Kehinde Wiley's Dilemma: How the Artist Painted Himself Into a Corner With His New Works

by Ben Davis
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Installation view of "Kehinde Wiley: An Economy of Grace" at Sean Kelly Gallery, New York
(© Kehinde Wiley & Sean Kelly Gallery, New York / Photo by Jason Wyche, New York)

Something is wrong with the left arm of the woman depicted in Kehinde Wiley's "Ena Johnson" (2012). Study the image, and you will see that her forearm and upper arm appear as two different sections, the too-sharp intersection between them making it appear as if they belonged to separate bodies. The result is to make her arm look like a paper doll's, or a Photoshop disaster.

This, of course, is nitpicking. But it is actually a relief to find something to talk about in "An Economy of Grace," Wiley's much-hyped, soon-to-close show at Sean Kelly, which otherwise gives you pretty much exactly what you would expect. It consists of a series of large oil-on-linen paintings in the same near-photorealist, mock-baroque style that made Wiley famous in the first place, though this time depicting African-American women (instead of men) who have been cast from the streets of the Bronx

and Queens, each of them clad in frothy couture made for their sittings by fashion designer Riccardo Tisci, in poses inspired by works from the Louvre.

Wiley (b. 1977) is one of the most successful painters working today. He was raised in rather tough conditions in South Central Los Angeles, but trained at Yale — where he picked up a hipper version of the queasy pastiche style of elder Yalies John Currin and Lisa Yuskavage — and had his big breakthrough during a residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem, where he decided to cast young men off the street and paint them in the heroic terms of royal portraiture. The result was a clever merger between street style and postmodern painting.

It's a good formula. Possibly too good. It suggests intelligence (in the art-historical references) and social conscience (in the focus on the African-American community), but is also neither particularly hard to digest nor particularly confrontational. Wiley states that his mission is to get some images of black faces in museums to inspire young African-Americans. Who, particularly in an art world so lily white, can argue with that? But it's also, in truth, not a very ambitious mission, as if it didn't really matter what the figures did or stood for. It allows him to define his contribution to social change as being about just getting his own paintings into museums.

Wiley's easily graspable schtick has allowed him to find a place in popular culture — the press-release talking point that "An Economy of Grace" represents his first series devoted to women is a bit misleading, since he has, in fact, previously painted Salt-N-Pepa for the VH1 Hip-Hop Awards, or that he has just done the album art for Santigold. It also allows him to churn out product. These days, his actual paintings are created by teams of assistants in China. He's secretive about how much of the work he himself does: "I don't want you to know every aspect of where my hand starts and ends," he told New York magazine recently.

But great portraits are not about formulae; they are about expressing something about an individual. Returning to "An Economy of Grace," you have to say that you get very little sense of any of these woman. They are blank as fashion plates. The iron-clad codes of Wiley's formula — woman + pose + Tisci dress — prevent the painting from saying anything particular. Compare Wiley's "Juliette Recamier" (2012) to the work that it duplicates, David's "Madame Récamier" (1800), where the austere mis-en-scene represents a painter's attempt to depict his subject as the embodyment of neo-Classical virtue. What does the flowery background of Wiley's

own version mean about his subject? The exact same thing as the identical motifs mean in every other one of his paintings, presumably, nothing more.

Then again, as John Berger notes in an essay on the history of portraiture, it is perhaps unfair to judge the genre by the few great examples that managed to capture a soul on canvas. In general, portraits were historically meant not to capture individuality, but to "underwrite and idealize a chosen social role of the sitter." In that sense, Wiley's project does indeed represent a contemporary spin on portraiture, in that his models' very blankness suggests the social place of these women — though not one they've chosen — which is as random consumers, raw vessels to be filled up with desire for clothes and the accoutrements of status. "Couture is a symbol of wealth and excess, and that's what art has been," Wiley told the WSJ. "There's a certain guilt associated with it — desire and guilt — it's always more sexy when you feel slightly guilty about it."

On some level, Wiley is aware that he is a prisoner of his own success. He has tried to change things up, first with what he called his "World Stage" series (most recently seen at the Jewish Museum) — where he did exactly the same thing, but in other countries — and now in "An Economy of Grace," where he does exactly the same thing, only with women and Riccardo Tisci. Lacking anything personal about them, either in terms of what they depict of their subjects or what they reveal about Wiley, you could say that the new works' main underlying subject matter is the nagging need to break out of a formula, without going so far as to risk anything.

They are adept, I guess, but also neutralized by their lack of human depth. As ads for Tisci dresses, the paintings in "An Economy of Grace" are top notch; as portraits, they are C stuff.

Kehinde Wiley's "An Economy of Grace" is in view at Sean Kelly Gallery, 528 West 29th Street, New York, through June 16, 2012