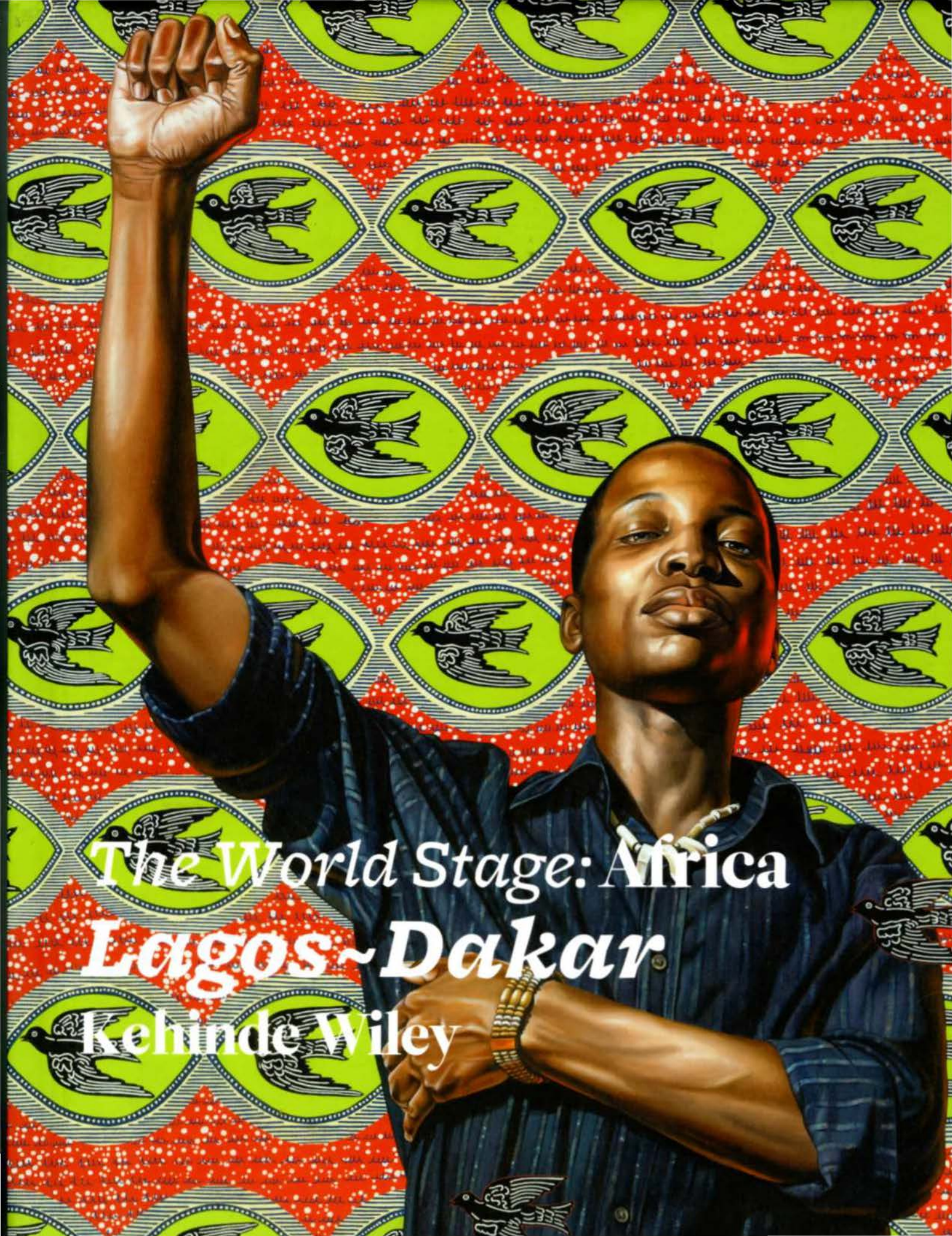


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The World Stage: Africa
Lagos ~ Dakar
Kehinde Wiley

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Kehinde Wiley: Détourning Representation

Robert Hobbs

*If you are what you say you are, a superstar
Then have no fear, the crowd is here
And the lights are on
And they wanna show oh oh oh oh, yeah*
-Lupe Fiasco, *Superstar* (2007)

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.
-David H. Solkin¹

On first acquaintance, one might be lulled into considering Kehinde Wiley's sensitive twenty-first-century portrayals of contemporary, young, assertive African-American males in hip-hop dress as essentially straightforward depictions. One might also be convinced momentarily that the only difference between these paintings and more conventional figurative works is the added bonus that they are inscribed on canonical art historical templates, which supplement the subjects' streetwise assurance with high-art pedigrees. But Wiley's paintings are not simple depictions; they are conceptually based critical works that are *about* representation rather than enactments of the process itself. In addition to assimilating high-art and popular-culture orientations, these works are concentrated analytical investigations that underscore portraiture's incarcerating limits. This far more theoretical approach enables Wiley to move beyond the still-compelling issues pertaining to the history of slavery—already explored by prominent African-American artists in the 1990s, including Glenn Ligon, Kara Walker and Carrie Mae Weems, among others—so he can examine the more general and insidious realm of representation's distinct yet often unrecognized shackles.

Differing from other writings on Wiley's art, this essay will contend that his past/present hybrids constitute a new type of *conceptual* realism, as opposed to its more straightforward counterpart. In addition, it will demonstrate that formative to his work is a sophisticated understanding of how portraiture can redirect French critic Michel Foucault's theories on the coercive normalizing effects of the human sciences since the eighteenth century. This essay will contend that Wiley's work, not content to sustain the stranglehold of official or culturally approved forms of representation, relies on the strategy of *détournement*, first defined by the mid-twentieth-century European group known as the Situationist International and involving the establishment of ongoing interactions between images so that they critique and undermine the molds in which representation traditionally casts its subjects.

One can begin to understand his extraordinary project of redirecting Foucault's ideas by substituting, as Wiley no doubt did, the word "portraiture" for "panopticon" ("pan" meaning "all," and "optic" meaning "seeing") in the theorist's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*.² 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 censoring positions assumed by officials stationed in central towers from which they can watch the incarcerated without being seen. Permitting views of all prisoners' proscenium-like cells, the easy visual access of the panopticon 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 it automatizes and disindividualizes power."³ He continues his discussion by pointing out that "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."⁴ Again, substituting "portraiture" for "panopticon," one can see how Wiley might reconceive this apparatus as the primary means for looking that the artistic genre—predicated on supporting hierarchical differences between classes—definitely ratifies. Foucault writes of the panopticon:

*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 . . .*⁵

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.

Portraiture's historical subjects are captives of the pictorial protocols that habitually typecast them in accordance with established or 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 implicit 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 that endorse as valid only those aspects of life that comply with its precepts. In this manner, images with claims to reality constitute types of social slavery based on conventional categories of intelligibility—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, which noted art historian David H. Solkin describes in the epigraph to this essay. As gentlemen, early-eighteenth-century subjects were expected to conform to distinct social norms that Whig writers such as Addison, Shaftesbury and Steele codified under the rubric of "politeness," an ideological construct that helped facilitate an equitable basis for exchanges between landed aristocracy and prominent members of an emerging commercial class.⁶

Highly discriminate in their scope, portraiture's historically based stylistic norms, which Wiley's work aligns with Foucault's analyses of the human sciences, can be considered in relation to this theorist's concept of the *énoncé*, which he explored in *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*.⁷ Referring to the enunciated place or position that legitimates a subject's entry into socially condoned

parlance at a particular time, as well as the direction of the equally time-specific creative imagination, this French noun undermines the artist'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 preeminence with the underlying perspectives that enable 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, Kehinde Wiley's work indicates a high regard for the concept's categorical ability to enhance our understanding of representation's creative and coercive role. His appreciation of its implacable force enables him to move in the new direction of rethinking the ways it subsumes race, class and history under its enslaving norms. This fresh starting point enables Wiley to work *categorically* with art historical and contemporary types and *dialectically* with both hip-hop strategies and 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 that cultural norms can empower as well as disenfranchise twenty-first-century, youthful, self-assured black males.

In describing his stylistic beginnings, Wiley alludes to his dialectical approach to portraiture, which enables it to function as a new type of discursive realism:

There was a desire to participate in that vocabulary [of eighteenth-century portraiture first encountered as a child on visits to the Huntington Art Gallery in San Marino, California, particularly such works as Thomas Gainsborough's Blue Boy (1770) and Sir Thomas Lawrence's Pinkie (1794)]. Only later, after graduating from Yale in 2001 and being in residence at The Studio Museum in Harlem did I begin to come to terms with that portraiture.⁸

Wiley then notes that while he was walking down a Harlem street soon after he moved there, he spotted a cast-off piece of paper that proved significant to his thinking about portraiture as an ideological genre:

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 a 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. And the first paintings of "Passing Posing" were the merging of those two lines . . .⁹

Wiley's accounts of incidents from his personal history formative to his mature style provide critical insight into his thinking at the time, since they indicate an awareness of how the FBI's bureaucratic style of portraiture can undermine a subject's power while eighteenth-century British approaches make the figures appear indomitable. His anecdote also indicates his appreciation of the protocols and effects endemic to categorically different genres of portraiture, including, in his example, wanted posters and aristocratic portraits. Although he suggests that upper-class historical figures wholly possess the mode of representation embodying them, his intimate knowledge from graduate school of the many portraits in the

permanent collection of the Yale Center for British Art, which was only a few of blocks from his studio, and his own subsequent work, indicate a move toward figures that are subject to portraiture's constraints, and thus not at all authoritarian.

In considering Wiley's anecdote about the circumstances formative to the development of his approach, which was 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. At that time, his love of canonical art historical portraiture and his desire to rethink painting presented him with two remarkably alternative views presented by some of the art on view at the Yale Center for British Art and the Yale University Art Gallery, which are directly across the street from each other. In contradistinction to the Center's superb, imposing British 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, *Tu m'* (1918). Predicated on the French familiar expression for "you," the work's title can be construed as a pun characterizing painting categorically as a "tomb" that, in Duchamp's opinion, ultimately buries or incarcerates itself and its formal means. Viewed in relation to the Center's collection of portraits, the pun can also be regarded as a wry critique of British portraits as representations in which their sitters' images are figuratively buried.

Through this Duchampian intertextual play with traditional painting, one can hypothesize that a possible source for Wiley's art is the practice of literalizing painting's devices, which was sustained and developed by a host of twentieth-century artists, including Robert Rauschenberg, Per Kirkeby, Sigmar Polke, Richard Jackson, David Salle and Jonathan Lasker, among others.¹⁰ In *Tu m'*, Duchamp found visual equivalents for painting's traditional functions, such as using color swatches to literalize color, an illusionistic rip in the canvas to signify art's illusions, a real 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 capacity for dealing with signs, and shadows cast by several of the artist's readymades to designate painting's reflective status. Instead of finding lowbrow equivalents for painting's long-heralded devices and distributing them randomly across canvases, as Duchamp and many of his followers had, Wiley imbricates them in his works. Considered in conjunction with *Tu m'*, Wiley's work alludes to art historical prototypes and their conventionally accepted reality, even as he emphasizes his streetwise models and painting's resilient self-referentiality by pointing to intense background patterns that, prior to the "The World Stage" series, related to neither his prototypes nor his models.

When Wiley began inviting prospective models 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 that function much like Foucault's archaeological approach. In *The Order of Things*, Foucault refuses to be hampered by the customary myriads of linear connections that engage historians. Instead, he theorizes an archaeological approach that compares discursive formations from different time periods. When Wiley populates a model's chosen artistic source with the person selecting them, the art historical masterpieces lose their privileged status and become images *about* power, rather than enactments of specific power positions. In his art, then, Wiley disengages discursively based representations from both art history and the urban environment, and thereby undermines the coercive force of each type. Using dialectics as a dissimulator, he *détourne*s or 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.

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—that correspond 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 that in the twenty-first century, hip-hop 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 cadenced style of speaking over the beats.

While Wiley's insistent background patterns can be regarded as analogous to the overall rhythmic quality of hip-hop music, and certainly do work well in this capacity, they also assume the highly important abstract role of being both opaque and resistant to representation of anything other than themselves. 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 illusions that his art historical prototypes and present-day models enact. In addition, when these distinctive patterns overlay parts of his figures, they pointedly demonstrate the conventionality of all representations and show that even the figures in Wiley's art are basically decorative configurations. While these designs function as formal elements to reinforce painting's self-reflexiveness, the sheer exoticism and range of his ornamental backgrounds, which refer to cultures unrelated to either his subjects or their art historical prototypes, undermine this seemingly modernist conventionality. Thus, their unconnectedness to either hip-hop culture or the referenced and redirected art historical models partially deconstructs Wiley's work, since these configurations defamiliarize the other two components in any of his paintings, including the past/present and prototypical/present-day polarities.

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 differences. These include the highly theatrical fashions associated with gangsta rap—including 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—which have been naturalized on the street through ubiquity but once again look extraordinary when seen in conjunction with traditional iconographic poses. Since the 1990s, hip-hoppers have topped these ensembles off with generous amounts of jewel-encrusted platinum and silver bling, which both plays into and differs from traditional portraits of bejeweled nobles.

In terms of their ability to defamiliarize both the past and present, Wiley's paintings serve notice to age-old ideas of a universal *humanitas* cohering all individuals into a family of man. In light of today's preeminent globalism, these works strongly suggest that underscoring the permeable boundaries forged through market economies—not eradicating them under the banner of a superannuated nation-statism—is the order of the day. 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 Nigerian-British artist Yinka Shonibare. There, as in Wiley's work, it indirectly affirms the global economic chains that join Southeast Asia's inspiration for these textiles; the Netherlands' and United Kingdom's subsequent manufacture of them; and west African nations' ultimate endorsement of the fabrics as national emblems. This highly ironic situation, which is predicated on far-ranging manufacturing and marketing networks, demonstrates the futility of viewing globalism as a new type of internationalism betokening humanity's unity; the separation of functions globalism entails emphatically reinforces both the world stage and its reliance on localized centers of exchange joined into vast networks.

The critical act of détournement, or directing imagery to undermine itself, is an ironic situation that can devolve into mere parody or rise to the level that the self-proclaimed Situationist International leader Guy Debord called the "parodic-serious stage." In order to see the world afresh and break representation's stringent hold, which he later called "the spectacle," Debord counseled:

It is therefore necessary to conceive a parodic-serious stage where the accumulation of détourned 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 a rendering of a certain sublimity.¹¹

Well aware 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 the rational and dispassionate perspective that we can view as similar to Kant's sublime, which briefly fends off feelings of engulfment. Instead of reinforcing the vice-like grip of representation, this parodic-serious strategy enhances human beings' ability to take comfort in reason's ability to comprehend vision as a preeminent ideological mode, even though we can never entirely wrest ourselves free of its far-reaching chains.

In his art, Wiley undertakes Debord's far more serious approach to parody as he works with officially sanctioned historical representations and present-day images of marginalized black men. The sheer absurdity, for example, of Wiley's substitution of gangsta-rap star Ice-T for Napoleon in the nineteenth-century, Byzantine-like seated portrait by French academic painter Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres demonstrates the narrow purviews of the two representational regimes associated with the figures. By inscribing Ice-T within the strict confines of Ingres's stage set for Napoleon, Wiley not only undermines aspects of these two discursive orders, 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 and this essay has attempted to explicate, it is as much a mode of seeing as it is 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) 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 that determine the position licensing popular-culture or art historical images as authoritative, as well as studying the particular hybrid images that result from this process.

¹ David H. Solkin, "Great Pictures or Great Men? Reynolds, Male Portraiture, and the Power of Art," *Oxford Art Journal* 19, no. 2 (1986): 42.

² Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977).

³ *Ibid.*, 202.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 205.

⁶ Solkin, "Great Pictures," 42.

⁷ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971).

⁸ Kehinde Wiley, interview by Roy Hurst. "Young, Gifted and Black: Painter Kehinde Wiley," National Public Radio, June 1, 2005.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Robert Hobbs, "Richard Jackson: Expanding Painting's Limits" in *Richard Jackson: New Works 2006-2007* (exhibition catalogue) (New York: Yvon Lambert, 2007); and Robert Hobbs, "Jonathan Lasker's Dramatis Personae" in *Jonathan Lasker: Paintings, Drawings, Studies* (exhibition catalogue) (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in coproduction with Kao Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf, 2003). Both essays can be accessed at <http://roberthobbs.net/>.

¹¹ Guy-Ernest Debord, "Methods of Détournement," *Les Lèvres Nues* 9 (May 1956). <http://library.nothingness.org/articles/SI/en/display/3> (accessed April 20, 2008).

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