



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Kehinde Wiley,
2010 September 29

Contact Information

Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Kehinde Wiley on 2010 September 28. The interview took place at Sean Kelly Gallery in New York, NY, and was conducted by Anne Louise Bayly Berman for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Kehinde Wiley and Anne Louise Bayly Berman have reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: This is Anne Louise Berman interviewing Kehinde Wiley at the Sean Kelly Gallery on West 29th Street on September 28th -

KEHINDE WILEY: Two thousand ten.

MS. BERMAN: Two thousand ten.

So now you were born in L.A.

MR. WILEY: I was born in Los Angeles.

MS. BERMAN: Okay.

MR. WILEY: My mother's from Texas.

MS. BERMAN: Okay.

MR. WILEY: Small town outside of Waco called Downsville. And my father's from Nigeria. And so I guess I'm properly African-American.

MS. BERMAN: [Laughs.] Yes.

MR. WILEY: They met in university back in the '70s. And I didn't grow up with my father. He - they separated before I was born. At age 20 I went to go find him in Nigeria. And after much toil, I finally figured out exactly where he was. And there's something about seeing your father for the first time - my mother destroyed all pictures of him.

MS. BERMAN: Oh, wow.

MR. WILEY: There was no image of the other biological half of myself. And as an artists, as a - as an - as a portraitist, the look of who you are was radically important to me.

MS. BERMAN: Sure. Did you - and did you have siblings? You had -

MR. WILEY: Six kids.

MS. BERMAN: Six kids. And -

MR. WILEY: Four boys, two girls.

MS. BERMAN: And a twin as well?

MR. WILEY: I am a twin, yeah, yeah.

MS. BERMAN: Okay. And did - in growing up, was there an emphasis on art? I think I read that your mother was getting her master's degree at one point while you were growing up and she would take you to The Huntington [San Marino, CA]. You know, was - were you sort of surrounded by art? Or were you kind of out looking for it on your own? Obviously you're saying that, you know, how you look is something that was really important.

MR. WILEY: Sure. Sure. And I was surrounded by art by virtue of not only the educational opportunities that my mother's foresight availed me to. But also, I think the world that I grew up in was like being in this sort of magical artistic garden. Just physically, if you looked at the house that I grew up in, my mother created this greenhouse that was plexi -

MS. BERMAN: Oh, wow.

MR. WILEY: And surrounded the entire property. And there was, like, trees and sculptures and like – it was, like, this crazy, like, secret garden space --

MS. BERMAN: Sounds magical.

MR. WILEY: -- that we grew up in.

Going to the Huntington gardens and libraries was radically important for me. They have one of the best collections of 18th- and 19th-century British portraiture that you can imagine in Southern California. One doesn't think about Southern California as being the capital of great art.

MS. BERMAN: [Laughs.] Right.

MR. WILEY: But it really was a place that I found wonder and providence. Looking, I think, at the L.A. County Museum of Art, I saw my first example of Kerry James Marshall, who had a very sort of heroic, oversized painting of black men in a barbershop. But it was painted on the same level and with the same urgency that you would see in a grand-scale [Anthony] van Dyck or [Diego] Velazquez. The composition was classically informed; the painting technique was masterful. And it was something that really inspired me because, you know, these were images of young, black men in painting on the museum walls of one of the more sanctified and sacred institutions in Los Angeles.

And so it was – it was definitely a game-changer for me.

MS. BERMAN: And at – and what age, you know, were you when you first sort of were confronted with this –

MR. WILEY: I was 11 when I was first introduced to live drawing classes and going to art school.

MS. BERMAN: Okay.

MR. WILEY: I was 12 in 1989 during perestroika, when my mother found a program that sent me to Russia to study art in the forests outside of Leningrad.

MS. BERMAN: Oh, wow. That's a big trip for someone that young.

MR. WILEY: Sure.

MS. BERMAN: How was that?

MR. WILEY: You know, it was – it was probably one of the things that gave me a sense of possibility and allowed for me to see beyond the small community that I existed within. You know, I was making friends with young Soviet kids that –

MS. BERMAN: That's amazing.

MR. WILEY: And, you know, this is during perestroika. You know, there's bread lines and vodka lines. The entire social structure of what was then the Soviet Union was radically different from what we know today.

MS. BERMAN: Right. Right.

MR. WILEY: It really was one of those moments, again, where my mother enabled a certain ability to thrive in the midst of organized chaos.

MS. BERMAN: So that was sort of her ability with you growing up.

MR. WILEY: Sure.

MS. BERMAN: And did she – you know, were you someone who knew that you had this talent, that you had this drive towards art? Or did she kind of pick up on it and, you know, nudge you in the right direction?

MR. WILEY: I think that it – initially it was just a matter of survival. I think it was a matter of, like, I'm not going to have my kids in these wild streets. Both my twin brother and I were in art school together.

MS. BERMAN: Okay.

MR. WILEY: He was – he was the – he was the star artist of the family as we – as we were growing up. He eventually lost interest and went more towards literature and then medicine and then business and so on. But

for me it became something that I did well. And it felt great being able to make something look like something.

MS. BERMAN: I can imagine.

MR. WILEY: And so I would imagine that that sense of adulation that you get from that is really what sort of gave me that stick-to-it-ness. It wasn't about a reward system but rather a type of self-esteem that was gained from it.

MS. BERMAN: That makes total sense.

And did your other siblings - were they taking art classes of some sort, or -

MR. WILEY: No, it was just me and my twin.

MS. BERMAN: And did - were you always drawn, even at that young of an age, to portraiture?

MR. WILEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. BERMAN: So that was - so you sort of -

MR. WILEY: But you know, portraiture is something that we're all drawn to. I think primarily other forms - we prefer, by and large, to look at human beings than a bowl of fruit.

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. WILEY: Now, you can paint a bowl of fruit magically. But we prefer, for some reason, to look at ourselves.

MS. BERMAN: To look at people. Oh, absolutely.

MR. WILEY: And I think it - you know, we're wired to be empathetic and to care about the needs of others, but also to be curious about others. And I think that's just sort of in our DNA. And so portraiture is a very human act.

MS. BERMAN: Really connecting you to what it is to be human, again, you know, to others.

What was your - as you got older, what was your, you know, high school art instruction like? And then eventually I know - I guess in 1999 you graduated from the San Francisco Art Institute. What was the instruction like there? You know, what was your experience like?

MR. WILEY: Well, in high school I went to the Los Angeles County High School for the Arts. And this is like *Fame*. It's like that sort of prototypical, dancers in the hallway, theater students, musical students, art geeks. And it was a kindergarten in the truest sense of the world: a children's garden where I was able to sort of really come into myself as an artist, as a person, sexuality issues - like, all of this became something where there was a firming-up and a knowing that went on. I -

MS. BERMAN: Were you - did you - oh no, go ahead.

MR. WILEY: I had an amazing instructor, Joseph Gotto [ph], who, as a painter, spoke to me as it - he didn't condescend. It felt like there was - there was a type of equivalence that really enabled -

[Off-side conversation.]

MS. BERMAN: You were saying, your instructor.

MR. WILEY: Joseph Gotto, yeah. Just all-around one of the more inspiring artists - not because of any sort of specific content direction, but rather the respect that I had for his own work and the ability for him to translate his ideas into useful form for me as a student.

MS. BERMAN: Did you find, as early as, you know, grade school or through high school into college, were there expectations of you that you were either going, you know, for or against, whether it be as, you know, a twin or as an artist or, you know -

MR. WILEY: Sure. Sure.

MS. BERMAN: You know, sort of any kind of role that you'd be playing.

MR. WILEY: After high school I went to the San Francisco Art Institute, and I began a formalized art education where we went through the history of art but we also went through the art of my contemporaries. And as a

young black man, a lot of my professors would really think that it was useful to see the work of politically oriented, positivistic, leftist creative works. And I found it incredibly useful. And I found it something that I've learned from and gained from.

But it is a certain rubric. It is a certain viewpoint or lens through which I was seeing the world. There were certain expectations that were assumed of me as a young black American 20th-century – then 20th-century artist.

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. WILEY: And I think that one of the questions that I asked of myself in later years was to this point of the political directive. Is it the responsibility of the colored artist or the ethnic artist to create works that are designed to exist in opposition to a certain political structure?

I noticed that the work of my non – I noticed that the work of my friends who were white and male, specifically, existed in a type of freedom that was not bound by certain political questions and assumptions and locations.

MS. BERMAN: Sort of like you were expected to do X, Y, Z.

MR. WILEY: Women are expected to identify gender as a starting point. Ethnicities are expected to identify that as a location. Is it ever possible for the artist to imagine a state of absolute freedom? That was my call to arms.

MS. BERMAN: Do you find that you could – that you found that? Or, you know, was that sort of something you were able to –

MR. WILEY: I think that's what I'm working towards daily. I think that I'm increasingly aware of the fact that in order to work towards any statement that's radically global or universal, you have to start in a place that's radically intimate and particular.

MS. BERMAN: Right. Right.

MR. WILEY: All art is self-portraiture.

I began working within the streets of Harlem, where, after graduating from Yale [University, New Haven, CT], I became the artist in residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem [New York, NY]. I wanted to know what that was about. I would actually pull people from off of the streets and ask them to come to my studio.

MS. BERMAN: Now, was –

MR. WILEY: And then it became a question of taste. I have a certain taste in art history. And that – I had a huge library of art history books in my studio. And I would simply have the models go through those books with me, and we began a conversation about, like, what painting means, why we do it, why people care about it --

MS. BERMAN: Right. Right.

MR. WILEY: -- why or how it can mean or make sense today.

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. WILEY: And these are just, like, you know – like, my peers at the time: you know, young black kids from off the streets of Harlem, having these conversations with me in my small, dirty little studio up in Harlem.

And what came out of that was an intense obsession with status anxiety. So much of these portraits are about fashioning oneself into the image of perfection that ruled the day in the 18th and 19th centuries. It's an antiquated language, but I think we've inherited that language and have forwarded it to its most useful points in the 21st century.

My paintings at their best take that vocabulary and attempt to transpose that into a form that gives respect not only to the history of painting but also to those people who look and sound like me.

MS. BERMAN: When you, you know, were in San Francisco or when you went on to Yale, was that when you started doing, you know, the sort of portraiture that you're doing now? You know, is that the point when that kind of came into play? Or what were you working on?

MR. WILEY: You know, it's interesting, because I went back to my mother's house recently and I saw some of my earlier works as a 15-year-old art student. And a lot of them were reiterations of classic works.

MS. BERMAN: Wow.

MR. WILEY: But there's nothing shocking inherently about that, given that so much of the way that artists are taught is by copying old master paintings.

MS. BERMAN: Right. Right.

MR. WILEY: I suppose in the end what shift occurred – which gets back to the heart of your question – is that at Yale I began to become more materially and conceptually aware of the mechanisms that gave rise to those types of patterns and paintings. And so the copying that happened in the childhood was a much more conscious type of copying in later years.

MS. BERMAN: Okay. So is it just – like you were saying earlier, sort of a firming up of kind of –

MR. WILEY: That's right.

MS. BERMAN: -- of something that was – who were you studying with at Yale?

MR. WILEY: One of my most strong memories was studying with Mel Bochner, one of the, I think, high water marks of American conceptual art.

[Side conversation.]

MR. WILEY: Where was I?

MS. BERMAN: Mel Bochner.

MR. WILEY: What can I say about Mel? Mel sets a very high standard. He expects only the best and most thoughtful and rigorous examinations, not only of the history of art but your own practice. Mel held large-form meetings with students. But the stronger points came through when we had the one-on-one critiques. And that's the system that works at Yale. There's the group critiques, and then there's the one-on-one critiques that happen in studio.

MS. BERMAN: Okay.

MR. WILEY: And I think one of the things that I took from Mel specifically was his ability to look at oneself and one's relationship to the history of art and the practice of art at arm's length, the ability to sort of clinically and coldly remove oneself from the picture and to see it simply as a set of rules, habits, systems, moving parts. And that's, I think, something that you might be able to locate in the work that I'm creating today: the ability to look at a black America as something that not only can be mined in a very sort of cynical, cold way, but also embraced in a very personal, love-driven way; but also sort of critiqued. And additionally, to be used as a starting point to look at broader pictures globally. The ability to look at certain patterns with regards to urban fashion, with regards to swagger, with regards to cultural hegemony, with regards to the ways in which young people look at resistance culture as a pattern that should be mimicked and admired.

I was recently in Israel doing my work and casting for models in the streets of Haifa and Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, meeting young Israelis and Palestinians and Falasha, Ethiopian Jews who had migrated to Israel in the '70s. They're obsessed with Bob Marley. They're obsessed with Kanye West. They're obsessed with resistance culture, people who find that they're not necessarily comfortable in their own personal and national skin.

Mel Bochner was able to give me the tools to look at those types of experiences, register them with my own, but also hold them far enough away to see them 360.

MS. BERMAN: That's a gift.

MR. WILEY: Yeah. Yeah. He's a great – he's a great professor. He retired recently, but.

But Peter Halley as well.

MS. BERMAN: And at this point, where – you know, in terms of your scale and your form and your models, did you see it developing to where sort of your work is now? Like, was it a very clear picture? You know, were you already working in that sort of way – you know, how was your – how was your, I guess, your process and your technique evolving during that period?

MR. WILEY: During Yale?

MS. BERMAN: Yes. As your – at Yale and then coming out of Yale, I guess going towards your artist in residence

at the Studio Museum.

MR. WILEY: I have – I haven't shown the world the work that I was making then. It's embarrassing. I mean, they're just embarrassing pictures, you know?

MS. BERMAN: [Laughs.] I believe that.

MR. WILEY: And I think that technically they're sound. But conceptually I think they were a little weak. I was trying. I was crawling. I was coming into myself.

And I was trying to in some ways get beyond – what is the word that I'm looking for? -- metaphorical language in painting, and to create something that was more indexical. And what I mean by that is that when you go to the library there's an index card that refers to a book that's actual and real in the world. So that index relates to something real.

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. WILEY: Whereas metaphor is a bit more scattered.

The work that I wanted to create wasn't being done then. I was too much concerned about fellow students, professors, institutional style. When I went to the Studio Museum in Harlem, there was a type of freedom that existed where I didn't have to think about professors, where I didn't have to think about much of anything other than my own practice.

MS. BERMAN: Why do you think that is?

MR. WILEY: Well, I think that just the nature of art education in schools, it's about packs, you know? Like, we're young wolves running together, creating a consensus. And consensus is antithetical to the art process.

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. WILEY: And I think that once you're able to sort of get in line with who and how you relate to the world, you'll become closer to this index that I'm referring to, right?

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. WILEY: Because what you want is this card that relates to that book. What you want is this human that relates to this world, rather than having this art school society scattering that point of view somewhere in between. It becomes diffused. And that level of clarity, I think, was gained at the Studio Museum in Harlem.

MS. BERMAN: That's amazing.

And so was that also the first time that you were really out on the street in Harlem, you know, meeting models that ways, which I guess is sort of the same way that you're working still?

MR. WILEY: Yeah, that's when it all – do you want some tuna?

[Side conversation.]

MR. WILEY: Yeah, no, it's a really specific process. Like, I don't know of any other way of doing this. And it was something that came sort of matter-of-factly. Because there – it's like really – real honest engagement with the people around me and just like really honestly being a little bit confused, quite frankly, about Harlem. You know, like, I grew up in South Central Los Angeles, where people are in cars.

MS. BERMAN: Right. Right.

MR. WILEY: There is no pedestrian culture.

MS. BERMAN: Right. So to, I guess, be confronted with all these people just walking around – [laughs] –

MR. WILEY: It was just, like, radically different, you know? Like, who are these people? And it was magic, you know? Like, the smells and the sights and the sounds. As an artist, you want to sort of be able to engage that and get that down in some way. This is – this is a type of familiarity but a type of radical difference at the same time. Yeah.

MS. BERMAN: Right. And – now, was that one of those things where you just sort of – you know, I guess when you were there, you just sort of were taking all this in and beginning work, but there was no real – I guess you hadn't prescribed for yourself a direct path of what you were – you know, was coming up next or –

MR. WILEY: I had no idea about where I was going. I had no sense of art as anything other than a problem to be fixed, you know, an itch to be scratched. I was in that studio trying my best to feel content with myself. I had, like, a stipend. I had a place to sleep. I had a studio to work in. I had nothing else to think about, you know. And that's - that was a huge luxury in New York City.

MS. BERMAN: It's very freeing.

MR. WILEY: Do you know what I mean?

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. WILEY: Like, you know, I actually, you know, studied cooking and, like, was thinking about becoming a chef -

MS. BERMAN: Really.

MR. WILEY: -- just so that I could support my art habit. You know? I mean, this is - this is something where you've been literally given an opportunity to put the world on pause for a second.

But what happened instead is that the world became the subject matter. You know what I mean?

MS. BERMAN: Right. Right. Right.

MR. WILEY: Like, that moment where you can calm down became that moment where I was like, actually, let me look at this and, like, just, like - and what really gave my process form was talking to the young men who ended up becoming the models in the work. You know what I mean?

MS. BERMAN: Yeah.

MR. WILEY: It was - because much like teaching art to young art students age 10 to 15 or so on, you have to break it down into bite-sized pieces, essential components. You have to - you know, at this point I'm so used to operating within given assumptions about art. But when you're explaining art to art students or people who are new to this experience, you have to really go back to the fundamentals.

And as an artist you can oftentimes forget the gravity of certain fundamentals. Why is it that portraiture is one of the keystones of the art tradition? Why not still life, or landscape?

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. WILEY: What is it that makes a grand portrait?

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. WILEY: What are the essential rules? Why do we cut off the figure at certain points? Why do we never cut the figure off at joints, at knees or at elbows? Why has that vocabulary been forwarded into film, for example?

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. WILEY: These things are things that you rarely think about when talking to sophisticated art people. But in the Studio Museum in Harlem, when I was dealing with that community and dealing with my peers in the streets, it allowed for me to get outside of Yale, to get outside of art-speak, and to really think about art as a material practice that has very useful and pragmatic material precedent.

And I think that gave rise to the type of practice that I - that I do now. I think it was informed by a very Marxist almost "use-value"-driven investigation of painting as agent. These are high-priced luxury goods for wealthy consumers, which are designed to deliver certain communicative effects.

MS. BERMAN: And being there, I guess, are you really - it was almost like being in an arts environment that you were then taking yourself out of, you know, and really going out onto the street. And I guess, like you were saying, you know, it's - the world is becoming, you know, what -

MR. WILEY: The world was a stage.

MS. BERMAN: -- what it is, yeah.

MR. WILEY: All the world's a stage. P.T. Barnum: It becomes a circus.

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. WILEY: But circuses or street pageants or parades have always been useful in a society.

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. WILEY: They've always been useful as a way of critiquing power. The carnivalesque has always been useful as a way of the powerful being mocked in a public space.

MS. BERMAN: Right.

Did you - I mean, did you think that that's what you were - you were going to be doing? You know, are these thoughts that sort of solidified after the fact? You know, were you - how much were you really aware of as you were starting it?

MR. WILEY: Well, I think - I think what we should concentrate on is what it feels like to be a working artist in the day to day. One doesn't imagine what comes down the line.

MS. BERMAN: Because I mean, right after you left that position - I mean, you went right into major shows.

MR. WILEY: It became -

MS. BERMAN: I mean, you had the *Ironic/Iconic* in 2002 and *Faux/ Real* in 2003, and then *Passing/Posing* [2004], and then, you know, *Rumors of War* in 2005 and the Hip-Hop Honors [VH1 commissioned portraits] [date?], and it just kept going and isn't stopping.

MR. WILEY: Sure. And so on and so on and so on and so on and so on and so on. Right.

MS. BERMAN: So you -

MR. WILEY: And again, I guess - I guess that's what I mean, is that one doesn't imagine what's coming next. One simply has to be in - like, no one ever - like, if I asked you, what does your mouth taste like right now, you don't think about it. It simply is, you know?

MS. BERMAN: Right. Right.

MR. WILEY: And I would imagine that what you try to do is to - is to be as sensitive to the environment that surrounds you as possible. As you see, my work has become increasingly global. My presence in the world has become increasingly global.

MS. BERMAN: Absolutely.

MR. WILEY: I'm trying to be sensitive to the life that I live. If I'm in the streets of India and the streets of Sri Lanka and I notice certain patterns that I - that exist in the streets of Harlem or Brooklyn, I want to get that down.

MS. BERMAN: It's got to be so exciting to witness.

MR. WILEY: That's right. That's right. And what's great about it is that painting doesn't move. And so in the 21st century, when we're used to clicking and browsing and having constant choice, painting simply sits there silently and begs you to notice the smallest of detail.

MS. BERMAN: That's true.

MR. WILEY: And that's what I think my job in the world has been, is to sort of try to sit silently a bit and watch it all sort of move and see those small, quiet details, whether it be a small village outside of Colombo [country?] or the favelas of Brazil, where, again, resistance culture is something that you hear resonating in the streets of South Central Los Angeles as well.

Like, what are those subtle movements that happen between the two? How does the artist function as poet-slash-witness-slash-trickster?

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. WILEY: That, I think, is my call to arms.

MS. BERMAN: How do you - how do you first conceive of a project or piece? And is it different when the project is connected to something specific as when it stands alone? Like, for instance, when you're doing something like the Columbus Museum [of Art, Columbus, OH] project or, you know, this new project you were just discussing about in Israel, or, you know, maybe the Hip-Hop Honors project, or something, you know, that has

sort of parameters around it –

MR. WILEY: Right.

MS. BERMAN: -- is the way you go into that different than something that totally exists on its own?

MR. WILEY: That's a good question. I think it's really useful to create parameters. The term you use can be forwarded into something more like a grid, a rubric, a system that you apply to all environments, and in so doing you create a situation in which you can locate local color, local differences within new environments.

If I have the same plan to go into the streets, find random strangers, use art-historical referent from their – from the specific location, to use decorative patterns from this location, that's a rule. That's a set of patterns that you can apply to all societies. But what gives rise or what comes out of each experiment is so radically different. I mean, the radical contingency that is – that exists and the fact that I'm going into the streets and finding random strangers any given day – who's in these streets that day?

It's – it's really sort of magical, in a way. But I almost compare it, in a way, to what happens to actual – to actual being, like to exist. You know, the average human male creates enough sperm cells per diem to populate the globe. Right?

MS. BERMAN: Right. Right.

MR. WILEY: But, like, on that one random day, you were chosen.

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. WILEY: I mean, from the prince to the guy laying in the streets. This is all magic, you know?

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. WILEY: And, like, chance – [snaps] – and radical contingency are the DNA to this painting project. It's that point in which you find someone who was trying to get to work that day, angry, or falling in love. Who knows what's going through their mind?

And then that becomes epic painting, hanging on the walls of one of the grand museums or art institutions in our society.

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. WILEY: Chance.

MS. BERMAN: So that's what it all sort of comes down to.

What – you know, there's been – so much has been said of what you are addressing, you know, whether it's highlighting local differences or, you know, power or, you know, commercialism, machismo, patronage, art history – I mean, really any – it's almost anything you can think of that exists in the general scheme of art and life has been – you know, has been sort of put on your shoulders that you are sort of taking this in or you're, you know, presenting it in some different way.

How much of this is intended? And how much of that is intended all the time? You know, is it – does it change from project to project? Does it change from piece to piece? Sometimes do you think, I just want to do this for the enjoyment of looking, for the –

MR. WILEY: As a twin, I operate with twin desires. I'm fully capable of multitasking certain conceptual concerns within the work. I love the idea of engaging religious sentiment and how that vocabulary has evolved over time. I love the of dealing with the homoerotic versus the idea of dealing with certain tropes with regards to black masculinity in the world, propensity towards sports, antisocial behavior, hypersexuality – all of these sort of non-truths that I don't exist in but that I see as being fixed in the world's imagination.

I think that at its best, painting can be an act of juggling perceptions, a hall of mirrors. And it can be a bit confusing and scattering. But as the artist, as the man behind the velvet rope who controls the smoke and the mirrors and the way that things move in the painted space, what I want to do is to try my best to be a good witness.

MS. BERMAN: With these things sort of coming in and out as they –

MR. WILEY: That's right.

MS. BERMAN: -- as they kind of come about.

MR. WILEY: And what it is is a type of editorialization, you know? This is self-portraiture. This is what you think about the world we live in. You know, what position do you take? You really have to take a position. Does – you know, this is a key point that Mel Bochner gave to me back when I was at Yale. Does art do more than point?

MS. BERMAN: Right. Yeah. Does it?

MR. WILEY: It does. And it behooves you to know that. So much of the hubris that surrounded conceptual art in the 1950s through '70s was that it had this arrogant presupposition that pointing in and of itself was a creative act. It never rigorously politically and socially analyzed the fact that the luxury to point is something that so many people throughout the world don't have.

It never really understood its own situational luxury. And I think that by and large the privilege of being Kehinde Wiley in the 21st century, making these high-priced luxury goods, traveling the world, pointing at these people, behooves me to have a point of view – [taps on table] – and to say something about it.

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. WILEY: And it's not always going to sound good. And it's not always going to be some political corrective. It's not always going to be fist-waving. It might just simply be –

MS. BERMAN: "This is what it is."

MR. WILEY: Right.

MS. BERMAN: Do you – are there times when you want to be fist-waving? Are there times when you do want to be saying something but you're not finding it or –

MR. WILEY: I just find it radically disinteresting. I think didactic art is boring. I mean, I love it in terms of, like, some of the historical precedents that I've learned from. You needed that. We needed those building blocks in terms of – you know, when I look at a great Barbara Kruger, for example, and you're thinking about, you know, the woman's position in society – you know, she found a way of making it beautiful, but at the same time it's very sort of preachy, you know what I mean?

And I – for me, I wanted to create something that's much more driven by a type of selfishness, a type of decadence.

MS. BERMAN: So almost like a fun –

MR. WILEY: Navel-gazing.

MS. BERMAN: Yeah.

MR. WILEY: And believing that navel-gazing in and of itself can transform itself into something that means something for society. I mean, we are communicative creatures. We desire to sort of understand each other's experiences and points of view. Storytelling is what painting, literature, filmmaking is all about.

And so when you're at your best, you're analyzing yourself and becoming increasingly isolated from a broader narrative. What's interesting about my project recently is that I'm going out into broader global spaces but then isolating at the same time – sort of pushing out but then pulling in.

MS. BERMAN: Do you – you know, do you feel – again, it's so much of the literature that's out there about you – I mean, so much of what other people are reading into your work – do you feel obligated to address these topics, whether it's obligated to a model, to yourself, to a gay audience, to an academic audience, to, you know, the art establishment, whoever it might be that is wanting to take something specific – you know, do you feel any either pressure or obligation or interest in addressing something that they want to read into it?

You know, that's sort of a large question. [Laughs.]

MR. WILEY: The expectations of the viewer are what you're asking about. And the expectations of the viewer are manifold. However, they are very fixed, given who I am in the world. People have certain expectations of me as an artist.

I use those expectations as a color on my palette, a certain temperature in the room. You can use those expectations for the great punchline, but also for a great painting, in society.

Painting is situational. And my particular situation exists within gender, race, class, sexuality, nation. This is a very American project. Even the hubris or the desire to go out into the world and find patterns that reflect back to yourself is so Lacanian and, like, mirrored, so as to be ridiculous. But there are very fixed sets of expectations that the world has about this work.

Can I – do I have to be obsessed with it and proceed from that? Not always. But when I’m on top of my game, I definitely think about the way that the world sees me and the way that the world thinks about painting. You must.

MS. BERMAN: Right. Right.

Where – you know, how do you want your work described or dissected? Or where do you want it to fit into the canon of art history, from your perspective?

MR. WILEY: I’ve never really thought about that question before.

I think that an obsession with art history gave rise to the work. A realization and a dissection of the canon gave rise to the work. But there’s also a sneaking suspicion of the canon.

MS. BERMAN: Sure.

MR. WILEY: There’s quite obviously the desire to open the rule sets that allow for inclusion or disclusion [sic]. I think that my hope would be that my work set up certain type of precedent, that allowed for great institutions, museums and viewers to see the possibilities of painting culture to be a bit more inclusive.

MS. BERMAN: It’s a good way to look at it.

Do you feel, whether from yourself or from others, that you are put into a role at all of being a – you know, like a spokesman for bringing sort of an African-American presence into American portraiture, whether in the role of artist or subject matter?

MR. WILEY: I think that the Kehinde Wiley brand is something that I’m working towards expanding and to inclusion. But I also – I think that the choice of using the word “brand” relates directly to the reality of the fact that artists now exist in a society that is really driven by consumer culture.

MS. BERMAN: It’s a very current idea, you know?

MR. WILEY: The notion of authenticity is troubled. The manufacture of artist identity is prevalent. I’d like to walk that fine line between the authentic artist self and the manufactured artist self. I’d like to exist outside of a set of expectations or assumptions about what the Kehinde Wiley brand is. And I’d like to walk towards something that’s a bit more unpredictable, human.

MS. BERMAN: And, you know, you work in a – I guess in what is considered a traditional sense, in an atelier with assistants and people, you know, working with you. And plus you have your models. So you have a lot of – you know, it’s not just you existing in a vacuum creating these.

At what point do you bring other people into the piece? You know, for instance, with your assistants, when do they come into your process?

MR. WILEY: Well, my studio practice is a – I suppose a bit more like [Thomas] Gainsborough or [Peter Paul] Rubens in the sense that any artist who wants to create a grand narrative on a grand scale has to sort of parse out some of the smaller aspects of painting or the more mundane aspects of painting to others.

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. WILEY: And so, for example, in one of my last exhibitions I had a 50-foot massive painting with I think perhaps a hundred thousand hand-painted small flowers.

MS. BERMAN: And which piece was this?

MR. WILEY: This was the Christ painting [*The Dead Christ in the Tomb*, 2008] in my *Down* exhibition [2008]. Now, I simply can’t spend –

MS. BERMAN: [Laughs.] Right.

MR. WILEY: -- eight hours a day painting small, identical flowers. And so I’ve got a team that allows me to have these grand, sweeping statements.

Yet at the same time I really enjoy painting flesh. I love being a portraitist. And so while I can hire out the portrait, I don't, because it's just - that's where I shine. You know, that's my blood sport.

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. WILEY: And so I love being able to have a team. I love the flexibility of saying, "Today we're making 50-foot paintings, and we're going to have to join hands and figure out how that's going to work." But in the end, it's a possibility. You know, I'm incredibly blessed to be able to have this level of choice as an artist today. In this economy, it's something that I, you know, pinch myself at constantly, just thinking about how I could wake up tomorrow and decide I'm going to start painting this or that. So it's good.

MS. BERMAN: Right. And do you - you know, are - do they help you with everything from taking a photograph to working with something in Photoshop to doing - you know, are you able to sort of parse that out?

MR. WILEY: Well, this is a very good question. This is a very good question. Because while it may seem a little mundane, the material realities of realizing the painting actually have a lot to do with how you should read the painting. For example, we assume that what the model is wearing is what we found him in in the streets. No; in fact, a lot of what happens is that in Photoshop certain aspects are being heightened or diminished. There is no actual material truth in these paintings.

MS. BERMAN: I wonder -

MR. WILEY: There's a team of filmmakers who follow me in the streets when I'm finding these models, to give me a sense of legitimacy to a casual stranger. This is New York City. No one's going to follow you back to your studio.

MS. BERMAN: [Laughs.] They'd be terrified.

MR. WILEY: Right. No. I mean, you have to bring books to explain your work. Usually I bring very attractive women with me to excite interest. I mean, it's a type of, like, strangers-with-candy situation.

MS. BERMAN: Sort of like a scene, so they're kind of drawn to this little scene you've created.

MR. WILEY: It's very situational. And it's a happening. It's an incident. It's an intervention.

MS. BERMAN: So in itself, getting, then, the model is really a whole - it's a piece in itself.

MR. WILEY: Right. No, but this goes back to the crux of your, again, very interesting question about process. You know, the process, I think, is the story. And it goes back, again, to what I said about chance and about radical contingency, the idea that all of this is this well-oiled machine that's been reared up and, like, really articulated and thought about. But in the end it's just, like, sort of - [snaps] - just - [squeaks] - one moment, you know?

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. WILEY: It's that chance.

MS. BERMAN: And does that really - you know, when you are out on -

MR. WILEY: But at its best, that is what opera can do. When the fat lady comes out to sing, we don't know how she feels that day. We don't know if she's suffering from a cold or is mourning a death or falling in love. We don't know. But so all of that chance is the performance.

MS. BERMAN: Right. So -

MR. WILEY: It's a well-oiled machine that exists in a very specific and situational moment in time.

MS. BERMAN: So I guess that would mean that you could have a - an idea in your mind of a piece you want to do or a series or something. But when you go out there, it really just depends who you run into or who is drawn to you: you know, who will engage with you.

MR. WILEY: Precisely. Precisely.

MS. BERMAN: And that sort of pushes it in the direction - [inaudible] - go.

MR. WILEY: And then, of course, they are going through art history books and choosing images that refer to their own taste patterns. And so it's about looking; it's about them looking at books, it's about me looking at

them; it's this hall of mirrors, again.

MS. BERMAN: Right. Right.

When you are out on the street, what happens generally? You know, are you approaching people? Or are they coming to you?

MR. WILEY: Most people say no.

MS. BERMAN: Most people say no.

MR. WILEY: Most people say, "Hell, no. I don't know who you are. This scares me. Like, I'm not interested in this."

MS. BERMAN: Okay.

MR. WILEY: Another way of looking at these paintings is, these are the guys who said yes. And so what is that -

MS. BERMAN: That's a great way to look at it. [Laughs.]

MR. WILEY: What is that demographic?

And you'll find that street casting in America is a lot different than street casting in different nations.

MS. BERMAN: How so?

MR. WILEY: In America, there's this type of expectation of just-add-water celebrity, this type of, "Of course you found me; we're all going to be famous for 15 minutes," sort of Paris-Hilton-ization of society.

Whereas I remember being in Dakar, in Senegal, where I have my third studio, and street casting, and I remember looking at the faces of the young men that we were speaking to through translators and so on, showing them the books. Complete - completely different response. Almost a type of lost -

MS. BERMAN: Wow.

MR. WILEY: -- like, confounded, "What is this?" And then of course, you know, I pay my models to work with me, so there becomes this weird sort of economic bartering thing, which made me feel really sort of uncomfortable, almost as though you were buying into a situation - which, again, is another way of looking at those paintings. The body language in those paintings is a lot more stiff. There's this look in the eyes of the models as though they were trying to please me as opposed to position - positioning themselves the way that they wanted to be.

MS. BERMAN: Okay.

MR. WILEY: "Is this what you want? Is this what you want?" It felt really radically uncomfortable. And I was really not sure at first about releasing that body of work. But then the more I thought about it, the more I thought that that position, that location, is something that's just sort of interesting in its own right, as an experience, as a process. Again, we're talking about this rubric, this set of rules, this grid that I toss on top of different locations globally. This is what came out of Africa.

MS. BERMAN: Wow.

MR. WILEY: Should you turn away from it because it feels uncomfortable? Or should you just look at it?

MS. BERMAN: Right.

And do you - have you found that in different locations people are - you know, respond differently?

MR. WILEY: Certainly. I mean, that's what I - certainly.

MS. BERMAN: These - I mean, I know you just said it with America and -

MR. WILEY: I mean, New York - that's right. That's right.

MS. BERMAN: But what about with, you know, the difference between India, say, and Israel? Or, you know, China and Brazil?

MR. WILEY: Right. I mean, there's no calculus to say, like, India versus Israel is this, or, like, China versus Brazil is this.

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. WILEY: But yeah, there's cultural temperature. And hopefully the work bears that out.

MS. BERMAN: What – do you – you know, you were talking about the poses, you know, and they were saying, you know, “Do you want it this way or that way?” How much control do your models generally want to give you? How much do they want to keep themselves? Is there ever sort of a tug of war?

MR. WILEY: There's always a tug of war. Like, in the States, in America, there's certainly a higher quotient, I would imagine, of, like, macho, like, masculinity posturing. You know what I mean? Like, I would see – like, there's moments where I want to use a certain pose that comes from – I remember a Gainsborough portrait of Lady Innes [*Lady Innes*, 1757]. And I was like, “What do you think of that” – [inaudible]? And most of the guys were like, “I'm not going there,” you know?

So sometimes you have to play your hand and sort of push in a direction. And I think that masculinity is the driving point for a lot of the way that people, like, posture in the work. That's one of the reasons why you see a lot of sticks and swords and –

MS. BERMAN: [Laughs.] Right. Right.

MR. WILEY: You know, this is not me. You know, this is – this is the process. This is – it's a sociological experiment in many ways. And so you're seeing the results of what happens when you put a lot of boys in a room looking at art history.

MS. BERMAN: Right. And are they usually –

MR. WILEY: Which, to me, I think is kind of fascinating as well.

MS. BERMAN: Absolutely.

MR. WILEY: And that's the trouble with, I think, my – the contemporary read of my work. So many people just simply say, “These are pretty pictures of black boys.” They're not really thinking about, like, what the whole thing is.

MS. BERMAN: Everything that goes into it.

MR. WILEY: And there's a lot to it.

MS. BERMAN: What – when you're giving them – you know, you're showing them these books, are they – the models often really – I imagine very – some are really interested in looking at these pictures and picking out a pose, and others are sort of just, “Tell me what you want me to do.”

MR. WILEY: Yeah. In fact, the field of responses to this project is as varied as the people that I meet in the streets.

MS. BERMAN: Okay.

MR. WILEY: I've had moments where I've met people who were complete, like, idiots, who could not understand visual culture to save their lives. I've met others who simply responded to me, “You're Kehinde Wiley. I know your work. I saw it at the Brooklyn Museum [Brooklyn, NY] And I'd be honored to be in your work.”

MS. BERMAN: That's good.

MR. WILEY: People who – and I think that's been a huge education for me. I think it's a – it's a privilege to be able to meet such a broad cross-section of New York and increasingly the world, and to get a feel of how people respond to visual culture.

MS. BERMAN: Right.

Was it different working with – you know, working with celebrities like LL Cool J or Big Daddy Kane or Boue [ph] or Mensa [ph]? Were those – working with those celebrities very different from working with the, you know, average person on the street?

MR. WILEY: It is. It's surprising sometimes. And it's disappointing others.

You know, one of my – one of my best and, I think, most enlightening moments was when I was contacted by Michael Jackson. And he requested that I paint his portrait. In our conversations, he revealed a surprising

understanding of art history. We were going through the finer points of the difference between one Italian sculptor to the next. You know, this – these are things that we don't necessarily assume of people in sanctified light.

MS. BERMAN: Right. And did he have an idea of what he wanted – what pieces he wanted to pursue with you? Or –

MR. WILEY: The process was to send him art history books.

MS. BERMAN: Okay.

MR. WILEY: He would choose specific moments. They were art history books that I prefer. They were paintings that he prefers. It's this dance back and forth. We were halfway through the dance. He died.

MS. BERMAN: Oh, no. Oh, so sad.

MR. WILEY: I completed the work. And I don't know if you've seen the painting, but I think he would have been very pleased with the outcome.

MS. BERMAN: I'm sure.

What – and what are some of those books that you – do you always turn to the same books when you're showing them to people, these specific –

MR. WILEY: I'm constantly looking. You know, I'm always in The Strand [Books, New York, NY] and, like, Amazon and so on. My studio manager is constantly complaining about how we're running out of space for books. But I have a voracious appetite for finding new, important influences.

But there are key moments. You know, I have a lot of problems with Western European easel painting. But in the end I'm in love with it. And that's where a lot of the influence from the work comes from.

MS. BERMAN: Okay.

And how much do you identify with your models? Or how much do you think they identify with you? You know, and how close of a relationship do you form as you're, you know, going through this whole process, starting from meeting them on the street all the way up through a finished work? Do they come to the shows? Do they –

MR. WILEY: Well, those are two very different questions.

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. WILEY: One has to do with identifying with the models. The other has to do with the extent to which I engage with them socially, personally.

MS. BERMAN: Right. Right.

MR. WILEY: To answer the first is almost impossible, principally because there are just so many different types of people that come into my studio, and secondarily, there's the idea of ideation, like, "Who are you and what do you see in yourself in this other person?" So many different people that you would see so many different things.

But I think what's really interesting and useful about this question is that ultimately all art is a type of self-portraiture. And so in the act of identifying yourself, you're using others to get to that point. And so you're parsing out different aspects of different people in the world. You're choosing not only from America but increasingly globally different aspects of what's out there.

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. WILEY: But it always comes back to and is anchored in your own sort of self-identity.

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. WILEY: The second part of your question has to do with, like, how much time I spent with each model.

We don't spend much time together. There's the day that we meet. There's the day of the photo shoot. And then there's the big opening night. And so there are these really intense –

MS. BERMAN: And so most of them come?

MR. WILEY: Oh, yeah, no, I make sure that they come. I try to keep recent – you know, a lot of people, they change their cell phone numbers, and it's hard to find them.

MS. BERMAN: Sure, of course.

MR. WILEY: But in the end, no, it's a huge social occasion for me. I want them to be there. There's – you know, I have the studio get them limousines and have them show up at the openings as though they were the stars of the show, which they are.

MS. BERMAN: Absolutely. Right. So great.

MR. WILEY: And so that's – but in the end, it goes back to this idea of going from the absolute mundane act of walking down the street, trying to get to work, to these, like, heightened moments of, like, being in an artist's studio and being photographed and going through art history books and then going to a big opening night. And there's – [claps] – it's short and fast and dramatic, and interesting. So.

MS. BERMAN: [Laughs.] Yeah, absolutely.

How do you – in terms of collaborating with them or directing them in terms – you know, to go back a little bit, selecting the poses and then also, you know, to dealing with the clothing, the accessories, that kind of thing –

MR. WILEY: Right.

MS. BERMAN: How much do they give you? How much do you, you know, put in yourself?

MR. WILEY: I would say 85 percent of it is what they walk into the room with. The trickster part of my job is to destabilize the viewer into not knowing which point is the authentic moment.

MS. BERMAN: Right. You do a good job of that.

MR. WILEY: [Laughs.] There are points where I will actually hire professional models from modeling agencies to be those destabilizing agents. You never know which one actually is the actual part of the narrative that I've created over the years.

There are stylists who come in, who will come in, and I'll give them the direction of, look at my entire archive and give me something Kehinde-Wiley-ish –

MS. BERMAN: Okay. In terms of clothing, or –

MR. WILEY: In terms of clothing.

MS. BERMAN: Okay.

MR. WILEY: But that's only maybe two paintings out of an exhibition of 15. And so one never knows which is which.

MS. BERMAN: Wow. And you do that just to keep it sort of –

MR. WILEY: That's – well, I do it as a means of creating this sort of anxiety in the viewership. I don't want people to believe the painting is indexical.

MS. BERMAN: Is so direct.

MR. WILEY: Right. I have a really strong suspicion of the romantic nature of portraiture, the idea that you're telling some essential truth about the interior lives of your subject. We have a lot of sort of received historical ways of viewing portraiture. And I suppose in some way I'm sort of questioning that by toying with the rules of the game.

MS. BERMAN: Right. Right.

What – I mean, I – you were saying that –

MR. WILEY: I'm going to have to take a break pretty soon.

MS. BERMAN: Oh, sure. We can, absolutely. Then I will just move on to the next question. You have done a lot of things, different collaborations with, like, Puma, for instance, with the – you know, the towels that you made, the shoes, shoelaces, things like that. Do you see those collaborations as any different from anything else you do? Or, you know, how do you sort of compartmentalize that?

MR. WILEY: Oh, of course I do. Of course I do. I mean, you know, like commercial stuff is sort of cheap and disposable and fun and can be sort of interesting in many ways. I love being in popular culture and existing in the evolution of popular culture. But it's so different from painting, and it's so different from that sort of slow, contemplative, gradual process that painting is.

You know, going back to that idea that painting sits still and that we give ourselves over to it over time. There's a difference between living with – imagine if this were sitting in your living room for 15 years. You'd probably understand the contours of it.

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. WILEY: That's not a sneaker, you know what I mean?

MS. BERMAN: No. Right, right. [Laughs.]

MR. WILEY: [Laughs.] And so – but that said, there's something really cool about being able to fly to South Africa and watch one of the most talented African footballers wearing a shoe on the field –

MS. BERMAN: Absolutely.

MR. WILEY: -- of the World Cup that you designed, right?

MS. BERMAN: I can't – I cannot even imagine.

MR. WILEY: So, you know --

MS. BERMAN: There's actually –

MR. WILEY: -- it's a different generation. It's a different age. And I believe that artists should be part of the culture. I think that my work clearly bears that out, that –

MS. BERMAN: Absolutely.

MR. WILEY: I think that branding is so much a part of the vocabulary of visual culture, whether it be that certain people have, like, certain brand affinities where they want to wear this big name on their chest to say that this is who they mean to the world – well, that can be interesting in a portrait.

MS. BERMAN: Yeah. Right.

MR. WILEY: And so there is no purity with regards to the marketplace and art, I believe.

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. WILEY: And I think that at its best you just have to respect each arena for what they can do well.

MS. BERMAN: There was a video on YouTube of a young – like, maybe a 20-year-old guy filming himself receiving in the mail the package of Puma shoes of yours –

MR. WILEY: [Laughs.]

MS. BERMAN: -- and, like, unwrapping them and looking at them for the first time. And it was definitely, like, a weird video. But there was something just so heartbreakingly sweet about his excitement –

MR. WILEY: [Laughs.]

MS. BERMAN: -- to get this package. I mean, it was just – it was really – you know, and it was him, I think, getting this piece of something so much bigger.

MR. WILEY: Yeah. Well, there's sneaker guys out there. Like, this is – this is –

MS. BERMAN: Yeah. Oh, definitely. No, I know; my husband's a sneaker guy. But that's like –

MR. WILEY: It's a culture. It's – I mean, people obsess over this. And people create subcultures that identify – and there are people in the streets who will recognize certain patterns and signifiers.

MS. BERMAN: Sure.

MR. WILEY: And that's – and that should be something that an artist can respond to as well in terms of a

painting.

MS. BERMAN: Right. Well, it was very cool.

Well, thank you so much. I'm going to stop here so you can take a break.

MR. WILEY: Awesome.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

Last updated...October 3, 2005