paul Rubens. Van Dyck was famous throughout London, Rome and the Netherlands and by the eighteenth century, his prized portraits were parts of the collections of important nobles and royal families.60 This painting constructs a new narrative of the sitters. In this narrative,

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they carry the social esteem by occupying the role of sitters. Ironically, they also carry social status of the name “Kehinde Wiley”, a famous contemporary portraitist who painted a picture of them.
CONCLUSION

Kehinde Wiley intervenes into the construction of black masculine identity through a decorative system that creates expanded, alternative narratives of black masculine identity and cuts through normative constructs of race, class and gender. In each portrait, Wiley makes the construction of Black masculine identity apparent. He presents a photographic representation of a black male. Simultaneously, he shrouds his figures in anonymity. Furthermore, he consistently uses males in urban and hip-hop attire. By utilizing a type, the artist suggests the fixed, normalized nature of black masculinity.

Wiley’s botanical patterns disrupt the construction and constriction of black masculinity by because they endow the bodies of his subjects with new narratives that address class and wealth. Wiley’s botanical décor refers to the objects and accessories of interior design. His use of enamel in various paintings of “The World Stage: China” series further situate his viewer in the sphere of the decorative. Together, these elements are analogous to the consumer cultures which assign value to accumulation and consumption of material commodities. Thus, Wiley associated upper-class status and wealth with signified by objects of good taste with his black male sitters. By borrowing the particular designs of Chinoiserie, Wiley channels the power of consuming the cultural other. In Support the army, Wiley’s imagines his sitters through the narrative of colonialist explorers and merchants who expressed European identity by collecting and manipulating objects from the Orient. To strengthen this intervention, Wiley re-imagined black masculine identity through roles that transgress its gender norms. In Support the army the
two sitters participate in arts and crafts, actions designated as feminine within the wider system of regulated ideals.

The landscape in the background of Charles I and Henrietta Maria and the architectural elements it encapsulates (although partially dissembled by the bodies of the subjects) draw attention to the illusion of depth. This frame conceptually underscores that fact that Wiley builds his aesthetic project is inside of an already constructed apparatus for imbuing bodies with value. Thus, if Wiley is critical of standardized types and stages interventions into this particular way of seeing, he is also complicit with the problems of black masculine identity. Similarly, the artist’s subjects are also complicit in the popular notions of blackness that they promote. Wiley echoes these sentiments in excerpts when he acknowledged that his portraits are, both, “critical and complicit” and that if he were to revalorize the black male body he ought to “rethink the medium of oil painting itself.” Rather than the realism employed by the artist to which Wiley is an aesthetic heir, Barkley Hendricks, the artist chooses the hyperrealism and artifice of bodily and spatial décor. This complicity lies in the bodily décor of his subjects.

Name brands, present in much of hip-hop fashion styles suggest that the body is a product and also uses the body as a vehicle for commerce. The briefs and pants of the sitter in Saint Sebastian II, for instance, constitute his bodily décor. The “Hanes” logos on the briefs of the male subject in Saint Sebastian II prominently signify his role in the international flow of

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62 Richard J. Powell, Cutting a Figure (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 131. Hendricks, an older African-American artist who has had a 40 year career, is also a portraitist. Like Wiley, he has large-scale portraits of individuals of African descent. Hendricks’ sitters also wear the popular fashions of their time.

63 I compare the artist to Barkley Hendricks here because Hendricks is a black male artist whose aesthetic project was, in many ways, very similar to Wiley’s in the 1960’s and 1970’s.
corporate capital and communicate another problem of black masculine identity - commodification. Commodification uses subjects without regard for their experiences and living conditions.  

Wiley’s use of black males in hip-hop attire proposes that this process of denial and decontextualization happens to black males in popular culture. One example of such a figure, O.J. Simpson, will make the process of commoditization clearer. Before O.J. Simpson, one of the first black athletes to enjoy what is called cross-over success (success in football as well as wider print and broadcast media in addition to becoming the spokesman for innumerable brand-name consumer commodities) he was from a poor neighborhood in Southern California. That Simpson became successful during the time of rising racial tensions around the United States in and outside of sports seems to suggest that white Americans are now color-blind. It causes whites to appear as if they have transcended the racial past and no longer let race factor in to how they see others. It was however, his ability and the ability of others to distance his body from his youth in an inner-city San Francisco neighborhood where he lived in a housing project as well as the wider social tensions and appeals for justice that market the 1960’s that allowed him to be fully commodified.

First, Simpson became a decontextualized black body by distancing himself from efforts on the parts of blacks who were fighting for a new society without discrimination and racism. Basically, Simpson took apolitical positions, ignoring politics, staying away from all civil and human rights efforts and denouncing protests on USC’s campus by blacks and others. Over and over the football star verbally pronounced that he preferred to stay out of politics.

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Additionally, he frowned upon the actions of fellow black players who advocated for more rights in their respective sports leagues, verbally denigrating the pivotal Olympic protests of John Carlos and Tommie Smith of 1968.66

Simpson’s body was also a prime subject to be commodified because in addition to distancing himself from the politics of the day, the football star also removed himself more and more from his past. Simpson grew up in a housing-project of inner-city San Francisco. Yet, he refused to identify with his childhood neighborhood of Portrero as “he seldom looked back after his move to Southern California.”67 The media only augmented this distancing and echoed it in their reporting on Simpson. That journalists “spelled Potrero Hill no fewer than four different ways-and usually wrong” clearly displayed the press’ desire to leave Simpson’s past and his adverse childhood conditions out of public consciousness.68 The most significant omission from accounts of the context from which he emerged was the 1966 rebellion against San Francisco police after a black teenager was shot dead in Simpson’s neighborhood.69 Thus, company after company sought to use Simpson as their corporate spokesman because he fulfilled white expectations and desires for a docile black body, one that assuaged fears of black rebellion and confirmed that blacks were happy with their place in society. The press commodified O.J. Simpson by removing him from the larger human rights struggles and oppression that black bodies constantly faced in the 1960s. By showing a body that has become a surface and an object, Wiley visually confronts this issue of commodification.

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67 David R. Roediger, *Colored White*, 78.
68 David R. Roediger, *Colored White*, 78.
69 David R. Roediger, *Colored White*, 79.
On one hand, leaving the subjects anonymous foregrounds the way that others distorted vision of black males. Like O.J. Simpson’s representations in print and broadcast media, the conditions in which Wiley’s male subjects they live and grow up do not appear in his portraits (in addition to their names). Dressed in hip-hop fashions and accessories, the figures become type-casted images of the black male body. Still, Wiley crucially depends on the acceptance of and the desire for these standardized types to sell paintings. Hip-hop, as a genre of music, and a series of representational products, is in many cases highly valued and associated with youth culture and a type of countercultural rebellion. It is, in some senses, “a global phenomenon.”

It is a genre that appeals to wide variety of young Americans. More importantly, the steady climb in auction prices that Wiley’s portraits enjoy, prove that hip-hop possesses representational value amongst collectors as well. By this, I do not mean that Wiley is inspired by hip-hop, but that he benefits from the popularity of the genre. Wiley acknowledges this complicity as he stated in a 2006 interview: “my paintings are as much about the consumption and production of blackness…and how blackness is marketed to the world.” In this statement, the artist reveals awareness that his project transgresses the boundaries that produce black masculine identity. He


In 2008, Peers notes that the prices of contemporary, modern and Impressionist artwork fell by 30%. Kehinde Wiley, however, was one artist whose imagery retained its value during this time. “Painter Kehinde Wiley has had tremendous success with his skilled, Renaissance-style portraits of black men.” Wiley stated in 2008 that “before he even arrived for the party celebrating his recent show at Deitch Projects “I heard half [the works] were sold.” Elton John bought Dead Soldier at Art Basel Miami beach for 120,000 in 2007. Additionally, collectors Susan and Michael Hort, LL Cool J, Russell Simmons and Denzel Washington all own portraits by the artist.

72 Paul Young, “The re-Masters,” Variety, May 31, 2006. In this article, curator of the Columbus Museum of Art, Joe Houston, also noted that “Wiley totally understands the marketing of his work just as he understands the marketing of black men.”
also discloses, however, his awareness of the appeal of the fixed, stereotypes that his portraits utilize.

Furthermore, instead of adopting a critical position towards systems of representing power, a system which is racially encoded and demands that black subjects take responsibility for certain ideas about their identity, the artist operates within already previously established semiotic systems. In particular, “in a racist society, it is up to the victim to fulfill the racist’s insulting fantasies or somehow find a way to disprove them.”73 Unlike artist Kojo Griffin, whose aesthetic project denies this responsibility, Wiley’s portraiture proposes that there is value in retaining some part of blackness.74 The artist’s project thus offers a practical approach to the construction of black masculine identity by using a system already recognized by the system of regulated, normalized identities. It is as if, completely breaking free from race is unforeseeable. Indeed, there still may be value in viewing these types of standardized representations of black bodies. In 2005 Wiley told Thelma Golden:

I love when the kids come through. There’ll be a young black girl talking about how this looks just like her cousin, and that this is her favorite picture because it reminds her of her family. It’s that type of engagement that happens so little now for the African-American community. There are just so few images that look like us.75

As Wiley comments convey, many youngsters are empowered to they see their own images reflected on the walls a prestigious institution. His anecdotes indicate that there exists power

73 John P. Bowles in *Ever After Whiteness*, (Chicago: Chicago Gallery at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2003), 5.


within those bodies that live in the society’s margins, even as they are subject to forces that
impel them to stay within the boundaries that define the various parts of their identity.

Although my analysis attempts to be comprehensive, Kehinde Wiley continues to
produce new portraits. His latest series, “The World Stage: Brazil” is currently on display in Rio
de Janeiro and critics report that future portraits will take him to new locales such as Turkey and
India. The portraits in “The World Stage: Brazil” do not use hip-hop attire. The artist also
executed the “Black Light” series in 2009, a group of digitally altered photo-portraits. Although
Wiley’s portraits have always been the products of a process that included photography, the final
products in this recent series are the photographs. This use of photographs as his final product
presents new issues embedded within this medium. Finally, even though the artist uses male
subjects, many of the subjects in the original Old Master portraits are female. The artist retains
the titles of the original paintings, signifying larger critiques of sexuality as it relates to black
masculine identity as well as representations of black masculinity. Further analysis of Wiley’s
work must examine the way the artist complicates gender and sexuality for notions of black
masculine identity. Finally, Wiley’s paintings in private collections may re-surface in museums
in the catalogue raisonné. As new portraits become available for research, we will continue to
learn more about Kehinde Wiley’s aesthetic project.
EPILOGUE

Success and Subversion: Circulation and Consumption

While my examination of the visual components of his portraits reveals how they address the construction of black masculine identity it does address many questions. How do Wiley’s visual elements and unique decorative system explain the artist’s popularity? In less than a decade since the artist received his MFA in 2001, Wiley has had no less than fifteen solo exhibitions. While a Master of Fine Arts degree is virtually a requirement in the overpopulated, hyper-competitive world of fine art, the accolade does not guarantee this level of exposure. It can take a quarter of a century before an artist appears on a curator’s radar. His peers Mickalene Thomas and Luis Gispert, both successful artists and represented by Rhona Hoffman gallery, have each had only half as many solo shows. In one of the most recent sales recorded, one of Wiley's portraits sold for $175,000 at Art Basel Miami Beach in 2009. Major institutions around the country including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the National Gallery in Washington, D.C., the Studio Museum in Harlem in New York and the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University own his work. Furthermore, five significant exhibition catalogs about the artists work exist and a group of four scholars and curators are currently producing a catalog raisonné.


of Wiley’s work.\textsuperscript{78} Most importantly, Thelma Golden, an internationally recognized authority on contemporary African-American art, who began to aggressively support the artist’s work in 2001, is a member of this group.\textsuperscript{79}

Scholars inside the institutions of fine art and cultural critics in mainstream organizations and media outlets adore Wiley. The \textit{New York Times}, \textit{Essence}, \textit{Giant}, \textit{The Wall Street Journal}, \textit{Vanity Fair}, \textit{Elle Décor}, \textit{Interview}, \textit{The Advocate} and a range of other popular, nationally distributed publications all featured Wiley’s portraiture in the past nine years.\textsuperscript{80} In 2004, Kehinde Wiley appeared in advertisements for Infiniti’s new G35 luxury automobile.\textsuperscript{81} In 2009, sporting goods retailer Puma asked the artist to create a portrait of three African soccer players commemorating the World Cup in addition to a new line of sneakers.\textsuperscript{82} At 33, he possesses all of the authority and symbolic legitimacy that being an individual who successfully navigates in the field of Art entails. What is it about his project that appeals to the wider public? In what ways do his subject matters and treatment appeal to contemporary collectors? Is this corporate attention simply a coincidence or another way to actively re-vision black masculinity?


\textsuperscript{79} Conversation with Sarah Lewis of December 29, 2009. Kehinde Wiley became an artist-in-residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem, where Thelma Golden is the director, right after he graduated.


What is apparent and curious about his success is the strength of his own voice in criticism of his work. Any exhaustive study of the scholarship on Wiley’s work must include the artist’s opinions.83 The artist has the authority of scholar, judge and cultural critic. Art historians Sarah Lewis and Krista Thompson, both, conducted interviews with the artist for their research. No less than five full-length interviews with Wiley exist.84 In addition to statements by the artist woven into reviews of his work, there are several catalogs that include lengthy artist’s statements. For example, the text that accompanied the “World Stage: Africa, Lagos – Dakar” included a ten-page interview with Wiley.85 Is this the product of an increase in marketing by Wiley or an equally strategic part of his project to redress conceptions of black masculinity?

In 2008, Wiley told art critic Susan Ross, in an interview for her New York Arts Magazine, “let’s face it, I make really high-priced luxury goods for wealthy consumers.”86 This candid remark seems inconsequential as the astronomical prices for work by acclaimed modern and contemporary artists is an unwavering characteristic of primary and secondary art markets. It is significant, however, as it admits that this status as decadent luxury items exists side by side with the politics of these portraits. The circulation of Wiley’s portraits through major public museums around the country and elite circles of high net-worth collectors raises questions about


how efficacious the critical elements of his project can be. With respect to Wiley’s ability to highlight the distorted vision of black masculine identity, what is the effect of his participation in the art market on the highly visual elements rethink and reimagine black masculine identity? Who owns Wiley’s portraits? Where are his paintings and do their locations circumvent how efficacious they can be?

High auction prices and gallery premiums limit the ownership of his portraits. Thus, only a select segment of the world’s population can acquire a Wiley painting. Is it possible that the circulation and consumption of these objects simultaneously fulfill and detract from the goals of his critical project? In her book Race and Representation, bell hooks asserts that “work by black artists that is overtly political and radical is rarely linked to an oppositional political culture. When commodified it is easy for consumers to ignore political messages.”

Do the effects of commodification hold true in the case of Wiley’s portraits? Critic Mia Fineman asserted in her New York Times review of the artist’s work that the scale and saturated, bold colors employed by the artist that generate the popping aesthetic quality of his work are emphasized over the relationships of those formal qualities to the subject and are often the key factors that win him notoriety.

While criticism of Wiley’s portraiture suggests that the ways in which his images subvert the dominant narrative of portraiture do come across, the overtly rebellious nature of the bodily décor is seldom acknowledged. In any case, consideration of these questions is integral to comprehending the impact of Wiley’s critical intervention into the construction of black masculine identity.

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87 bell hooks, Race and Representation (South End Press: Cambridge, 1992), 33.

Fig. 1: Kehinde Wiley, *Portrait of Pablillos de Valladolid, Jester of Phillip IV, II*, 2006, Collection of Melba Bucksbaum and Raymond Learsy. Oil on canvas.
Fig. 2: Kehinde Wiley, *The Dead Christ in the Tomb*, 2008, The Sender Collection.
Fig. 3: Kehinde Wiley, *Passing/Posing 14*, 2002, Rhona Hoffman Gallery.
Fig. 4: Kehinde Wiley, *The Veiled Christ*, 2008, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Oil wash on paper.
Fig. 5: Kehinde Wiley, *Portrait of a Venetian Ambassador, II, Aged 59*, 2006, Collection of Jeanne and Dan Fauci. Oil on canvas.
Fig. 6: Kehinde Wiley, *Cheick*, I, 2007. Oil and enamel on canvas.
Fig. 7: Kehinde Wiley, *Support the army and look after the people*, 2007. Oil and enamel on canvas.
Fig. 8: Kehinde Wiley, *Saint Sebastian II*, 2006, Collection of Toni and Daniel Holtz. Oil on canvas.
Fig. 9: Kehinde Wiley, *Charles I and Henrietta Maria (After Anthony van Dyck)*, 2006, The Sender Collection. Oil on canvas.
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