



Kehinde Wiley, *Vagner Rodrigues Gomes*, 2008.  
Photo: Craig Smith

One young, slender, dark-skinned, goatee-sporting figure with natty dreadlocks, peers out at the viewer from Kehinde Wiley's oil on canvas work *Vagner Rodrigues Gomes* (2008). The figure's face shines with high contrast lighting that displays a wide range of tones, while the closely cropped composition seems to eliminate the distance between the subject and the background, as both it and the sitter's skin tone rely on the warmth of that reddish-orange hue.

In histories of art, portraits are said to convey aspects of their sitter's intersecting identities, be they cultural, individual, national, or racial. Wiley's was produced during a residency in Brazil and in his words, it was "inspired by the iconic nationalistic sculptures that line the city streets and anchor its parks." This figure dons a bright garment with gray collar and black lettering; the football jersey worn by this sitter shares a yellow-green hue with the floral stems and leaves that dance around the figure's head in three main clusters, while the flowers themselves boast petals in various shades of blue-violet that pop and snap into cornflowers, poppies, star flowers, and lotuses. The play of bold, complementary colors makes a visual sensation that amplifies Wiley's visual signature: An arrangement of intricate floral patterns collide in a botanical field that meanders from a shadowless, wallpaper-like background to embrace the central figure and spill into the immediate foreground. The key components of this arrangement emphasize color, pose and clarity of form over setting or emotion. The slight tilt of the face seems confident, but the facial expression remains neutral.

In situ inspiration may indeed play a role in this portrait, but instead of a conventional representation of identity via setting, skin tone, hair style, sports jersey, or even botanical symbology, Wiley's *Vagner Rodrigues Gomes* (2008) offers its viewers an opportunity to enjoy the strategies favored by an artist who seeks to highlight the space between memory and make-believe.

-RJ Salley, *The Space for Creative Black Imagination at MICA*