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

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

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 this appropriated tradition 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 Wiley 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.◆

Foreword
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Kehinde Wiley:
The Artist and Interpretation
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