Kehinde Wiley on his first UK solo show for Frieze week

For his first UK show, hip-hop’s portrait artist Kehinde Wiley has turned his attention to the Jamaican dancehall with dazzling results. It’s all about history and identity, he tells Ben Luke.

Kehinde Wiley is already a big art world star. He’s the South Central LA kid who became the darling of the hip-hop scene, with A-list celebrities queuing up to be painted by him; he’s a fixture in American museums, with paintings that reach six figures at auction; and he has studios around the world, in New York, Beijing and Dakar.
Britain has been slower to notice him but that’s set to change as London bursts into brighter-than-usual colour for Frieze week and Wiley’s first UK solo show opens in Mayfair. Once seen, these paintings aren’t forgotten: images of young black people, mainly men, in poses from grand historical portraits, with dazzling flower-patterned backgrounds.

In the new show, all the paintings are based on great British portraits by Joseph Wright of Derby and other masters, and the backdrops are like William Morris on acid. “I’ve turned the volume up on notions of acceptable colour and taste,” the 36-year-old artist tells me from Beijing.

It’s all very bling — and intentionally so, in reference to what Wiley sees as the conspicuous flaunting of money and power in so much historical painting from the imperial and colonial past: a time, he says, when art was “the embodiment of so much of the wealth that was fortifying Europe”.

He’s particularly uncomfortable with painting’s role as “the iPhone of its time”, documenting flora and fauna, “but also documenting peoples in new territories that were considered to be now possessions of the empire”.

His relationship with art is a conflicted one, he adds. “I have this love affair with the history of painting but I can’t accept the entire project, because clearly there are certain ways of being that are politically incorrect and outmoded.”
Of course, there are barely any black faces in the history of western painting and by casting ordinary people of colour from across the world in the roles of the nobility and royalty of the past, Wiley challenges all that.

“I’m in love with the tricks of coaxing paint into form, and making something that’s almost a type of Trojan horse,” he says. “Where it’s striking, it’s vibrant and you think only later about some of the broader cultural or political implications, some of the power juxtapositions. All those things are important but I don’t want to bore myself, or anyone else for that matter, with making work that’s simply didactic.”
His London exhibition, The World Stage: Jamaica, is the latest in a series inspired by his recent travels, where he finds a new cast of characters in cities around the world, poses and photographs them, then paints them against his chosen background. Wiley says the project is about “trying to figure out how painting plays a role in these places, in their history, and in the way we look at the people”.

Though he has long wanted to show his work in London, he says, “the question has always been how to do it, and meaningfully”. The answer was Jamaica, and its colonial relationship to Britain. The paintings are all based on portraits he saw on tours of nine UK galleries, with all the sitters young people he encountered in Jamaica. But while they probe British and Afro-Caribbean history they are as much about his homeland, he now sees: “They’re classically American struggles — to come to terms with who you are and this identity that’s been cobbled together over a couple of centuries.”

The paintings are based on photos he took of both men and women in sessions in Kingston nightspots.

Homeland history: a painting of Sir Brooke Boothby, which will be among other new works at Wiley’s new exhibition
“What’s interesting is that a lot of those clubs and improvised dancehalls, which are often outdoors, will have cameras and lights set up with a backdrop with clouds or sports cars, or all these aspirational objects pictured in them”, there for revellers to have pictures taken of themselves in their finery. So, Wiley says, when he set up his own camera and backdrop, it “wasn’t anything special”, the clubbers weren’t at all fazed.

Wiley is gay, so I ask how he feels about Jamaica's appalling record on homosexuality, which remains illegal, and particularly the homophobia endemic in dancehall culture. “For years I was afraid to go to there,” he says. “As a gay man, I had a really bad taste in my mouth for a lot of the news that I heard coming out of Jamaica.”

He feels his paintings inevitably address the issue because “so much of the work has to do with this charged male beauty”. He’s not interested in “hyper-political ‘free-the-gays’ kind of work because that would be boring” but says that “by virtue of my being there, it sheds light on a specific way of looking at the black male body in public space that rarely comes out of Jamaica”.

Urban identity: another new painting by Wiley of China Samantha Nash
The new paintings, just like those from Sri Lanka, Brazil and his other World Stage locations, reflect the huge international influence of black American urban identity, and particularly hip-hop culture. “In the Seventies, no one would have imagined that hip-hop would have gone global,” he says. “It was this outcropping of kids in the Bronx, playing around with poetry and their words and their grievances. Fast forward and it becomes one of our dominant cultural exports.”

Hip-hop has always been at the heart of his life — and not always in a positive way. He grew up in South Central Los Angeles in the Eighties, an environment which he once said was “driven by some of the defining elements of hip-hop: the violence, antisocial behaviour, streets on fire”.

With a single mother who was intent on doing anything to get him and his siblings out of the neighbourhood, he was sent on numerous free programmes, including, when he was 12, a trip to what was then Leningrad, “to study painting in the forest with these Russians”. He also visited the great LA museums, including Huntington Library and Gardens, with its remarkable collection of British paintings.

He remembers being struck by the “powdered wigs and lapdogs” in the paintings, and by the “huge amount of hushed protocol and ceremony” surrounding them.

“We could barely afford to pay our rent and people were paying for security and having people trim the hedges to house and protect these little paintings. There was something really wasteful, I thought, about it but fabulous at the same time. It was like going to another planet.”
He eventually went to art school in San Francisco, then Yale, and immediately afterwards won a residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2002. At a loose end, he began painting portraits of the young, hip-hop-loving men he met on the Harlem streets. He talked to his sitters about art. “I asked them about what they liked in the collection of art history books that I had, helping them choose their favourite paintings and positioning them as those paintings — and the process began.”

Flower power: in his new Jamaican series, Kehinde Wiley’s W Graham Robertson is inspired by John Singer Sargent

That residency prompted his first New York exhibition, and he has never looked back. By 2005, he was depicting hip-hop royalty, including Ice T and LL Cool J. For a time, he was best known for these celebrity paintings, but he has always been more interested in what he calls “under-served and invisible communities”, hence his desire to seek them out all over the world.
“My inbox is full of celebrated people who’d pay a lot of money to be featured in those images,” he says. “But what gets me most excited when I step back from a painting at the end of the day and imagine it ultimately hanging in a museum somewhere, is knowing that this person was minding their own business, trying to get to work, and all of the ceremony and all of the trappings of importance and the resistance of death that painting allows just shined on this person as a matter of chance.”