The Sound of Light: Reflections on Art History in the Visual Culture of Hip-Hop

Krista Thompson

Light confirms my reality, gives birth to my form.—Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man, 1947

The power of the surface is inescapable, as is its efficiency as a depository of complex histories.—Malik Gaines, "Kehinde Wiley: Pieces of a Man," 2002

In May 2008, the Detroit News reported on a spectacular local high school prom entrance. A young African American woman hired photographers, at the cost of approximately six thousand dollars, to enact the role of paparazzi to make her feel, as she put it, “like a star” amid the flashes of their cameras.⁵ A photograph of the event, which concentrates more on the paparazzi than on the young couple or their Rolls-Royce, brings into focus why the young prom goers likely staged such an entrance: it highlights the importance they placed on being seen being seen (Fig. 1). Indeed, the process of being represented seems to be the real aim of the young couple’s presentation, rather than displaying or even photographing their prom splendor. Such an entrance very much attempts to participate in the structures of visibility that frame celebrity in American mainstream media, to bask literally in the limelight shone on “stars.” But the entrance may also shed light more specifically on visual expressions in contemporary hip-hop, which provide some of the most prevalent images of celebrity among black youth throughout the African diaspora, from Detroit to Kingston, Jamaica. The notion of the entrance not simply as a space in which to be seen but as a place in which to perform one’s appearance theatrically was popularized in part by rap stars, like Diddy (Sean John Combs), who grab the media spotlight by descending from helicopters or ascending from luxury yachts for event entrances.¹ Such displays from the image world of hip-hop inform how black urban youth, like our paparazzi entrance organizers, approach and insert themselves into mainstream structures of visibility and how they use these modalities to represent and reflect on black subjectivity.

Contemporary visual manifestations of hip-hop, whether in music videos, print media, or cover art, give expression to and generate distinct approaches to representation and visibility. Black youth conversant with the visual language of contemporary hip-hop have more in mind than emulating what they see in the image worlds of hip-hop, they also articulate hip-hop’s language of visibility—especially the fascination in hip-hop with generating the optical effect of being seen, particularly through the display of light. The young woman who organized the elaborate entrance, hiring professional photographers to line the red carpet, did so not to have pictures taken but to create the effect of being photographed.³ She explicitly enlisted the photographers to simulate the blinding flashes of visibility, the sound of being bathed in light, the moment of being seen—yet with the invisibility that comes at the point of visual saturation. In a manner similar to what performance art theorist Peggy Phelan describes as performance without reproductive representation,⁵ young people on the island, who cite hip-hop as their most prevalent visual influence, are seldom interested in securing material reproductions of their entrances, despite their investment in performing being represented, in being seen to be seen.⁶ Rather, inspired by visual manifestations in hip-hop, many prom goers view the optical effect of being seen and pictured as its own form of image. The prom entrances call attention to another related aspect of hip-hop’s visual culture, the importance of occupying the generative space of image creation. In other words, expressions of visuality in hip-hop place an emphasis on the moment of being made into a representation and its optical effects.

Despite the prominence of visual expression in contemporary hip-hop, many art historians, curators, and critics frame hip-hop primarily as a musical genre or employ analytic approaches derived from the study of hip-hop’s sonic iterations. This is evident in two recent exhibitions, One Planet under a Groove: Hip Hop and Contemporary Art, organized by Franklin Sirmans and Lydia Yee for the Bronx Museum of the Arts in 2001, and Mass Appeal: The Art Object and Hip Hop Culture, curated by Sirmans at Gallery 101 in Ottawa in 2002.⁸ Curators of these shows and many other scholars frequently use analogies derived from techniques of hip-hop deejaying, specifically, “sampling, mixing, and remixing” or “cutting and scratching,” in their formulation of hip-hop’s visual aesthetics.⁹ These commentators propose that studio artists informed by the “conceptual strategies of hip-hop,” much like hip-hop deejays, who reutilize beat structures from existing sound recordings in their musical arrangements, engage in a comparable sort of remixing.¹⁰ They sample from existing works of art, reconfiguring art history in the process. Such explorations of the intersections between hip-hop’s musical production and studio practice have been instructive in that they suggest how hip-hop culture and popular expressions in the African diaspora more generally may yield new perspectives on art history and art making. However, by privileging
The artist topically meets the subjects of his paintings by "they stride through urban space to pose for him." The who command, as he describes it, "a certain type of power" as recently, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, where he asks young black men such as New York's Harlem, Columbus, Ohio, or, more recently, taking to the streets of black urban communities. Resuming poses derived from existing works of European art. Of hip-hop—bubble jackets, hoodies, and baggy jeans—assisted his earliest series of paintings that figuratively addressed Mass Appeal attention in numerous group shows, including Hip Hop and Contemporary Portraiture (2002) and Recognize! Hip Hop and Contemporary Portraiture (2008), and held court in solo exhibitions such as Faux/Real (2003), Passing/Posing (2004–5), and Kehinde Wiley: Columbus (2006). After obtaining his master's in fine arts from Yale University's School of Art in 2001, Wiley, as an artist-in-residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2001–2, created his earliest series of paintings that figuratively addressed hip-hop. The canvases, which remain his most iconic body of work, portray young black men dressed in the street stylings of hip-hop—bubble jackets, hoodies, and baggy jeans—assuming poses derived from existing works of European art. The artist typically meets the subjects of his paintings by chance, taking to the streets of black urban communities, such as New York's Harlem, Columbus, Ohio, or, more recently, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, where he asks young black men who command, as he describes it, "a certain type of power" as they stride through urban space to pose for him. The precise pose is something each individual chooses from the artist's collection of art books. Once his model settles on and into a pose, Wiley takes photographs of him (to date, his subjects have all been men), and these photographs serve as the basis for his monumental oil paintings. Wiley depicts his contemporary subjects floating in a nondescript luminous and ornamental background, surrounded by—not insignificantly—a halo of light and set in heavy ornate frames.

Another artist at the top of curators' hip-hop art roll call is New Jersey–born but Miami-reared photographer, sculptor, and filmmaker Luis Gispert. Gispert also earned his MFA from Yale University in 2001, studying there at the same time as Wiley. Gispert's photographs, particularly his Cheerleader series, figured prominently in the group shows One Planet and Mass Appeal and in solo shows such as Urban Myths Part I and II at the Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley, and in Luis Gispert: Loud Image at the Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College (2004). In a striking parallel to Wiley's paintings, Gispert's Cheerleader series features subjects who enact roles from art history's representational past. Poses, compositions, and techniques from Italian Baroque-era paintings in particular often serve as the artist's pictorial inspiration. Unlike Wiley, though, who chose to depict young men, Gispert portrays young women of numerous ethnicities dressed as cheerleaders. They often wear audacious gold jewelry and gold grills on their teeth, acrylic nails, or other forms of bodily adornment associated with hip-hop culture. In the Cheerleader series, female figures hover in midair, like celestial "hoochie goddesses," to cite the title of one photograph, against a brilliant green monochrome background. Gispert's Cheerleader and Wiley's Passing/Posing exhibitions, occurring contemporaneously, were formative in narratives of hip-hop and contemporary art as they developed at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Curators and critics have attributed Wiley's and Gispert's appropriation of canonical works in art history, which accords with many trends of postmodernism, to strategies of remixing in hip-hop and have lauded the artists for revising and "racing" art history. The artists indeed use European Renaissance and Baroque pictorial traditions to visualize another history of art, one that brings the black body (and other ethnicities, in Gispert's case) literally and figuratively to the surface. Both artists, though, engage in a much more radical interrogation of art history and contemporary popular culture than scholars have acknowledged, and they do this precisely by drawing on strategies and approaches to representation, or the vernacular visual modernities, evident in black urban youth cultures. Rather than remixing art history, the artists refract it through the lens of hip-hop to reflect on techniques of light and surface effect in the history of oil paintings, while highlighting alternative epistemologies of representation engaged in by black urban youth.

The Hip-Hop Revolution Will Be Televised Contemporary hip-hop, which informs these artists' works, must be distinguished from earlier permutations of the genre. Hip-hop started as a subcultural movement among Afro-Caribbean, African American, and Latino youth in the Bronx in the late 1970s. It comprised four different yet related types of expression: deejaying, emceeing, break danc-
ing, and writing (the production of graffiti). Although often marketed and globally exported as an "African American" genre, hip-hop was a product forged within and between African diasporic communities. By the mid-1980s, although mainstream interest in graffiti and break dancing waned, hip-hop music enjoyed new life on the American pop charts. Scholars and many fans often view these early days of hip-hop as a golden era. It was the time when, so the typical narrative of hip-hop goes, many musicians used hip-hop to critically and creatively respond to the poor conditions of black and Latino communities in postindustrial urban America, to the social and economic changes wrought by the Reagan era. It is this early period that curators of recent exhibitions on hip-hop and contemporary art hark back to in their characterizations of the genre.

Wiley, Gisbert, and many other artists identified with the hip-hop generation, however, came of age in what critic Nelson George lamentably regards as the "post-soul era," when the message, and the medium that delivered that message, in hip-hop started to change. In the 1980s, as hip-hop gained visibility and commercial success nationally and globally, rappers increasingly turned their attention from politics to pleasure, a focus on earthly and bodily gratification, hedonism, and even nihilism. While some rappers in the past had shone a critical light on capitalism, hip-hop artists in the post-soul period unabashedly celebrated materialism or a "guerilla capitalism," draping themselves in symbols of wealth, in hip-hop started to change. In the 1980s, as hip-hop gained visibility and commercial success nationally and globally, rappers increasingly turned their attention from politics to pleasure, a focus on earthly and bodily gratification, hedonism, and even nihilism. While some rappers in the past had shone a critical light on capitalism, hip-hop artists in the post-soul period unabashedly celebrated materialism or a "guerilla capitalism," draping themselves in symbols of wealth, from gold chains and medallions to all manner of luxury goods. Numerous scholars psychologize that these manifestations of hypercapitalism in later forms of hip-hop may be attributed to black youths' marginalization and ghettoization in postindustrial American society. What is of interest here is not so much why materialism entered hip-hop's lexicon but that this later phase of hip-hop was produced, promoted, and propagated in forms of visual culture.

The rise of these later material manifestations of hip-hop coincided, not inconsequentially, with the popularity of new forms of visual expression. In the late 1980s, music was no longer something circulated primarily through the underground economies of mixed tapes or radio; hip-hop's global revolution was televised and digitalized through a set of visual technologies. Hip-hop came of age, most significantly, as music television reached maturity. In the late 1980s, the music video radically transformed how music was distributed and even produced. New magazines, such as Source and Vibe, founded in 1988 and 1993 respectively, also played a role in hip-hop's visualization and popularization. Through corporate America's visual cultural networks, types of hip-hop that celebrated capitalism gained global currency.

This preoccupation with material consumption was perhaps most explicit in visual cultural expressions of hip-hop emanating from the southern United States by musicians like the Hot Boys, Ludacris, Lil Jon, and Soulja Boy, although not exclusively. Beginning in the late 1990s, expressions of hip-hop from New Orleans, Florida, and Georgia, in particular, gained recognition, if not respect, as Southern rappers topped the hip-hop charts. Southern rappers produced a type of hip-hop music known as bounce or bass music, labeled as such for its throbbing bass, which could be felt as much as heard. But southern hip-hop did more than promote music designed to generate sonic effect in car sound systems as young people moved through urban space. Visual manifestations of the genre—in videos, album covers, and print media—depicted an equally loud style and lifestyle, one that can be summed up in one word: "bling!"

The concept of bling, which came to define an era of hip-hop, was formative in visual cultural expressions from the late 1990s and continues to resonate in popular imagery. Coined in 1998 by the rapper B.G. (Baby Gangsta) of the New Orleans–based group Cash Money Millionaires, the term bling originally referred to expensive jewelry. "Bling" quickly entered common parlance and by 2003, the Oxford English Dictionary defined it not only as a "piece of ostentatious jewellery" but also as any "flashy" accoutrement that "glorifies conspicuous consumption." The cover for his compact disk Chopper City in the Ghetto, designed by the firm Pen and Pixel Graphics Inc., epitomizes bling in this broader sense, portraying a visual pastiche of prized commodities (Fig. 2). The rapper, wearing a gold chain with a diamond pendant and set off by his diamond-encrusted name, sits in a phantasmagoric lair of luxury goods. Photographed from below, he appears larger than life and is surrounded by a sparkling automobile, a bottle of champagne, a chandelier, and a chalice, or "pimp cup," all of which sparkle. A heavy, ornate gold frame, containing an image of B.G., occupies a prominent place among the other signs of wealth. The inclusion of this double depiction of the rapper suggests that the framed image is not merely about capturing his likeness. Rather, his portrait, this mise en abyme, foregrounds how being seen being represented offers value within the visual economy of late twentieth-century hip-hop.

Bling, however, refers to more than flashy objects or one's self-aggrandizing portrayal as a work of art; it describes a specific visual effect. As the Oxford English Dictionary defines it, the expression appears to "represent the visual effect of light being reflected on precious stones and metals." In coining the term, B.G. sought to characterize "the imaginary sound produced when light reflects off a diamond." Bling calls attention to the moment when the commodity displays its opulence in the visual field, when it reflects a shimmering light from its luminous surface. It captures the moment, so central in contemporary hip-hop, when consumption becomes conspicuous. Even as bling denotes an investment in the light of visibility, the concept may also be seen to pinpoint the limits of the visible world: the instant that reflected light bounces off a shiny object, it denies and obliterates vision. It saturates the visual plane, ultimately blinding the viewer. Indeed, in the track "Bling, Bling," B.G. boasts of bling's "blinging power." Bling, then, conveys a state between hypervisibility and blinding invisibility, between visual surplus and disappearance. It signals a state of the sublime, the physiological—even painful—limits of vision. Bling, in short, illuminates an approach to visibility in which optical and even blinding visual effect has its own representational value.

In keeping with this fascination with the ocular effect of light, hip-hop image makers often fix attention on the reflective boundaries of the object or, put more simply, on shiny surfaces. Starting in the late 1990s, influential music video and film director Hype Williams (Harold Williams) developed a style of cinematography that focused on light and its reflection in surfaces as both subject and form. This aesthetic
would visually define hip-hop for the next decade, spotlighting still-reigning hip-hop stars like Diddy, Jay-Z, Missy Elliot, and Busta Rhymes. Williams produced and popularized a distinctive look for hip-hop music videos using lights and shiny surfaces, highlighting “luminous objects in the frame (neon, incandescent, and fluorescent bulbs)” and “highly reflective (metallic or wet surfaces),” as film theorist Roger Beebe puts it (Fig. 3). Williams’s inventory of reflective objects included the ubiquitous shine of luxury automobiles and the sparkle of jewelry, as well as the shimmering surface of black female skin. More specifically, Williams often depicted sexualized parts of black women’s bodies in ways that heightened their shine. The videographer, who tellingly cites seventeenth-century Dutch artist Rembrandt van Rijn (renowned for his use of light in the painting technique of chiaroscuro) as one of his influences, would further electrify his shiny surfaces by saturating the entire scene in bright white light. Williams also became well known for his distinctive use of an extreme wide-angled lens, which created the impression that viewers were observing the world presented in the video, hip-hop’s fun house, through a peephole. Actually, Williams’s signature fish-eye-lens look made the entire video at times resemble a reflection on a shiny surface. Through his cinematographic techniques, the director set out to enlarge the aura of rappers and the power of their celebrity. Williams not only succeeded in giving rappers a larger than life presence but also his visual brand gave their phantasmagoric lifestyle of hyperconsumerism visual substance, precisely by using light and its optical effect on shiny surfaces.

Notes on Surface and Shine in the History of Art
In order to understand why shine and surfacism have emerged in contemporary forms of hip-hop, it is useful to look at these visual expressions within a broader historical
ART HISTORY IN THE VISUAL CULTURE OF HIP-HOP

4 Hans Holbein the Younger, The Ambassadors, 1533, oil on wood, 81 1/8 x 82 1/8 in. (207 x 209.5 cm). National Gallery, London (artwork in the public domain; image © The National Gallery, London)

Elucidating the historical conditions under which these aesthetic forms figured in the past may offer insight into their production in the visual economy of contemporary hip-hop. "Surfacism" refers here to a concentration on the materiality or visual texture of objects within or of the picture plane, "the elaborately wrought and highly finished representations of objects that are themselves elaborately wrought and highly finished." Shine, or what Roland Barthes calls "sheen," is a related concept. Artists have used shine, the visual production of light reflecting off polished surfaces or passing through translucent glass, to emphasize the materiality and haptic quality of objects.

Shine and surfacist practices have a long and varied history in different cultural contexts. One scholar, John Berger, attributes the development of surface aesthetics in the visual economy of European art to two historical developments: the invention of oil painting as an art form in the sixteenth century and the formation of new wealth and new moral economies surrounding capital. He maintains that oil painting allowed artists like German-born Hans Holbein the Younger, whom the art historian locates at the beginning of this tradition, to attain a hitherto unachievable sense of "the tangibility, the texture, the luster, and the solidarity" in the world they depicted. Holbein used the medium of oil paint to populate his entire picture plane with objects, whose surfaces he depicted in meticulous detail. In a painting like The Ambassadors (1533), for example, two impeccably dressed statesmen, Jean de Dinteville and Georges de Selve, figures in the court of Britain's King Henry VIII, stand magisterially next to a collection of their possessions, which include objects symbolic of the sciences and arts (Fig. 4). In the work, with the exception of the merchants' skin (a point to which I will return momentarily), "there is not a surface in this picture which does not make one aware of how it has been elaborately worked over," from the ambassadors' sumptuous fur-lined clothes to the well-crafted instruments and patterned textile that creates a background surface in the painting. Berger relates this new tactile rendering of the material world in oil paint to the "new power of capital" and "new attitudes to property and exchange." The painting may be seen as an early art historical precedent of the fashioning of power and prestige through material possessions, among them the work of art. Holbein's anamorphic depiction of a skull in the foreground of the painting, however, also draws attention to what the world of appearances hides from view: the inevitability of death, the fragility of things. Surfacism, then, Berger argues, from its earliest inception in European art gave visual form to a way of seeing that was bound to the market economy, new forms of self-fashioning, and the optical effects achievable specifically through oil painting.

While Berger's genealogy of surfacism dates to the sixteenth century, many art historians associate surfacist practices with aesthetic approaches that spread across Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Art historian Svetlana Alpers details how an attention to the surface appearance of things, what she calls the art of describing, was a
dominant aesthetic among Dutch painters of the seventeenth century. Artists (from Frans Hals or Jan Vermeer to Johannes Cornelisz Verspronck), in their commitment to rendering the visible world, approached, as she explains, "the picture as a surface (like a mirror or a map, but not a window) on which words along with objects can be replicated or inscribed." Of particular interest here is that Dutch artists reproduced light in new ways to give the world around them its descriptive texture. Alpers maintains that Dutch artists, for the first time in the history of art, attempted to reproduce the optical effect of rays of light hitting the surface of objects within their paintings. By arresting the flux of the optical experience of light reflecting on and through surfaces within their canvases, artists represented what visual theorist Norman Bryson refers to as the gaze, a vision captured, prerecorded, independent of, and indifferent to the subsequent observer of the work. Such paintings produced an asymmetry between the artist's perception and the viewing subject, whose physical presence and viewing experience were not accounted for in the work. In contrast to bling's bodily centered (and, indeed, physiologically blinding) use of the momentary effect of light, the Dutch still life paintings presented corporeally and temporally removed representations of the gaze in their "shellacked" canvases.

Significantly, deepening the sense of a historical connection between materialism and surfacism, Hal Foster relates the production of shine in Dutch paintings to commodity production and the increased centrality of the market in Dutch life in the seventeenth century. Building on a study by Barthes, he posits a connection between the Dutch still life paintings and the diverse class of objects that newly circulated as commodities in Dutch domestic and imperial economies. Foster makes the prescient point that shiny surfaces in Dutch paintings did not simply give commodities a material and almost tactile form, but they also constituted a representational system in which the objects came to be produced and perfected as commodities, in the face of ethical debates about consumption. The special "shellac" of Dutch still life paintings endowed them with a pictorial texture. Alpers maintains that Dutch painters, for the first time in the history of art, attempted to reproduce the optical effect of rays of light hitting the surface of objects within their paintings. By arresting the flux of the optical experience of light reflecting on and through surfaces within their canvases, artists represented what visual theorist Norman Bryson refers to as the gaze, a vision captured, prerecorded, independent of, and indifferent to the subsequent observer of the work. Such paintings produced an asymmetry between the artist's perception and the viewing subject, whose physical presence and viewing experience were not accounted for in the work. In contrast to bling's bodily centered (and, indeed, physiologically blinding) use of the momentary effect of light, the Dutch still life paintings presented corporeally and temporally removed representations of the gaze in their "shellacked" canvases.

Barthes points out that in contemporaneous paintings Dutch artists also made their male patrons, often guild members, look "ultra human." Painters endowed their subjects with "extreme signs of humanity": large heads, brown or plum-colored eyes, pinkish skin, and salient facial features highlighted through the delicate use of shadow. These guild portraits, moreover, made their male subjects appear almost divine, otherworldly, and omnipotent, in part through the use of arrested gesture and striking lighting. In this respect, Dutch artists produced portraits in which men were superhuman and in which objects had a visual life.

The surfacism and shine of Dutch painting had a very different appearance, aim, and specular effect than paintings composed according to Cartesian perspectivalism, a mathematically based and disembodied mode of perception organized around the Albertian concept of single-point perspective. Starting in the Italian Renaissance, but not confined to this period, painters ordered their canvases from this monocular perspective "in the manner of a lone eye looking through a peephole at the scene in front of it," as Martin Jay describes it. Painters, structuring their canvases by these means, often created a sense of visual entry into the picture plane and the illusion of recession through three-dimensional space by deemphasizing, if not effacing, the painting's flat surface. In contrast, Dutch artists, interested in descriptive surface details, often crowded the picture plane, used multiple viewpoints, and more haphazardly framed their objects in space, hindering a visual recession into the painting.

Numerous scholars have reiterated the differences between Cartesian perspectivalism and surfacism, and I do not aim to retrace the substance of these discussions here. Rather, I want to stress a point made by Alpers, Jay, Clement Greenberg, Christopher Pinney, and others: that surfacism historically articulates a way of seeing and describing that constitutes an alternative to, and perhaps a repudiation of, Cartesian perspectivalism, the most dominant and normalized scopic regime in modern history.

Moreover, surface aesthetics often held up a mirror through which this naturalized mode of representation could be refracted and fractured. Christine Buci-Glucksmann makes this argument in regard to another stylistically complex form of artistic production, the Baroque, in which artists often embellished, overly so, the surfaces within and beyond their paintings with proliferating, ornamental detail. She asserts that surfacist aesthetics furnished an "anamorphosistic mirror, either concave or convex, that distorts the visual image—or, more precisely, reveals the conventional rather than natural quality of 'normal' specularity by showing its dependence on the materiality of the medium of reflection." She posits that the Baroque's surface aesthetics, by offering this counter approach to vision and representation, reflected on normalized models of visuality in such a way that their means of construction, particularly through the medium of reflection, were made visible.

Holbein's painting The Ambassadors, although removed from the period that Buci-Glucksmann has analyzed, might elucidate how surfacist aesthetics, through anamorphosis and otherwise, may render legible conventions of representation. Holbein's anamorphic depiction of the skull, which looks like a distorted disk on the surface of the painting, served as more than a memento mori. Even more pertinent, the skull, which can be seen only when viewers shift how they perceive the work, requires that viewers both acknowledge another way of seeing and recognize the perceptual boundaries of "normal" vision. "To see the large death's-head," as historian Stephen Greenblatt puts it, "requires a still more radical abandonment of what we take to be 'normal' vision; we must throw the entire painting out of perspective in order to bring into perspective what our usual mode of perception cannot comprehend." It is this potential of surfacist aesthetics to foreground other ways of seeing, to bring to the surface naturalized structures of vision, and to reveal the structural limits of vision that I want to show as intrinsic to the visual history of surfacism.

While scholars have written about many historically specific occurrences of surfacism and shine in the history of art, I have concentrated here on the periods that Gisbert and
Wiley engage most explicitly in their early work—that is, late Renaissance, Dutch, and Baroque painting practices in the late sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries. It is against this historical backdrop that the contemporary resurfacing of surface aesthetics in hip-hop should be situated. What are prevailing norms of visuality on which hip-hop reflects, both historically and in contemporary society? What might bling, especially as Wiley and Gispert interpret it, uniquely reveal about these ways of seeing and about the visual production of the commodity in contemporary society? What might the visual cultures of late twentieth-century hip-hop, in ways that are distinct from previous articulations of surface aesthetics, render visible in their blinding aesthetics?

**Shine and the Fact of Blackness**

A look at popular depictions of canonized works of European art in hip-hop begins to reveal what hip-hop’s surface aesthetics may reflect about naturalized ways of seeing and canonized ways of representing. Consider an advertisement for a Website on hip-hop, published in the popular hip-hop magazine *Vibe* in 2000, at the height of bling’s popular enshrinement (Fig. 5). Under the words “What is hip hop?” a version of the painting *Portrait of King Henry VIII* by Hans Holbein, created in 1536, appears in visual call and response to the bejeweled question (Fig. 6). The ad pictures the king wearing a rapper’s signature gold chains and diamond jewelry, all star-studded enlargements of the jewels he wears in the Holbein painting. Hip-hop is, the ad provocatively suggests, an extension of a much longer history of refashioning status and prestige through shiny jewels, tactile surfaces, and sumptuous goods. Indeed, the ad’s designer plots a direct representational genealogy between Henry VIII and B.G., who is denoted in absentia by the quote, “I be that player with the ice [jewelry] on me....” The advertisement crowns the defiant...
painters used to convey the value of the object and the status of their subjects. This interest in the effect of light is hinted at in the advertisement, which pictures the king's jewels literally highlighted by starburst reflections, against a liquefied backdrop of light. The popular image indicates anecdotally what will become more explicit in Wiley's and Gispert's work: vernacular approaches to visuality in later forms of hip-hop offer a lens to view and magnify the techniques used in the visual production of power and prestige in the work of art. If surfacist artistic practices in the past reflected on normalized conventions of representation, the advertisement and artists' works are one step removed. They use bling to reflect on surfacism and the visual production of shine.

But bling and contemporary surface aesthetics in hip-hop also accentuate more broadly other repressed aspects of normalized modes of seeing and describing. In particular, contemporary representations in hip-hop that focus on black skin in its visual economy of shiny surfaces call attention to what might be considered a site of negative instruction in early painterly manifestations of surfacism. According to Berger and Barthes, skin was the only surface not rendered in a tactile way commensurate with the visual production of surface effect in early oil painting. Berger notes in regard to The Ambassadors, for example, that the only surface Holbein did not portray using the visual language of the commodity was the men's white skin. This observation is especially striking given that at the time Holbein produced the work, black skin was intrinsically connected to global capitalism, slavery, and the new ways of seeing that Berger describes. Indeed, Berger ponders whether the men pictured in Holbein's work amassed their possessions through the profits of the first transatlantic colonizing ventures. In marked contrast to the way the ambassadors' skins escaped representational inscription as "object[s] in the midst of other objects," as expressed by Frantz Fanon, the bodies of persons defined as black not only literally circulated within a global economy as commodities but also were visually defined as such through the visual logic of surfacism and the aesthetics of shine.

That slaves came to be visually produced as property in part through the shine of their skin is evident in and beyond the realm of painting. Dutch artist Dirk Valkenburg, for instance, at the beginning of the eighteenth century depicted slaves in ways that emphasized their glossy appearance. As art historian Charles Ford recognizes, in such works slaves' glistening bodies represented a "grotesque prunk stilleven, advertising their master's ownership of themselves." In fact, slave traders actually greased the bodies of enslaved Africans using sweet oil or greasy water "to make them shine," as freedman Moses Roper expressed it, "before they are put up to sell." Many buyers' sole assessment of slaves came through visual inspection in the pens. Slave traders therefore had a vested interest in glossing over the scars of the enslaved through shine, in rendering illegible "the hieroglyphics of the flesh," in creating the veneer of discipline and health. Bodily shine helped to increase slaves' worth, to heighten their assimilation and visual verisimilitude to the world of objects. In this way, the reflective surface of the black body—what might be characterized as the visual production of the slave sublime—served to blind buyers, if you will, to the slave's humanity. It sealed them, as Fanon so succinctly described it, "in crushing
objecthood." Contemporary attention to surface aesthetics and to the representation of black skin and black people as part of the visual economy of surfacism brings to the fore this other genealogy of surfacism, one that paintings like Holbein’s *The Ambassadors, Portrait of Henry VIII*, and much of the art historical literature on surface aesthetics occludes from view. The visual modes of commodity production extended to enslaved Africans. I am not suggesting that many rappers and people influenced by hip-hop make explicit the connection between the shine of bling and the degradations of slavery—although some rappers do, such as Kanye West—but the artists who draw on its aesthetics implicitly call up the connection between shine and surface aesthetics, capitalism, and the historical denial of subjectivity to enslaved persons of African descent.

More specifically, bringing the surface of the black body and blinding visibility in hip-hop into focus sheds light historically on how prevailing scopic regimes configured notions of race, both the supposed transparency of whiteness and the glare of blackness. Continuing the history of surface practices that allow critical reflection on normalized modes of specularity, the surface aesthetics of hip-hop reveal how both ways of seeing and describing contributed to what literary critic Robyn Wiegman characterizes as the anchoring of “whiteness in the visible epistemology of black skin.” Wiegman traces the racial logic of corporeal inscription to Cartesian perspectivalism and the belief it ordained that observation yielded scientific and objective truth. Notably, ideals of race as inscribed on the surface of skin gained currency in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a period contemporaneous with the art of describing, when natural scientists, philosophers, and artists expressed faith in surface appearance. In other words, the very notion of blackness as locatable on the surface of skin is an extension, the logical end, of a logic, using precisely the site of racial inscription and commoditization, the black body, to eviscerate the equation between seeing and knowing. Arguably, this incommensurability between vision and the surface of black bodies is evoked in Hype Williams’s provocative use of the fish-eye lens. This photographic device seems to visualize a monocural perspective, a disembodied way of looking, associated with Cartesian perspectivalism and with the optical devices that subsequently contributed to the belief in surfacism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. While Williams’s wide-angle lens appears to function like a magnifying glass, promising a voyeur-like intimate inspection of the pictured object, it also notably warps and distorts anything fixed in its viewfinder. Indeed, in many instances, Williams’s camera seems to bring the object so close that it can no longer be seen. In this regard, Williams’s hip-hop aesthetic pinpoints an aspect of bling and the surface effect of late hip-hop more broadly: it calls attention to the failure of vision, to how vision obscures from view what it purports to reveal. Further, the notion of bling denotes a state of visibility in which the optical field is so saturated that nothing can be seen; it is a state of hypervisibility that is, in effect, blinding. Bling’s emblazoned invisibility recalls much of the literature on what Fanon referred to as the “fact of blackness,” the way in which the overdetermined surface of the black skin prevented many from seeing the subjectivity of persons of African descent. In other words, inherent in hip-hop’s surface visual economy is a critical reflection on how observing the surface appearance of things has been an obstacle to certain ways of seeing, a fact of visibility’s limits that, historically, people of African descent have long experienced. In this respect, hip-hop’s surface aesthetics may be seen as a manifestation of Buci-Glucksmann’s reflective mirror, one that renders visible the relation of past modes of scopic regimes to race, the commodification of blackness, and the blindness to black subjectivity, while illuminating the limits of vision more generally.

Moreover, bling’s focus on the intersection between hypervisibility and disappearance not only brings into view the boundaries of normalized ways of seeing but may articulate alternative modes of visuality. The characterization of bling in *The Oxford English Dictionary* or by B.G. as sound produced by reflecting light may be read as an effort to describe what is in excess of visibility, a type of representation that transcends the realm of the visible world, so much so that it becomes sound. This notion of the sound of light may be considered with respect to literary scholar Alexander Weheliye’s provocative suggestion that persons rendered invisible within the visual economies of race in the United States and other locales of the African diaspora often sought solace and subjectivity through sonic means. Faced with the glare of mechanisms of vision that fixed racial signification, black subjects often strove to constitute subjecthood outside the optical realm through sound. Weheliye cautions that sonic technologies should not be interpreted as the sole site of black identity formation; rather, black subjectivity “inhabits the spatiotemporal terrain between sonic modernity and visual modernity: the crossroads of subjection and subjectivation.” Black subjectivity was constituted somewhere between the glare of invisibility and the blackness of sound. Does the use of sound to describe bling’s light similarly aim to characterize a sonic visibility, a mode of visuality that reflects and deflects historically dominant modes of seeing blackness and seeks to represent subjectivity within, yet beyond, what is typically defined as the visual realm? Is light’s sonic casting a reimagining of the boundaries of vision so that it is capable of registering—hearing—black subjectivity? In other words, the sound of bling may be not only a repudiation of dominant scopic regimes but also an enunciation of alternative modes of fashioning black visibility and personhood.

The Power of Surface and Light in Kehinde Wiley’s Artistic Practice

Given that contemporary forms of hip-hop are expressed through a distinct visual language that sometimes reflect on art history and visuality more generally, it is surprising that scholars and curators have turned a blind eye to these forms in their appraisals of hip-hop in contemporary art. Understanding the visual cultural manifestations of later forms of hip-hop—bling and its surface aesthetics—may bring into
focus why artists like Wiley and Gisbert use the visual language of contemporary hip-hop as both form and content in their artistic practice—and why it provides a prescient framework for their critical reflection on art and art history. Wiley, for one, has made his direct engagement with the concept of bling explicit in his artistic practice. In a 2001 interview with curator Christine Kim regarding his earliest series of portraits of young black men based on old European oil paintings, he emphatically stated, "With the work I'm doing now, I'm interested in history as it relates to blingbling." Wiley invoked bling in part to characterize the parallels he first detected, as an artist-in-residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2001, between the flash of bling as manifest among black youth in the streets of Harlem and the opulence of male subjects depicted in early European oil paintings. Echoing the genealogy of conspicuous consumption plotted in the "What is hip hop?" advertisement, Wiley recognized in the "flossing" and carriage of young black men in Harlem a sense of "power" and "pomp" that recalled the stances of omnipotence and pageantry in European portraits. The artist first encountered these paintings in museums as a child. He recalls his visits to the Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens in San Marino, California, for instance, seeing portraits of royalty and gentry and being fascinated by the "artificiality" and "opulence" of these works. "There was this strange otherworldliness that, as a black kid from Los Angeles, I had no manageable way of digesting. But at the same time, there was this desire to somehow possess that or belong to that." Wiley's monumentalized portraits of black men in hip-hop gear assuming poses from European paintings may betoken the artist's desire to possess these traditions. Yet Wiley was less invested in positing hip-hop as a neo-Baroque aesthetic, as some critics have argued, or in conscripting "old master" paintings as part of bling's early history, than he was in using bling as a conceptual framework to interrogate the performance and visual propagation of power. Bling, he explains, came to "stand in for a much broader and complicated field of interest when thinking about picturing power, which is one of the dominant themes in my work." By superimposing the opulent worlds of rulers and rappers, Wiley sought to visualize conventions for representing power in European portraiture on the surface of his paintings. Wiley recognized that "[t]he history of painting has been the history of those [powerful] men trying to position themselves in fields of power that are very defined and codified as a type of vocabulary that's evolved over time..." The painter scripted black urban youth into this history in order to ripple its codified visual field. In so doing, he took care to represent his black male subjects in such a way that they appear both within and yet outside these defined vocabularies. In his early paintings, he shows his male subjects in the process of being enclosed in the surface of his canvases, "shellacked" within the image world they inhabit. This is suggested by the male figure in the painting Female Prophet Anne (2003), whose hand seems to reach out toward the golden swirls of light that undulate across the surface of the work, as if marveling at them (Fig. 7). Wiley renders his black male subjects, with their grand gestures, in ways that are in keeping with the subject matter and form of early painterly manifestations of surfacism. However, Wiley emphasizes tactility and shine only on some parts of his paintings. While his male figures assume powerful and theatrical poses in the center of his canvases illuminated by a halo of light, their lower extremities dissolve in the picture plane. In Female Prophet Anne, for instance, the young man's jersey is displayed in surfacist detail, standing out in the foreground of the image, but his limbs disappear in the orange light and background of the bright canvas. Wiley, by portraying his subjects within the conventions of portraiture but not carrying this through the entire painting, allows the illusions of portraiture to arise and then dissipate on the surface of the work. His figures inhabit the surface of the canvases, between visibility and invisibility. They appear both luminescent and transparent, statuesque and ephemeral, photorealistic and abstract, present and absent: accidental inhabitants of history on the verge of disappearance.

Wiley, in part informed by bling, was especially attentive to how producers of European portraits used the optical illusion of what he describes as "super-rapturous light" and surface reflection to convey the power and seemingly otherworldly status of their sitters. Not coincidentally, for his early figurative hip-hop paintings, Wiley chose many artworks from the late Renaissance and seventeenth-century Dutch periods, when artists first employed oil painting to produce the appearance of a tactile, haptic surface and reproduced the optical effect of light hitting the surface of objects. It is as if Wiley, in his reappraisal of art history, in order to understand how the refashioning of prestige and personhood "evolved over time," had to go back, way back, to the beginning of this visual vocabulary. In preparation for his work the artist studied the earliest techniques of oil painting, focusing in particular on the use of light to model three-dimensional form. Wiley, influenced by Richard Dyer's work on the aesthetic technologies of light and its relation to whiteness, sought to capture the sense of bodily transcendence conveyed by light in these earlier paintings. Dyer demonstrates how light often gave European subjects a spiritual quality, "a sense of being in the body but not of it." Within his canvases, as evident in Female Prophet Anne, Wiley saturated his black male figures in this ethereal light, giving it a luminous and decorative presence on the surface of his canvases.

Light and reflective surfaces also became an important source in various stages in the production of his paintings. The artist, for instance, would flood his studio with light as he took photographs of his models and would try to capture the brilliant use of white light that became a hallmark of Hype Williams's music videos. He also subsequently used computer digital imaging software to further saturate the image with, as he put it, "more light than can exist in the photographic setting." He would then project these light-enhanced photographs via projector onto his monumental canvases, literally using light as a mode of translation. The resulting canvases, however, instead of displaying the subtle modeling of light to convey the materiality of objects or the eeriness of subjects, evince a flattening of light. While Wiley adds some amount of detail to his figures through overpainting, particularly to his subjects' faces, his relatively flat method of paint application does not allow the illusion of light to take effect. This is most dramatically the case when...
Wiley uses metallic paint, which produces a flat reflective plane of light in the painting. The metallic paint explicitly sets the illusion of light and its sometimes blinding effect (depending on the angle from which viewers approach the work) on the surface of the painting. In thinking about how to make paintings "about the system of painting," he recognized that "light ha[d] to be not only heightened but pointed to as a tool."92

Wiley's foregrounding of light as a tool is evident in a comparison of his Portrait of Andries Stilte (2005) with its Dutch source painting, Johannes Cornelisz Verspronck's Andries Stilte as a Standard-Bearer (1640) (Figs. 8, 9). Wiley did two versions of the painting (as did Verspronck), but one of the paintings clearly illuminates how Wiley engages art history in ways that emphasize light and surfacism in art. In Wiley's painting, a young man dressed in hip-hop street garb assumes a self-possessed pose similar to the one that Stilte, a wealthy member of a prestigious civic militia, strikes in the
seventeenth-century painting, even though Wiley's model does not quite capture the haughty repose of Verspronck's figure. Indeed, his model's "imperfect" performance of the gesture heightens what Barthes refers to as externalization of the notion of power through embalmed gestures in Dutch painting. What is most notable in Wiley's version of the image is the background and foreground, which the artist renders as a material latticework of radiating light. The figure stands assertively in the middle of proliferating ornamentation in a narrow pictorial space, which seems to be disappearing, between the designs. Wiley's depiction of stylized light in the painting visualizes the effect of light in the seventeenth-century painting. He tunes viewers visually into Verspronck's use of light in the early portrait, in the way it shimmers off Stilt's pink sumptuous garments, visually defines the finery of his lace, suggests the texture of his feather, and highlights the ample folds of his standard, a testament to Stilt's newly elevated status in a civic militia. If many of the original Dutch paintings arrested the artist's perception of light on the object at its moment of creation, Wiley's canvases attempt to capture the visual experience of viewing the oil paintings, the visual effect of techniques of oil paintings. In this regard, his works offer a glance at the initial painter's gaze ("glance" referring here to Bryson's characterization of the momentary, embodied, and partially blinding experience of viewing, "vision in the durational temporality" of the viewing subject"). This corporeal experience of vision recalls the physiological and even painful experience of light that is so intrinsic to bling. Inspired by ways of seeing in hip-hop, Wiley glances at how the early portrait painters used light to convey the prestige of their subjects to the beholder. Thus, what is new in Wiley's bling-informed neo-Baroque aesthetic is not another era of flamboyant fashions but a new way of foregrounding literally how painters constructed opulence and power through surfacism and light.

Portrait of Andries Stilt also shows how Wiley brings surfacist
and decorative effect to the forefront of his canvases. The earliest producers of surfacist aesthetics rendered with elaborate detail the surfaces of decorative objects. Wiley's artistic reinterpretations make the ornamental, the surfacist embellishment of objects, the subject of his paintings. In *Portrait of Andries Stille*, for instance, the decorative surfaces and ornate objects that once formed the background of late Renaissance, seventeenth-century Dutch, and Baroque paintings—like the textile backdrop and instruments of Holbein's *The Ambassadors* (Fig. 4), for instance—compete with the human subject of the work for representational supremacy. Wiley makes explicit reference to the decorative surface of objects in his inclusion of the gold mask representing Louis XIV as Sun King, which appears just above the main figure in the work. André Charles Bolle, artisan in the court of Louis XIV, used such decorative insignias in his elaborate cabinets. Bolle became renowned for crafting his pieces with veneers, using polished strips of exotic woods and materials from across the French empire and the globe on the surface of his furniture. The painting then places the black male figure within the shiny surface, the skin, of the luxury commodity, inhabiting the shallow depth of field in the canvas. The *Portrait of Andries Stille* also assumes the aspect of a textile, like a Seydou Keita photograph in which the backdrop patterns have come to life or a Yinka Shonibare figurative sculpture in which the fabrics, wrought at the interstices of Dutch imperialism and global cultural exchange, have taken two-dimensional form. The difference between figure and ground, human and object, the subject of portraiture and the surface of the decorative, and the individual and the global become interpolated and flattened out on his canvases.

Wiley also elucidates how the act of being represented, inhabiting the frame of art, literally and figuratively, affects status and affirms the subject's power. This preoccupation with the occupation of art and the broader framework of representation recalls popular images and approaches to visuality in contemporary forms of hip-hop, from the prom paparazzi scenes to numerous rappers' enshrinement in print ads framed as works of art. Wiley interrogates how being in the frame of representation was foundational to the prestige of oil painting. He underscores these issues by painting frames within the boundaries of the canvas or more typically by placing his paintings in heavy ornate and often gilded frames, as seen in the ornamental gold frame on *Portrait of Andries Stille* and the elaborate black frame accompanying the portrait *St. Sebastien II*, an image based on a Flemish triptych of the saint by an unknown artist dating from 1510 (Fig. 10). While the frame provides contiguity with the designs within the painting, for the most part the heavy black frame imposes itself on the work. It insists that the image contained within it is a painting and, furthermore, that it has been defined and ensnared as a valuable work of art through the frame. Wiley's paintings as such critique picturing practices, or what might be described in the art world as "enframing," the process by which certain subjects and practices are reified as powerful through art, foretelling other representational possibilities or forms of revealing.

Wiley's framed paintings, in keeping with surfacist aesthetics' revelatory potential, also bring into focus alternative ways of seeing that dominant forms of representation conceal from view: they foreground specific forms of image making engaged in by black urban youth. Wiley's paintings highlight how African American youth often perform visibility and represent themselves through visual effects, practices that typically take place outside the traditional frames of painting. The artist was in fact inspired to create his work after observing "a runway element" in how black men moved through urban pedestrian neighborhoods like Harlem. Recalling the paparazzi scenes, Wiley recognized that many young men in metropolitan cities were keenly aware of the importance of being seen being seen. Wiley put a spotlight on the runway feel of these everyday performances by approaching his potential subjects with a small video crew in tow. He enacted a spectacle of being seen in order to invite young men with a sense of their runway presence to pose for him. The painter's process of looking for models, his staging of his own paparazzi scene, incorporated the modes of visibility in hip-hop and in "celeb-reality" culture more generally into his artistic practice. When Wiley paints his models bathed in light, it reflects these everyday practices of visibility among black youth and the processes of being bathed in the light of the artist's video camera, illuminated by his camera's flashes, or circumscribed by his gold frames.
In some respects, Wiley’s paintings, through form and content, call attention to an aspect of black youth culture that may be seen as both a refinement and a repudiation of European portrait-making practices, a culmination of the effect of visual effect. In vernacular expressions of hip-hop culture, the optical effect of light has its own representational value, oftentimes independent of the frame of representation.

While Wiley uses the vocabulary of hip-hop to reflect on European portraiture and the frame of Western art more generally, the painter is equally interested in pulling back the curtain on another image world projected through light: representations of male power and prestige in popular displays of contemporary hip-hop. Although some appraisals of Wiley’s paintings assume that he sets out to aggrandize the status of his black subjects, the artist casts images of hip-hop culture and its visual production, as with his approach to European portraiture, in a critical light. The artist points out precisely how the illusion of light and surface reflection gave male rappers global presence, as Hype Williams himself recognized. Many scholars have commented on and critiqued the way in which hip-hop’s visualization and popularization coincided with its hypermasculinization and hypersexualization. The world of music videos imaged male prestige not only through material possessions but also through the shiny economy of black female skin, a projection of male power that, at its worst, was sexist, misogynistic, and homophobic. Wiley, as a gay male, experienced these representations of black masculinity in hip-hop, as he did the European portraits he encountered in his childhood, as something otherworldly that he did not belong to but that intrigued him nonetheless. His almost homoerotic encounters with his potential models on the streets are the artist’s flirtation with these representations of black masculinity, his attempt to
possess and depose hip-hop's visual construction of masculinity. That his subjects often assume the poses of female figures or take female names—that they, in effect, cross-dress by taking on personas in art history—further destabilizes the cool pose of hip-hop's masculinity.

Wiley's equation of light and surface effect in hip-hop with rappers' performances of masculinity is made explicit in some of his paintings, in which the swirls of light in the canvases, on closer inspection, take on the appearance of sperm. In the work *Alexander the Great, Variation* (2005), Wiley shows a figure sporting a puffy jacket surrounded by spirals or currents of light (Fig. 11). Light in the work, though, morphs into what Sirmans aptly described as "spermatozoa." The spermatozoa, often rendered with metallic paint, in Wiley's canvases first took the form of patterns derived from aerial views of specific military battle plans. They literally follow a historical visual script of masculine power. In this and other paintings, Wiley's use of light is doubly inflected. Light offers an alternative mode of representation that black youth use to make their subjectivities stand out. However, in the context of hip-hop culture, light also eclipses some black subjectivities that must not come into view, precisely within the self-conscious performances of masculinity that must always be seen being seen. Greg Tate's observations have come closest to capturing the complex casting of light in Wiley's work. He recognizes in the paintings that "[t]here is a surface quality of being caught and exposed to the light. Technicolor light, pageant light, spectacle light, line-up light to the men apprehended in Wiley's paintings." Wiley portrays his figures as "caught" in the lineup light as well as the limelight. The *St. Sebastian II* figure literally looks constrained in the painting's decorative surfaces, as the ornamental patterns, which echo the designs of the tattoos on his skin, coil around him. His pose could also be read as much as a gesture protecting himself from the glare of lights as basking in its visibility. This dual casting of light seems evident in *Andries
Stille (Fig. 8), in which the figure stands triumphantly in a decorative rendering of light within the shiny surface of an object that forms a barricade around him. Wiley uses blinding light to reveal modes of black subjectivity concealed and rendered invisible in bling’s shine.

Wiley’s light and surface aesthetics also reflect more broadly on the relation between the commodity and blackness in contemporary society. Given that historically surfacist ways of seeing have been related to the market economy and the visual production of commodities, what might hip-hop’s surface aesthetics, as represented by Wiley, reveal about the commodity status of blackness historically and in late capitalism? Is bling a contemporary reappearance of the shine of blackness as commodity in the global marketplace? Wiley’s meditation on the visual effect of the commodity and its relation to the global marketing of blackness through hip-hop culture is foregrounded in a series of works, the Diamond paintings, that accompanied the artist’s first set of hip-hop-inspired work. Wiley was coming to represent notions of value and the commodity through the effect of light and outside of portraiture.

When Wiley exhibited the Diamond paintings at Deitch Projects in New York in 2001–2, he commissioned musicians to play West Coast gangster rap recomposed as chamber music and showed the work with an eight-foot-tall diamond-shaped ice sculpture at the opening. The giant sculpture was a super-size reference to bling, which in hip-hop parlance is also referred to as “ice,” as manifest in contemporary black popular culture and in the opulent European portraits. The ice sculpture melted down and “decayed,” as the artist put it, during the course of the exhibition, serving as a memento mori, a rapidly disappearing reminder of the ephemerality of all that shines.108

Wiley’s Diamond series and figurative paintings may offer a visual counterpart to the work of theorists like Fred Moten, who reevaluate notions of value and the commodity through a consideration of black culture, black subjects, and slavery. Moten, for one, takes issue with Karl Marx’s theory of value. Specifically, Moten quarrels with Marx’s premise that commodities cannot speak, a point that is intrinsic to Marx’s argument that objects such as diamonds and pearls have no innate value, none that exists before their valuation through market exchange.109 Moten is quick to point out that Marx neglected to recognize slavery and the fact that slaves were indeed commodities who spoke, who indeed screamed as they were violently reminded of their status as objects. Beyond the argument that blacks who were defined as objects sounded their subjectivity, Moten makes the broader point that an acknowledgment of slavery and blackness requires a radical rethinking of the notion of value. He reiterates that some commodities had “value” before their exchange value (contrary to Marx’s view) and conceives speech, the “materiality” of “breath and sound,” as possessing value for slaves and their descendants.110 Moten’s consideration of the sound of the commodity may be insightful here for developing an understanding of the sound of light and rethinking the notion of value as defined through the optical realm. Do conceptualizations of the sound of light, building on Moten, highlight alternative formulations of black subjectivity and redefinitions of value? Might Wiley’s portrait of light-reflecting diamonds and the visual world of bling point to what might be considered the material value of light in black urban practices? By this I mean: Is it possible that black bodily shine, once the most explicit visual manifestation of the commodity, now has its own material value? This might explain why youths often “fake that floss” (wear shine-producing but fake jewelry) or stage paparazzi entrances directed at producing light. In contemporary black urban cultures, the simulation of shine seems to have its own value, which can be produced without commodities through the effect of light and outside the market economies of mainstream America. This state of affairs would seem simultaneously the culmination of prac-
tices of commodification and their dematerialization, a metatroping and refraction of a long history in the visual production of the commodity and systems of value in capitalism.

Wiley’s paintings, moreover, which the artist describes as being about “the consumption and production of blackness [a]nd how blackness is marketed to the world,”111 appear to shine a light on a shift in the representational politics of blackness in the last two decades, brought about by the unprecedented global commodification of black culture. As art and cultural theorist Kobena Mercer observes, throughout the twentieth century African Americans struggled for representation within mainstream American popular culture and as subjects of art—and, indeed, viewed visibility within these structures of representation as a blueprint for racial uplift."112 In contrast, in contemporary times black culture is hypervisualized. Mercer, following sociologist Herman Gray, uses the term “hyperblackness” to characterize how contemporary forms of black culture saturate the public sphere, both nationally and as a global brand. Hip-hop has played a central role in this unprecedented spectacularization of black culture. I would take it one step further to point out that hip-hop’s bling-bling culture, its blinding visual expressions, are products, producers, and personifications of this notion of hypervisible black culture. Wiley’s portraits of diamonds and his monumentalized representations of black men caught in light similarly reflect on and are reflections of this unprecedented moment of emblazoned black visibility.

The Visual Illusion and Volume of Light in Luis Gispert’s Cheerleaders

Luis Gispert similarly creates artwork that speaks of and through the hypervisible language of hip-hop culture to reflect on the history of art and contemporary popular cultural representations of blackness. Gispert also identifies Southern forms of hip-hop as formative in his artistic practice.113 He spent much of his youth in Miami in the mid-1980s, when the city boomed with the sounds of the city’s African American, Latino, and Caribbean-infused bass music culture. In 2001, Gispert exhibited a series of photographs that aimed to capture the visual practices that surrounded Miami’s hip-hop scene, his Cheerleader series. Composed of eleven large-format Fujiflex photographic prints, as well as two accompanying videos, the series portrayed cheerleaders of various ethnic backgrounds sporting the accoutrements of bling.

Gispert conceived the series on the heels of a trip to Italy and France, where he first started to perceive parallels between the audacious ornamentation of Italian Baroque paintings and the visual expressions of hip-hop. “Bling, bling” constituted, he concluded, an urban baroque aesthetic: “[T]he jewelry, the shiny clothing, the elaborately painted fingernails, all of the gold and platinum—it is fundamentally about excess and about an appetite for Baroqueness.”114 In the Cheerleader series Gispert combined these urban bodily practices in hip-hop with seventeenth-century Baroque pictorial traditions. In the photographs, female figures, adorned with the visual weaponry of bling, inhabit spaces where Virgin Marys and saints once took up heavenly residence in Baroque paintings. In Untitled (Single Floating Cheerleader, a.k.a. Hoochy Goddess) (2001), for instance, the artist presents a cheerleader suspended in space against a luminous green background, weighed down only by her heavy gold jewelry, gun-shaped diamond-studded pendant, and gold teeth (Fig. 13). The image recalls the many scenes of heavenly ascension, typically toward or within light, that animate Renaissance and Baroque paintings. The figure’s pose is also reminiscent of other religious and pop cultural representations of levitating figures. One could characterize the bejeweled female cheerleader as a sacred embodiment of hip-hop’s secular culture, one who also brings the heavenly figures of Baroque religious paintings down to earth. But Gispert’s Baroque juxtapositions, like Wiley’s, are not simply a contemporary restaging of an art historical representational script but rather a Brechtian unveiling of the visual effect of canonized modes of artistic production.
Gispert looks at art history through the lens of bling, perceiving through it the optical effect of works of art. While Wiley's paintings scope out the effect of light and surface, Gispert focuses on the illusion of gravity. Specifically, he became fascinated with how artists used painterly techniques of perspective, scale, and light in Renaissance and Baroque paintings to create the illusion of figures floating in space. This optical effect was central to the representation of otherworldly power and inspired deference, devotion, or, in the use of the Baroque in the Americas, subjection. That bling for Gispert is about the representation of visual effect is foregrounded in his *Untitled (Girls with Ball)*, a photograph that captures two cheerleaders from a high vantage point jumping in the air, with arms eagerly outstretched, in pursuit of a bowling ball (Fig. 14). All the elements in the photograph seem to defy gravity, from the women who hang in a nondescript green background to the bright, seemingly weightless, red ball that hovers in the center of the image. What is notable in this first image of the Cheerleader series is that the artist does not represent bling as bodily accoutrement. The cheerleaders wear none of the commodities associated in popular culture with bling. Yet the artist makes explicit reference to bling in another way: the word "bling" appears with unblinglike simplicity on the shiny surface of the red bowling ball. Gispert's placement of "bling" on the bowling ball, the focal point of the gravity-defying composition, foregrounds the subject of the photograph and the Cheerleader images more generally: bling is about the production of visual effect. It calls attention to the means of producing the visual illusion—the mirage, to use the other word inscribed on the ball. Additionally, Gispert's specific engagement with the tradition of oil painting is signaled through the three quadrangular squares on the red ball, a trope that appeared in the earliest forms of oil painting in the Renaissance. Michel de Certeau notes that quadrangular reflections of light in paintings quite literally reflect what is not depicted in the canvas (but exist within the physical space that the subject of the work occupies). Gispert's inclusion of a device associated with the beginnings of oil painting calls attention to his engagement with the history of the medium and his interest in making visible what the art form of painting itself does not bring into view: how the painting constructs its subject through visual illusion.

Although Gispert's cheerleaders may resemble paper-doll cutouts from art history, the artist peels away the compositional devices that support gravity-defying illusion in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century paintings. *Untitled (Girls with Ball)*, for instance, presents the figures suspended in a visual ballet, but all other organizing principles of Cartesian perspectivalism or the surface arts of describing are stripped away. Norman Bryson has argued that historically, oil painting functioned as an erasive medium: "What it must first erase is the surface of the picture-plane: visibility of the surface would threaten the coherence of the fundamental technique through which the Western representational image classically works the trace, of ground-figure-relations. . . ." Gispert, by placing figures against a monochrome bright green backdrop, literally pulls the ground from the representation, highlighting the organizing structure, the erasive illusion, of oil painting. Specifically, the artist, who was originally trained...
as a filmmaker, uses the chroma-key green backdrop, a device used in film to superimpose figures against any ground. By erasing the illusion of perspective and foregrounding surface, the series of photographs visualizes “ground-figure-relations,” the creation of spatial depth and figural ascent.

Gispert’s reflection on representation is not confined to historical paintings; the artist also interrogates the marketing of black youth culture through the language of contemporary advertising. The figure of the cheerleader in the series stands as an example of a mutable and pliable American pop icon used to sell everything from ideals of nation, gender, race, and sexuality to consumer products, from television shows to toothpaste. The cheerleaders, who don the flashy accoutrements of hip-hop culture in Gispert’s series, call attention to a contemporary moment in which black youth culture circulates across cultures, ethnicities, and nations as a fungible commodity—indeed, as Gray might argue, as the most visible consumer product nationally and globally. The fungibility of black culture is made most explicit in the Cheerleader series of photographs or glossy posters of Michael Jordan taped to the walls with the word “bling.” The work also brings to mind photographs or glossy posters of Anthony Pinn’s provocative argument

Intriguingly, Gispert recognized that some of the same visual effects that were central to the impression of supernatural power in Renaissance and Baroque paintings informed the production of blackness in the world of advertising. Most notably, the illusion of the gravity-defying heroic bodies suspended in space laid the ground for the representation of black subjects in advertising and the portrayal of their seemingly superhuman power. Gispert’s Untitled (Girls with Ball) recalls the divine ascent in Baroque painting, but the image also refers to more secular pursuits. The photograph draws thematically and compositionally on ads for the National Basketball Association (NBA) that feature black men photographed from a high vantage point, suspended in air, strenuously reaching for a basketball. For the basketball, Gispert substituted a bowling ball, and he replaced the NBA’s logo with the word “bling.” The work also brings to mind photographs or glossy posters of Michael Jordan taped to the walls of little boys’ rooms that immortalize the black basketball star “hanging” in midair, and even of the Nike brand he endorsed, consisting of a leaping figure. The artist’s suspended (in)animation recalls the artwork of Paul Pfeiffer, who digitally lifts NBA players from photographs and video footage, leaving a lone twisting and contorted figure floating in space, suspended in light. In the resulting images, however, as manifest in Pfeiffer’s Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (17), black men, despite being bathed in super-rapturous light, seem weighed to the ground, unable to escape their earthly and bodily confines (Fig. 15). Gispert’s photographs similarly bring the visual production of heralded black sports figures, caught hanging in time, into view. The use of the green backdrop, for one, a visual device that advertisers use in the manufacture of their images, calls attention to such images’ fabrication. Gispert’s Untitled (Girls with Ball) foregrounds how certain techniques of photography (still and moving)—the freeze-frame, the replay, slow motion, high camera angles (basket cams), lighting—all reconfigure ground-figure relations to generate the effect of superblackness.

Bling in Gispert’s photographs is ultimately not simply about the visual figuration of black athletes or about how NBA players participate in popular manifestations of bling (in 2003, tellingly, NBA players’ championship rings were inscribed with the word “bling”); it also casts a spotlight on the marketing of the black body as commodity. This is evident in the work of another artist, Hank Willis Thomas, who uses the language of advertising to reflect on the branding of blackness. In the photograph Branded Head (2003), Thomas presents, against a nondescript background, a porous close-up of a black male head in profile (Fig. 16). The figure’s scalp literally bears a Nike brand in upraised shiny flesh. Glowing with the shine of sweat, depicted in the heat of harsh light, the photograph literally focuses on the shiny surface of the black body as the site of objecthood. The source of light in the photograph is notably ambiguous and seems simultaneously evocative of a camera’s light, lineup light, limelight, the ESPN highlight, and the slave buyers’ sight. Branded Head brings to mind Anthony Pinn’s provocative argument that the sweating black body signifies spiritual transcendence in the black Pentecostal church. In Thomas’s photograph, however, the sweating black body appears unable to transcend its status as object, much like Pfeiffer’s and Gispert’s figures, which, despite being based on poses and pictures of transfiguration, remain confined to the material world. The black figure’s objectification, its inability to imprint subjectivity, is suggested in Thomas’s cropping of the figure’s face,
the incisive cut that excises the visage from view. Thomas’s and Gispert’s surface aesthetics bring the histories of the slave sublime head to head with the sublime blindness of black hypervisibility, highlighting how in both instances, despite the glare of visibility, the subjectivity of the figure disappears from view.

While Gispert’s Cheerleader photographs intimately engage popular cultural and art historical visual economies, images in the series also highlight black and Latino youths’ conceptions of visuality, those informed by Southern manifestations of hip-hop. The photograph Untitled (Car Toes), for instance, provides a snapshot of popular visual practices, particularly the pastime of cruising, of driving slowly through urban space to see and be seen being seen (Fig. 17). The image depicts a bejeweled foot and a hand adorned with gold rings, both with elaborately painted and sculpted nails, dangling out of a car window. A male hand, similarly displaying bling’s accoutrements, grasps the steering wheel. The occupants themselves, however, are secondary subjects in the image. Despite their shine, they are notably invisible in the photograph. The image points up the effect they aim to affect. Light shines off the red glossy surface of the car, light adds to the sculptural qualities of the toes, and bling’s signature star reflects from the jewelry. Gispert added to the shiny subject matter through his choice of medium, a high-gloss Fujiflex photographic paper that aptly portrays and projects light. Gispert, moreover, by situating the car on the chroma-key backdrop, placed the vehicle and its occupants’ visual effects within what could be considered the generative space of representation. Recalling the paparazzi prom entrances or the frames in Wiley’s work that allow black youth to occupy sites of image production, the chroma-key backdrop may also represent a site in which images are made. Gispert’s photograph thus presents the optical effects of being seen, as manifest on the surface of the car, within a site of representational becoming: the green screen.

Another work, the installation Low Profile (1999), further develops the theme of the car as a site of production of visual effect and as a frame of representation (Fig. 18). For the installation Gispert took the measurements of a red Dodge Viper, a car he identified as emblematic of hypermasculinity in Miami’s hip-hop culture, and using high-gloss car paint, applied the exact measurements of the vehicle’s surface area, 90 by 175 inches, to a piece of fiberglass on a gallery wall. He also included imitation hubcap rims suspended at the exact height at which they would be seen on the Viper. The work highlights many of the popular representational practices of later forms of hip-hop that I have outlined above, a logical and literal unfolding of the formal and theoretical concerns of Gispert’s work. The installation consisted solely of the reflective surface—the site of the performance of masculinity, the sight of popular representational practices in hip-hop, and the sight of the visual production of light’s effects. It is also the sparkling shell of the commodity, which independent of the object (in this instance, the car) has become central to the value of things. It is the representation of the effect of light and the shiny surface as its own image, as the work of art in the age of contemporary hip-hop.

Moreover, Gispert’s covering of the gallery wall with a glossy surface extends and subtends his broader engagement with the history of painting to reflect on the boundaries of visuality and specularity more generally. He used bling to underscore the limits, the pictorial impossibilities, of Cartesian perspectivalism and surface aesthetics. Gispert provocatively labels his larger body of work, which includes the Cheerleader series, “loud images,” invoking the sonic to identify his visual production. Might this invocation of sonic visuality aim to characterize what Weheliye calls the “crossroads of sonic and visual modernity,” or the visual scream of the commodity? Do Gispert’s loud images give form to a type of visual expression that, like bling, exceeds the optical realm? The artist describes the powerful sonic effect of Miami’s bass music as occurring “toward the end of the audible spectrum.” Gispert’s photographs may similarly be characterized as images that aim to reproduce the blinding effect of vision, pointing out the end of the visual spectrum. His loud
images speak to alternative modes of visuality, of subjectivity, that sound at vision’s end.

The Work of Art in the Age of Hip-Hop
All of the artists discussed here have used visual expressions of hip-hop in the late twentieth century and the notion of bling to accentuate the commodity status of blackness both historically and in contemporary society. As Moten foregrounds and bling illuminates, enslaved Africans and people of African descent whose subjectivities were (and continue to be) eclipsed in the shine of surface aesthetics have long been aware of the construction and limitations of European modes of visuality and the affect of its effects. In other words, that people of African descent were defined as black through the visual logic of Cartesian perspectivalism and, subsequently, surface aesthetics as commodities immediately casts light on the blind spots of these ways of seeing and describing, as well as informed critical approaches to representation. Bling, unlike normalized disembodied and monocular modes of specularity, highlights other bodily forms of perception and the blinding limits of visibility. Many visual practices of black youth simulate a bodily, physiological experience of seeing and have made the physical sensation of viewing intrinsic to their performance practices. They have taken the moment when the limit of the visual realm has been reached and have made the effect of this visual breach the substance of their representations, the source of their self-fashioning. Characterizations of the sound of light, the sound of the commodity, and the sound of loud images have been exploited to convey alternative approaches to representation, to find ways to articulate black subjectivity outside of Western economies of vision. Returning to Wallace’s concerns about the problem of the musical in visual cultural studies of African American culture, the exploration of the visual cultural manifestations of hip-hop and contemporary hip-hop art presented here evinces how the visual and sonic extend and subvert each other to form new expressions of sonic visuality, expressions that come to light at the juncture of sonic and visual modernities.

Bling, while foregrounding the historic relation between blackness and the commodity, also ultimately speaks to the representational politics of blackness in the contemporary moment, in the age of black hypervisibility. Gispert’s and Wiley’s works and the popular cultural focus on blinding visibility reflect on how the hypervisualization of black culture—to return to Mercer—has radically transformed the conditions of imaging black subjectivity. What possibilities of black subjectivity lie at the interstices of hypervisibility and disappearance? Might the hypervisibility of bling be another instance of the disappearance of the black subject, a new form of emblazoned invisibility? Wiley, Gispert, and the producers of popular images of hip-hop capture the complexi-
ties of this contemporary moment of hyperblackness and the new politics of representation and aesthetic practices that it brings to light.

Krista Thompson, associate professor of art history at Northwestern University and author of An Eye for the Tropics (2006), is a Getty Foundation postdoctoral fellow (2008–9) and David C. Driskell Prize recipient (2009). She is working on a book on light and visual practices of the African diaspora (Department of Art History, Northwestern University, 1880 Campus Drive, Kresge 3-400, Evanston, Ill. 60208).

Notes

Thanks to audiences at Princeton University’s Art History Department and the College Art Association Annual Conference (2008) for their suggestions on early manifestations of the paper. I am very grateful to several colleagues and friends for their insightful remarks on the essay, namely, Huey Copeland, Hannah Feldman, Tatiana Flores, Jacqueline Francis, Richard Ion, Christina Käer, Harvey Neptune, Christopher Pinney, Allison Stielau, Claudia Swan, and Harvey Young. I also thank Richard Powell and the anonymous reviewers for The Art Bulletin for their engagement with and critical reflections on the text.


7. Interviews by author in Nassau, New Providence, of Sandra Ferguson, June 17, 2006; Tabatha Griffin, June 22, 2006; Cisco McKay, June 21, 2006; Nadia Miller, June 22, 2006; and Jaime Taylor, June 21, 2006.


9. Many art historians and art critics make such musical analogies. See Lydia Yee, “Breaking and Entering,” in Yee and Sirmans, One Planet under a Groove, 19; Olu Ogulike, The Culture Game (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 122; Sirmans, Mass Appeal, 1; idem, “In the Cipher: Basquiat and Hip Hop Culture,” in Basquiat, ed. Marc Mayer (London: Merrell; Brooklyn: Brooklyn Museum, 2005), 94; and Derek Conrad Murray, “Kehinde Wiley: Splendid Bodies,” Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art, no. 21 (Fall 2007), 92. Here, I do not take issue with these readings, but rather suggest how such interpretations may be further expanded by looking at approaches to visuality in hip-hop.

10. Curiously, few appraisals of the contemporary art of hip-hop use graffiti as a model of visual aesthetics. As Sirmans puts it (Mass Appeal, 1), “Although graffiti can be looked upon as a crucial element of expression in hip hop culture, the conceptual strategies of hip hop—sampling and appropriation, a cannibalistic penchant for mixing and re-mixing to make the new—have become the hallmark of a new generation of contemporary artists.”


ing for Hip-Hop Culture What Artists Once Did for the Aristocracy," Art in America 93, no. 4 (April 2005): 121; Yee, "Breaking and Entering"; and Fortune et al., Being Bad?

14. More recently, Wiley has used posters and public sculptures as the basis for paintings created in China, West Africa (Dakar and Senegal), and Brazil, respectively. The World Stage: China/Kehinde Wiley (Sheboygan, Wis.: John Michael Kohler Arts Center, 2007); and Christine Kim, The World Stage: Africa, Lagos/Dakar; Kehinde Wiley (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 2008).


16. This interpretation pervades much of the literature on Wiley, Gispert, and hip-hop in contemporary art more generally. A few examples are Sarah Lewis, "De(ifying the Masters," Art in America 93, no. 4 (April 2005): 121; Yee, "Breaking and Entering"; and Fortune et al., Being Bad?


19. George, Post-Soul Nation.


24. MTV, the major forum for the distribution of music videos, was founded in 1981.


28. Ibid.


32. Ibid., 256.

33. Ibid., 257.

34. Ibid., 258.

35. Ibid., 259.

36. Ibid., 260.

37. Ibid., 261.

38. Ibid., 262.

39. Ibid., 263.

40. Ibid., 264.

41. Ibid., 265.

42. Ibid., 266.

43. Ibid., 267.

44. Ibid., 268.

45. Ibid., 269.

46. Ibid., 270.

47. Ibid., 271.

48. Ibid., 272.

49. Ibid., 273.

50. Ibid., 274.

51. Ibid., 275.

52. Ibid., 276.

53. Ibid., 277.

54. Ibid., 278.

55. Ibid., 279.

56. Ibid., 280.

57. The designation "Baroque" derived etymologically from the Portuguese word for an oddly shaped pearl; it sought to characterize a style that, even more so than the Dutch art of "describing," made irregular the norm, emphasized surfaces and embellishing ornamentation.

58. Christine Buci-Glucksmann, trans. in ibid.


62. This is perhaps a fitting appellation for a ruler whose "vigorous and imposing bulk [was] fairly lost beneath the sheer mass of stuff—jewels, feathers, yards of rich cloths—where he bucalkeed himself" and who wore, as a contemporary ambassador marveled, "one mass of jeweled rings" on his fingers and "around his neck he wore a gold collar from which hung a diamond as big as a walnut"; Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, 28–29.


64. Barthes, "The World as Object," 110, echoes this view when he notes that in Dutch paintings peasants had, in essence, no shirt and were portrayed in a manner that seemed "unfinished."


69. Historian Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 145, explains that polished bodies hid rebellious parts: "As the slaves removed their coats and frocks and shirts, buyers inspected their naked bodies minutely, looking for what they called 'clear' or 'smooth' skin, skin unmarred by signs of illness and injury. ... More than anything, however, they were looking for scars from whipping. As Solomon Northup explained, 'scars upon a slave's back were considered evidence of a rebellious or unruly spirit, and hurt his sale.' The buyers thought they could read slaves' backs as encodings of their history." Former slave William Huson, "Interview," 209, viewed greasing as a practice aimed at discounting scars. "Some of them was well greased and that grease covered up many a scar they'd earned for some foolishness or other." The term "the hieroglyphics of the flesh" is from Hortense J. Spillers, "Ma-ma's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

70. As Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 133–34, puts it, "In the pens the traders medicated and fed and shined and shaved and plucked and smoothed and dressed and sexualized and racialized and narrated people until even the appearance of singularity had been saturated with the representations of salability." See also James Oakes, *Money and Freedom: An Interpretation of the Old South* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 24.


72. A notable exception to this is Joselit, "Notes on Surface."


75. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*.


77. Ibid.

78. This curatorial position reflects more than benign neglect. At least one curator, Franklin Sirmans, whose insights have been so formative in considerations of hip-hop and contemporary art, insisted in an interview about the inaugural *One Planet* exhibition that hip-hop studio practice should not be seen in light of popular expressions of post-soul hip-hop, which he deemed "this bling, bling thing that has developed," Sirmans, "An Interview with Franklin Sirmans," by Merrily Kerr, *NY Arts Magazine*, January 2002, 20–22.

79. One rare exhibition that highlighted surface aesthetics and reflection in black and Latino youth cultures was *The Superfly Effect*, curated by Rocío Aranda, for the Jersey City Museum in 2005.


81. Golden, "Keihide Wiley (Interview)."

82. Fineman, "The History of Art, in Baggy Jeans."


85. Golden, "Keihide Wiley (Interview)."

86. Wiley, interview with author.

87. One of the techniques Wiley studied was chiaroscuro. The method, first popular in the sixteenth century, involves first a detailed drawing, followed by layers of brown underpainting, and a full-color overpainting. In essence, the technique created the illusion of depth, through light and shadow, using the successive laying on of surfaces.


89. Wiley, interview with author.

90. This was particularly the case with a series of photographs, the Black Light series, that the artist produced in 2008. Keihide Wiley, *Interview* with the author, January 8, 2009.


92. Ibid.


94. Bryson, *Vision and Painting*, 111–17, notes how Jan Vermeer, for instance, in his paintings combined an interest in visually transcribing the shimmered surface with notation, representing the "accidental history of... the... physical surface striated by light."

95. See also an advertisement for rapper Snoop Dogg, "Snoop Dogg Top Dog," in *Vibe*, May 1999, or, for an example of the use of the frame in music videos, see the beginning of a 1996 Hype Williams video for Busta Rhymes. The video begins with a portrayal of Rhymes walking through the frame of a painting of himself. Williams, *Wow! Huh! Got It!