Kehinde Wiley: An Archaeology of Silence

March 18–October 15, 2023

The US Premiere at the de Young Museum

“That is the archaeology I am unearthing: the specter of police violence and state control over the bodies of young Black and Brown people all over the world.”
—Kehinde Wiley

SAN FRANCISCO – The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco (the “Museums”) are honored to host the US premiere of Kehinde Wiley: An Archaeology of Silence, a monumental new body of work created against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, the murder of George Floyd, and the worldwide rise of the Black Lives Matter movement. Expanding upon American artist Kehinde Wiley’s Down series from 2008, An Archaeology of Silence meditates on the deaths of young Black people slain all over the world. These 26 works stand as elegies and monuments, underscoring the fraught terms in which Black bodies are rendered visible, especially when at the hands of state-sanctioned violence.
"As part of the Museums intentional focus on exhibiting the work of groundbreaking Black artists, it is an immense privilege to host Kehinde Wiley: An Archaeology of Silence at the de Young museum," stated Thomas P. Campbell, Director and CEO of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. "Utilizing the historical visual language of the dying hero, Wiley’s portraits of Black youths render visible previously obscured victims of state violence. In the Bay Area—a place that has resisted violence against Black bodies, as evidenced in the Black Power movement and the current Black Lives Matter movement—Wiley’s work has deep resonances. They ask each of us, how are we implicated? And how do we take action?"

The artist’s 2008 Down series featured a group of large-scale portraits of young Black men inspired by Hans Holbein the Younger’s The Dead Christ in the Tomb (1521–1522). Holbein’s painting triggered an ongoing investigation into the iconography of death and sacrifice in Western art that Wiley traced across religious, mythological, and historical subjects. An Archaeology of Silence reconceptualizes this research into paintings and sculptures that confront the legacies of colonialism through the visual language of the fallen figure.

The resulting paintings of Black bodies struck down, wounded, resting, or dead, all referencing historical paintings of heroes, martyrs, or saints, offer a haunting meditation on the violence against Black and Brown bodies through European art historical references.

"By inscribing Black bodies into known examples of Western painting and sculpture, Kehinde Wiley counters the historical erasure of people of color from the dominant cultural narratives," said Claudia Schmuckli, Curator in Charge of Contemporary Art and Programming at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. "This new body of work forgoes the rhetorical tools of empire that have informed his portraiture thus far to shift the conversation toward a recognition of suffering and resilience that is both vulnerable and strong, elegiac and ecstatic, devastating and beautiful."

Kehinde Wiley: An Archaeology of Silence contains some of the largest paintings and sculptures Wiley has created to date, as well as some of the smallest. The series uses scale to elevate the people depicted to heroic status, generally absent from the depictions of the recumbent or fallen figure in Western art (including those that Wiley’s works have been based on). It marks an important departure in the artist’s work which, with the notable exception of Down, has been primarily concerned with verticality and elevation, projecting Black youth into positions of power and grace by painting them into compositions inspired by canonical Western portraits such as Anthony van Dyck’s Charles I at the Hunt (1636) or Jacques-Louis David’s Napoleon Crossing the Alps (1801), among many others.
Created against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, Wiley had to forgo his usual practice of “street casting,” instead working with residents, staff, and friends of Black Rock, a residency program he established in 2019 in Dakar, Senegal, and where he spent most of his time during the international lockdown. With the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, Wiley saw an opportunity to broaden the conversation beyond national concerns. The figures’ personal markers of Senegalese and West African culture, with regard to hair in particular, serve as a metaphor for the many places where systematically oppressed communities of Black and Brown people experiencing the same state violence around the world.

*Kehinde Wiley: An Archaeology of Silence* is part of the Museums’ Contemporary Art program. Presented in the de Young museum’s second-floor galleries, the exhibition centers contemporary conversations and explorations of the American identity, expanding on the narrative told in the adjacent galleries dedicated to the Museums’ historic American Art collection.

*Kehinde Wiley: An Archaeology of Silence* is made possible by a $1 million grant from the Ford Foundation. In addition to providing exhibition support, this generous gift will enable the presentation of a series of public programs and interpretation by community members who work in the areas of restorative justice and human rights, to inform the visitors’ experience in the exhibition.

"Kehinde Wiley’s visionary art sends an affirming and profound message by filling the void of Black representation in history and shining a light on the Black experience of today. His art has the power to ignite innovative ideas about culture and justice, helping us reconsider how we see ourselves and the world around us," said Ford Foundation President Darren Walker. "The Ford Foundation is proud to support the exhibition of this work and the reflections that it will share."
Kehinde Wiley: An Archaeology of Silence will be on view March 18–October 15, 2023, at the de Young museum in San Francisco. Claudia Schmuckli, Curator in Charge of Contemporary Art and Programming at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, serves as curator for the presentation of the work at the de Young.

About Kehinde Wiley

Kehinde Wiley (b. 1977, Los Angeles) is an American artist best known for his portraits that render people of color in the traditional settings of Old Master paintings. Wiley's work brings art history face-to-face with contemporary culture, using the visual rhetoric of the heroic, the powerful, the majestic and the sublime to celebrate Black and brown people the artist has met throughout the world. Working in the mediums of painting, sculpture, and video, Wiley’s portraits challenge and reorient art-historical narratives, awakening complex issues that many would prefer remain muted.

In 2018 Wiley became the first African-American artist to paint an official U.S. Presidential portrait for the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery. Former U.S. President Barack Obama selected Wiley for this honor. In 2019 Wiley founded Black Rock Senegal, a multidisciplinary artist-in-residence program that invites artists from around the world to live and create work in Dakar, Senegal. Wiley is the recipient of the U.S. Department of State’s Medal of Arts, Harvard University’s W.E.B. Du Bois Medal, and France’s distinction of Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters. He holds a BFA from the San Francisco Art Institute, an MFA from Yale University, and honorary doctorates from the Rhode Island School of Design and San Francisco Art Institute. He has held solo exhibitions throughout the United States and internationally and his works are included in the collections of over 50 public institutions around the world. He lives and works in Beijing, Dakar, and New York.
Public Programming + Piazzoni Murals Room Activation

*Kehinde Wiley: An Archaeology of Silence* features paintings and sculptures that force viewers to confront their relationship to and complicity in state-sanctioned violence against Black people. Throughout the run of the exhibition, the museum's Piazzoni Murals Room (PMR) will be utilized as a space of respite and reflection, a resource library, and host to a series of public activations with the primary aim of practicing care for visitors during and after their visit, particularly for visitors of color.

Utilizing reflection tools such as anonymous comment cards, drawing materials, audio recordings, and books and magazines, PMR will offer visitors a space to work through the emotions Wiley's complex imagery may conjure. Visitors will also have access to resources about the history of state-sanctioned violence against Black people in the United States, and resistance to state-sanctioned violence that persists in contemporary society, specifically in the history of the Bay Area.

As part of a collaboration between the Fine Arts Museums' Public Programs and Bay Area artist Angela Hennessy, PMR will serve as the site of a series of workshops designed to center visitors processing both individual and collective grief. Dates and more information to come.

Catalogue

The exhibition will be accompanied by a full-scale catalogue produced and published by the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. Edited by Claudia Schmuckli, the catalogue will include an interview with Kehinde Wiley, full-color reproductions of the objects in the show, and newly commissioned essays from community contributors. More details to come.

Film

The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco recently launched FAMSF Presents, a film program to bring the work of artists shown at the de Young and Legion of Honor museums to online audiences. *Kehinde Wiley: An Archaeology of Silence* will be accompanied by a FAMSF Presents film to debut alongside the exhibition's opening.

Through the eyes of acclaimed directors, FAMSF Presents films bring insight into the life and practice of each featured artist, providing viewers a glimpse of the exhibition in which the artist's work is presented at the museum.

**Exhibition Organization**

*Kehinde Wiley: An Archaeology of Silence* is organized by the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

The exhibition is made possible by a generous grant from Presenting Sponsor the Ford Foundation.

**FORD FOUNDATION**

Additional support is provided by The Adamolekun Family, Delvecchio and Kelly Finley and Lisa Blackwell Properties.

The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco's Contemporary Arts Program is made possible through the following donors: Generous Support is provided by the Harris Family, Rebecca and Cal Henderson, and Vance Wall Foundation. Additional support is provided by Joachim Bechtle, Katie Colendich and Albert d'Hoste, Jeffrey N. Dauber and Marc A. Levin, Shaari Ergas, Lizelle and Martin Green, Katie Hagey & Jill Hagey in memory of their mother, Mary Beth Hagey, Kate Harbin Clammer and Adam Clammer, Ella Qing Hou and J. Sanford Miller, Kaitlyn and Mike Krieger, Lore Harp McGovern, Jason Moment, Katie Schwab Paige and Matt Paige, Rotasa Fund, Keiko Sakamoto and Bill Witte, Mr. and Mrs. Charles R. Schwab, David and Roxanne Soward, Pascale Thomas and Tayo Famakinwa, Zlot Buell + Associates, and the Contemporary Support Council of the Fine Arts Museums.

**Visiting \ de Young**

Entry to *Kehinde Wiley: An Archaeology of Silence* will be included in general admission to the de Young museum, with free admission for San Francisco Bay Area residents every Saturday, generously provided by Diane B. Wilsey.

The de Young Museum is open Tuesday–Sunday, 9:30 am–5:15 pm. For more information, please visit deyoungmuseum.org.

**THE FORD FOUNDATION**

The Ford Foundation is an independent organization working to address inequality and build a future grounded in justice. For more than 85 years, it has supported visionaries on the frontlines of social change worldwide, guided by its mission to strengthen democratic values, reduce poverty and injustice, promote international cooperation,
and advance human achievement. Today, with an endowment of $16 billion, the foundation has headquarters in New York and 10 regional offices across Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East.

**About Contemporary Art and Programming at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco**

Established in 2016, the Department of Contemporary Art and Programming (CAP), led by Claudia Schmuckli, has distinguished itself through an innovative and dynamic program of commissions, exhibitions, and interventions in dialogue with the Fine Arts Museums’ historical sites, architecture, and collections. As the only department not delineated by either medium or geography, CAP exhibits and collects works in all media and across geographies that incite dialogues, embrace a multiplicity of perspectives, and shed new light on both the past and the present. Reflecting a commitment to fostering an inclusive, diverse, and forward-looking dialogue, CAP highlights pressing societal issues and concerns through its programs and acquisitions.

**About the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco**

The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco oversee the de Young museum, located in Golden Gate Park, and the Legion of Honor, in Lincoln Park. It is the largest public arts institution in San Francisco, and one of the most visited arts institutions in the United States.

The de Young originated from the 1894 California Midwinter International Exposition in Golden Gate Park and was established as the Memorial Museum in 1895. It was later renamed in honor of Michael H. de Young, who spearheaded its creation. The present copper-clad landmark building, designed by Herzog & de Meuron, opened in October 2005. Reflecting an active conversation among cultures, perspectives, and time periods, the collections on view include American painting, sculpture, and decorative arts from the 17th to the 21st centuries; arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas; costume and textile arts; and international modern and contemporary art.

The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco respectfully acknowledge the Ramaytush Ohlone, the original inhabitants of what is now the San Francisco Peninsula, and acknowledge that the Greater Bay Area is the ancestral territory of the Miwok, Yokuts, Patwin, and other Ohlone. Indigenous communities have lived in and moved through this place over hundreds of generations, and Indigenous peoples from many nations make their home in this region today. Please join us in recognizing and honoring their ancestors, descendants, elders, and communities.