

A Metamorphosis of the Past

By Annabel Chilton

First Place: Researched Argument (UNIV 111/112)

In the prologue of the *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison's narrator writes, "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me... When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination— indeed, everything and anything except me" (Ellison 3). In this book, Ellison expands upon the concept of the "invisible man," a man rendered invisible not through science fiction, but through American institutionalized racism. Others see him solely as a representation of their notion of Blackness and not as an individual. This is and has been the case for Black Americans as they are unseen and underrepresented in society. This society is depicted through art museums, media, and monument displays across the U.S. that all exclusively center whiteness. As a result, Black activists and artists like Kehinde Wiley have worked to finally make the Black community visible and to make their voices heard. Specifically, in Kehinde Wiley's painting, *Willem van Heythusen*; his sculpture, *Rumors of War*, and in the Marcus-David Peters Circle, the Black community is made visible through the power of their own actions within various spaces in which society has previously rendered them unseen.

Artist Kehinde Wiley's *Willem van Heythuysen* is an 8 by 6 foot oil painting, created in 2005. The piece is a "remodel" of an original 1625 painting, *Willem van Heythuysen Posing with a Sword*, which depicts a 17th-century Dutch merchant and was created by Dutch artist Frans Hals. The subject, a middle-aged white man, stands in an authoritative pose with one hand against his side and the other resting on his sword. He appears noble and respectable, fitting in

among an array of other paintings featuring glorified white men throughout history. In Hals' painting, Heythuysen poses in front of classic red drapery with a comfortable facial expression, adding to his powerful aura. However, the drapes are a dimmer red, assimilating with the color scheme of this piece alongside browns and grays. To the modern viewer, these colors align well with how we imagine history, melancholy and faded. The painting is well-known, which enabled it to serve as the inspiration for Kehinde Wiley's remake.

In contrast, Wiley's piece depicts a 21st-century, young Black man in Heythuysen's place, wearing a white modern tracksuit yet standing in the exact same powerful and respectable position. The more recent *Willem van Heythuysen* has a deep red background accompanied by a regal gold floral pattern, embedding a tone of wealth. In juxtaposition to the original, this painting has bright colors, which foster a tone of vibrancy and life and communicate the positivity of the present and future. Wiley is a Black American artist, most known for his pieces which showcase Black men in positions of power traditionally and currently held by white men. In the *Invisible Man*, Ellison's narrator states, "You're constantly being bumped against by those of poor vision. Or again, you often doubt if you really exist" (Ellison 3). Thus, this painting is impactful because it gives Black children, especially, the representation they deserve. *Willem van Heythuysen* provides a step towards building a world in which no one is "bumped against." Through the subject's modern clothing, the piece implores a sense of hope that this visibility can be the future. When speaking on his art, Wiley said himself, "It's a story about America 2.0. The 21st century will have to be a series of yeses to moments like this" (Copeland par. 11). Since Spring 2006, the painting has been displayed in the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts alongside other 17th and 18th century works, similar to the original piece. In this way, Wiley's displayed

artwork inserts Black representation in a space that would otherwise exclude it, symbolically creating a history and future outside of Eurocentric standards for the Black community. Through its placement in the traditional, public location of the VMFA, the new *Willem van Heythuysen* disrupts the narrative that idolizes and immortalizes the value of white men alone, and this is not where Wiley's reach ends.

Kehinde Wiley continues his revolutionary acts of disrupting our cultural narrative in 2019 through a similar method, a re-creation of the *J.E.B. Stuart Monument* with a young Black man in Stuart's place. The original monument was sculpted by German American artist, Frederick Moynihan, and unveiled on Monument Avenue in 1907. The bronze statue depicts the Confederate general facing the side as his horse charges forward. With one hand resting on the back of his horse, Stuart appears to be surveying the area with a sense of authority. Though some may claim he resembles a protector, Stuart represents a threat for Black Americans. A 2019 article by *Richmond Freedom Press* reveals that, "Seeing for the first time the equestrian statue of Confederate Gen. J.E.B. Stuart, among the five memorials to Confederates lining Monument Avenue, Wiley sought to create a piece that would reflect and respond to the imagery of 'domination' the sword-wielding Stuart statue presents" (Copeland, par. 10). Though Wiley's remake, entitled *Rumors of War*, depicts his subject in a similar position, there are key deviations between the two.

The sculpture rests in a city housing many Confederate statues that communicate a drastically different message. Its title references the biblical passage, Matthew 24:6 which says, "And ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars: see that ye be not troubled: for all *these things* must come to pass, but the end is not yet" (*King James Version*). For this reason, *Rumors of War*

represents Black liberation and the ongoing battle for justice. The man is dressed with Nike high-tops and torn jeans. This artistic choice to dress the subject in modern fashion further showcases the ongoing struggle for equality. Another notable difference between the two sculptures is that while Stuart's pose is rigid and restricted, the *Rumors of War* subject's pose appears active. His fist tightly grips the reins, his chest pushes out in pride, and his arm strains at an angle. Through these key details, the piece embodies movement, change, and strength whereas the Stuart monument embodies stagnation. This piece was first placed outside the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in December, 2019, causing some controversy over its close proximity to Monument Ave. As his horse charges forward, the young Black man exudes an air of determination. Wiley stated himself at the exhibit's unveiling that the piece is "consequential on a scale that goes beyond museum walls. It's about how we choose to give birth to the next group of people" (Copeland, par. 9). When put into conversation with the *J.E.B. Stuart Monument*, the sculpture poses the question, what type of person and what type of message deserve to be memorialized? In a 2019 article from *The Guardian*, author Michael Henry Adams writes, "Rumors of War is all about the veneration of questionable heroes. Wiley employs traditional artifice to invest his Black man with every convention of noble bearing, including a charging horse" (par. 12). In this way, Wiley's artwork enables him to express Blackness as nobility.

Through its title, the sculpture also conveys that the fight for racial justice is far from over. It is uniquely powerful as it gives future generations a new narrative regarding what is important to remember and value. As for the Stuart monument, it was removed when the controversy of Confederate statues was brought to political forefront following the murder of

George Floyd. On July 7, 2020, the statue was officially placed in storage, leaving only the granite pedestal it once rested on. However, *Rumors of War* continues to sit outside of the VMFA to this day. As stated by chairman Dr. Monroe E. Harris Jr. at the VMFA, the statue “says that no matter what your background or your lot in life, you are important. This is a turning point for Richmond” (Copeland, par. 4). During this time of change, other monuments of the past were altered as well.

Robert E. Lee Memorial was the first statue placed on Monument Avenue in 1890. It was sculpted out of bronze in France by artist Antonin Mercié to commemorate Lee, who was considered a war hero and strategist at the time. Similar to other Confederate monuments, it depicted Confederate General Robert E. Lee heroically atop a horse, looking straight forward. For a long time, the installation acted as a notable focal point in Richmond, though it was never welcoming for visitors in the community. The statue remained frozen in time, untouched and looming over the people of Richmond, in a way prolonging its racist symbolism. This changed entirely in the summer of 2020, when the transition to Marcus-David Peters Circle began. After the death of George Floyd, this monument was the center of various Black Lives Matter protests. The people of Richmond and supporters of the movement began to use spray paint to reface the site which honored the Confederacy, an act once unthinkable. Eventually, the paint became layered, beautifully covering the site with vibrant colors and statements like BLM, similar to how the new *Willem van Heythuysen* replaced the former’s dull color scheme with rich reds and golds. In “The Art of Power and the Power of Art” by Michaela Crimmin and Jemima Montagu, the authors state, “Art also gives new perspectives on familiar narratives, offering an alternative lens from that of the international media and government statements... Art can help us see, think

and feel more clearly” (1). Marcus-David Peters Circle is a work of art alongside Wiley’s pieces because it transforms the national perspective on Confederate monuments and our culture as a whole. Through visual alterations to the Monument, the space brings to the surface feelings that deserve to be heard, allowing Americans to think more clearly.



Marcus-David Peters Circle is a stark difference from the cold and barren *Robert E. Lee Memorial*, which transformed from a representation of racism to a living and breathing canvas, an exhibit of people’s thoughts, feelings, and needs for ‘America 2.0’. During that time, one individual displayed a make-shift sign claiming the area as “Marcus-David Peters Circle.” By doing so, the space became officially named after a young Black man killed by the Richmond Police Department while unarmed and experiencing a mental health crisis. Eventually, a permanent sign took its place. In September, 2021, the original statue was entirely removed by the city, leaving its pedestal behind. MDP Circle grew and developed as a community space and

site for activism. Once a symbol of institutionalized racism, the location became a space for individuals to express themselves and their anger towards injustice, where all people could be visible and finally welcomed, as shown in the picture above. Marcus-David Peters Circle aligns with the works of Kehinde Wiley because it provides a peek into a world in which symbols of racism have fallen, a world that offers “a series of yeses to moments like this” (Copeland, par. 11).

By putting these pieces in the center of the former Confederacy, alongside monuments and works of art featuring solely white men, Wiley actively disrupts the narrative that only whiteness is deserving of societal visibility. Both his works and Marcus-David Peters Circle display a metamorphosis reaching beyond our country’s white-washed history. These exhibits claim the spaces they inhabit as their own, as spaces that grow and evolve in the present to allow for all types of people to be seen and heard. When put into conversation with one another, they suggest that in order to make progress, we must first address the past and acknowledge America’s racialized foundation so that we may disrupt and change it. We must amend the aspects of society in which some are rendered invisible, including monuments and museums. These acts of representation implore us to recognize the racist spaces that still surround us and to make our voices heard, in order to push forward a future in which everyone is visible, powerful, and respected.

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