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Masters old and young featured in two new museum shows

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By Rick Brettell, Published: 02 November 2015 07:26 AM Updated: 02 November 2015 07:26 AM



Nasher Sculpture Center
Spazio di luce (Space of Light) is a 2008 work in bronze and gold by Giuseppe Penone. He has produced important work for almost 50 years.

Two solo exhibitions in North Texas museums — one at the Nasher Sculpture Center, the other at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth — are a study in contrast: one a painter, the other a sculptor; one young and hip, the other older and, dare I say, wiser.

Of the two, the Italian Giuseppe Penone, showing at the Nasher, is virtually an old master. He was born in Italy in 1947, and his career commenced in the 1960s, when he was part of the movement labeled Arte Povera (Impoverished Art) by the distinguished critic Germano Celant.

Penone has produced important work for nearly 50 years. His art is single-mindedly dedicated to challenging the relationship between modern urban citizens and nature. Although much of the work in the exhibition is from the last decade of his production, Nasher curator Jed Morse reached back to include some of his earlier works from Arte Povera so that we can understand his origins.

By contrast, Kehinde Wiley is a comparatively youthful American master. He graduated from the Yale School of Art in 2001 and his show at the Modern of Fort Worth is, hence, a retrospective of fewer than 15 years of his painting, organized by the Brooklyn Museum. With a profusely illustrated catalog, it is an attempt to canonize a young artist who is already commercially successful.

Wiley is the American-born son of a Nigerian father and African-American mother, and his talents are turned toward investigating the role of race in the visual arts, particularly painting. His formula is comparatively simple: to select figural poses from European old masters and use urban black models to adopt these poses, juxtaposed against cheerfully colored patterned backgrounds.

The backgrounds, which are often painted by assistants, have their origins in Nigerian contemporary art, while the poses can be found in paintings by Van Dyck, Caravaggio, Hals, Ingres and other old masters. All of this is whipped into a visual confection with attractive models and hip-hop fashion, leading certain critics to dub Wiley's work a cross between art and urban outfitter.

By contrast, Penone takes us from our contemporary world and confronts us with forests of old trees carved in wood and cast in bronze to be so lifelike that they seem almost real. Most of them appear to have been chopped down or in some way mutilated by men. Thus, we enter an immemorial world as we walk through the galleries, but one that humans alter for their own use. We also confront a level of sculptural virtuosity in carving and casting that rivals the pictorial skills of Wiley.



I found myself returning to the Penone exhibition again and again — both in my mind and by going out of my way to peer into the Nasher’s windows at his otherworldly natural forms. My experience of the Wiley show was different: Once I “got it” — his formula that is — I found myself cruising through the galleries reveling in the beauty of the paintings, but thinking very little about their deeper significance and finding few memories that lingered.

This latter sense of superficiality became stronger when I considered the career of Fort Worth’s own Sedrick Huckaby, who graduated from the Yale School of Art two years before Wiley. Huckaby deals with the world of his African-American family and neighborhood, producing works of great painterly virtuosity.

While I was in the Modern’s admirably installed Wiley survey, I found myself wishing the same galleries could have been filled with Huckaby’s work. That did not happen at the Nasher, where the exhibition, small as it is, was so utterly compelling that I wished for nothing but more work by Penone himself.

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“Giuseppe Penone: Being the River, Repeating the Forest” continues through Jan. 10 at the Nasher Sculpture Center, 2001 Flora St., Dallas. 214-242-5100. nashersculpturecenter.org.

“Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic,” through Jan. 10 at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, 3200 Darnell St., Fort Worth. 817-738-9215. themodern.org.