

Femme piquée par un serpent

2008. Oil on canvas, 102 × 300 in. (259.1 × 762 cm).
Courtesy of Sean Kelly, New York. © Kehinde Wiley



Laying It Down: Heroic Reclining Men and Other Tactical Inversions

DAVID J. GETSY

In the history of art on which Kehinde Wiley draws, horizontality is a value and not just an orientation. In this tradition, ascendance is hierarchical, and the uprightness of the human body signals the intellectual and moral alertness of the figure. Asleep, wounded, dead, or objectified, the horizontal body is first and foremost one whose mortality and carnality have been underscored by its lack of uprightness.* The recumbent body, in this way, came to signify passivity, vulnerability, and availability.

For *Down*, Wiley chose some of the most dramatic of horizontal figures from the history of European sculpture and painting. His prototypes have been bitten, punctured, stabbed, or lie there sleepily in a seductive languor. When these paintings have been discussed, many critics have rushed to see them as laments about the dangers faced by black youth. While this is undoubtedly part of the context in which these works operate, to see these works only as this misses the ways in

* For more on the meanings ascribed to horizontality in the history of sculpture, see David Getsy, "Fallen Women: The Gender of Horizontality and the Abandonment of the Pedestal by Giacometti and Epstein," in Alexandra Gerstein, ed., *Display and Displacement: Sculpture and the Pedestal from Renaissance to Post-Modern* (London: Courtauld Institute of Art Research Forum and Paul Holberton, 2007), pp. 114–29.



FIGURE 29
Auguste Clésinger (French, 1814–1883).
Femme piquée par un serpent, 1847.
Marble, 22 $\frac{1}{4}$ × 70 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 27 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. (56 × 180 × 70 cm). Musée d'Orsay, Paris, RF 2053.
(Photo: Jean Schormans, © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY)

Sleep

2008. Oil on canvas, 132 × 300 in. (335.3 × 762 cm).
 Courtesy of Roberts & Tilton, Culver City, California; Sean Kelly, New York;
 Galerie Daniel Templon, Paris; and
 Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. © Kehinde Wiley



which they strategically deploy eroticism to activate and invert the power dynamics that often go uninterrogated in the history of Western art.

The *Down* series offers some of Wiley's most eroticized images. In many ways, this is a result of the tradition on which he has drawn. In those older works, the recumbent and vulnerable body was often used as a vehicle for the sensual. Take *Femme piquée par un serpent* (plate 23), which refers to the scandal-inciting 1847 sculpture by Auguste Clésinger of a woman supposedly dying from a poisonous snakebite (figure 29). The sculpture was highly praised for its sensual naturalism, but many viewers and critics wondered whether her voluptuous writhing was, in fact, evidence of her death rather than *sa petite mort*.[†] Wiley adapted the famously contorted torso of Clésinger's female nude to show both the rear and front of his model: the viewer is confronted with both the alluring expanse of the white underwear and, at the same time, the searching face with open eyes and mouth. Similarly, other works in the series play with the eroticism latent in the traditions of painting and sculpting the nude male. *Sleep* (plate 24), loosely based on a sensuous figure

study by Jean-Bernard Restout (1771; figure 30), differs from its prototype in a few ways, but most notable is the finger that now caresses his belly button, indicating an inward-directed sensuality for the dreamer.[‡]

This is the titular pun of the series: with a few exceptions, these depicted men are not just (lying) down; they are “down.” Responding to an interview question about how sexual these works seemed, Wiley remarked, “I believe it’s the repose. Historically, we’re used to female figures in repose. . . . I think we’re almost trained to read the reclining figure in a painting within an erotic state. There’s a type of powerlessness with regard to being *down* off of your feet, and in that sense, that power exchange can be codified as an erotic moment.”[§] While Wiley gives in to this eroticism, he also makes sure to temper the power exchange in which the reclining figure is usually on the receiving end—as with the

[†] For a useful account of the issues related to the Clésinger sculpture, see Susan Waller, *The Invention of the Model: Artists and Models in Paris, 1830–1870* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 66–70.

[‡] On the prototype, see Carter E. Foster, “Jean-Bernard Restout’s *Sleep: Figure Study*: Painting and Drawing from Life at the French Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture,” *Cleveland Studies in the History of Art*, 3 (1998), pp. 48–85.

[§] Quoted in Brian Keith Jackson, “Kehinde Wiley on the Difference Between His Art and His Cooking,” *New York Magazine Vulture Online*, October 31, 2008, accessed May 5, 2014, http://www.vulture.com/2008/10/artist_kehinde_wiley_on_his_ne.html. For further on the issue of eroticism, see the enlightening interview with Wiley by Christine Y. Kim and Malik Gaines in *Kehinde Wiley: The World Stage; Africa, Lagos–Dakar* (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 2008), pp. 8–15.



FIGURE 30
 Jean-Bernard Restout (French, 1732–1797). *Sleep*, 1771. Oil on canvas, 38 3/4 × 51 1/2 in. (97.6 × 130 cm). The Cleveland Museum of Art, Leonard C. Hanna Jr. Fund, 1963.502. (Photo: © The Cleveland Museum of Art)

Morpheus

2008. Oil on canvas, 108 × 180 in. (274.3 × 457.2 cm).
 Courtesy of Roberts & Tilton, Culver City, California; Sean Kelly, New York;
 Galerie Daniel Templon, Paris; and Stephen Friedman Gallery,
 London. © Kehinde Wiley



outward gazes added to many of the figures once he translates them from sculpture to painting, such as *Morpheus* (plate 25). Neither Clésinger's *Femme* nor Jean-Antoine Houdon's *Morpheus* (1777; figure 31) so directly address the viewer with their eyes as do Wiley's clothed men.**

Most important, Wiley reverses the power exchange of his appropriated traditions by amplifying these figures to the size of billboards or history paintings. Far greater than their prototypes, Wiley's immense recumbent figures dwarf the viewers who would approach them. This scale shift offers a parallel tactic to the move

for which Wiley is most known: the insertion of black subjects into canonical sculptures and paintings. Both of these operations elevate a position conventionally marked as subordinate or different in order to expose underlying power dynamics and stereotypes. The *Down* paintings are often erotic, but they are also grand paintings that refuse to allow the bodies they represent to be easily dominated. These titanic recumbent figures both incite and scoff at attempts at mere erotic objectification, and the vulnerability of their sources has been transmuted into confidence by a scale that is nothing less than heroic. ♦



FIGURE 31
 Jean-Antoine Houdon (French, 1741–1828). *Morpheus*, 1777. Marble, 14 $\frac{3}{8}$ × 27 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 14 in. (36.9 × 70.5 × 35.8 cm).
 Musée du Louvre, Paris, INV1063. (Photo: Gérard Blot, © RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource, NY)

** On Houdon's *Morpheus*, see Guilhem Scherf, "Morpheus," in Anne Poulet et al., *Jean-Antoine Houdon: Sculptor of the Enlightenment* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2003), pp. 91–94.

Published on the occasion
of the exhibition

Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic
at the Brooklyn Museum,
February 20–May 24, 2015

Travel Itinerary

(Venues as of October 28, 2014)
Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth
Seattle Art Museum
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts,
Richmond

Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic
is organized by Eugenie Tsai,
John and Barbara Vogelstein
Curator of Contemporary Art,
Brooklyn Museum.

This exhibition is made possible
by the Henry Luce Foundation,
the National Endowment for the
Arts, and Grey Goose Vodka.
Additional support is provided by
John and Amy Phelan, Sean Kelly
Gallery, Stephen Friedman
Gallery, and Roberts & Tilton.



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of the Brooklyn Museum and
Prestel.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kehinde Wiley : a new republic /
edited by Eugenie Tsai ; with an
essay by Connie H. Choi.
pages cm

“Published on the occasion
of the exhibition *Kehinde Wiley:
A New Republic* at the Brooklyn
Museum, February 20–May 24,
2015.”

Includes bibliographical refer-
ences.

ISBN 978-3-7913-5430-9 (Prestel
hardcover : alk. paper) ISBN
978-0-87273-176-9 (Museum
pbk. : alk. paper)

I. Wiley, Kehinde, 1977—Exhibi-
tions. I. Tsai, Eugenie, editor. II.
Choi, Connie H., writer of added
commentary. III. Wiley, Kehinde,
1977—Paintings. Selections. IV.
Brooklyn Museum, issuing body
host institution

ND1329.W545A4 2015
759.13—dc23

2014034650

First published in 2015

Brooklyn Museum
200 Eastern Parkway
Brooklyn, NY 11238-6052
www.brooklynmuseum.org

in association with
DelMonico Books, an imprint of
Prestel, a member of Verlags-
gruppe Random House GmbH.

Prestel Verlag
Neumarkter Strasse 28
81673 Munich
Tel.: +49 89 4136 0
Fax: +49 89 4136 2335

Prestel Publishing Ltd.
14-17 Wells Street
London W1T 3PD
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Fax: +44 20 7323 0271

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www.prestel.com

Picture researcher: Alice Cork
Digitization of analogue images:
Tracie Davis

For DelMonico Books · Prestel:
Designer:
Barbara Glauber / Heavy Meta
Production manager:
Karen Farquhar
Printed in China

Unless otherwise indicated in the
captions, photographs of Kehinde
Wiley’s works were provided by
the artist’s studio or by the owners
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Foreword

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Preface and Acknowledgments

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Introduction

EUGENIE TSAI

Kehinde Wiley: The Artist and Interpretation

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Selected Bibliography

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