

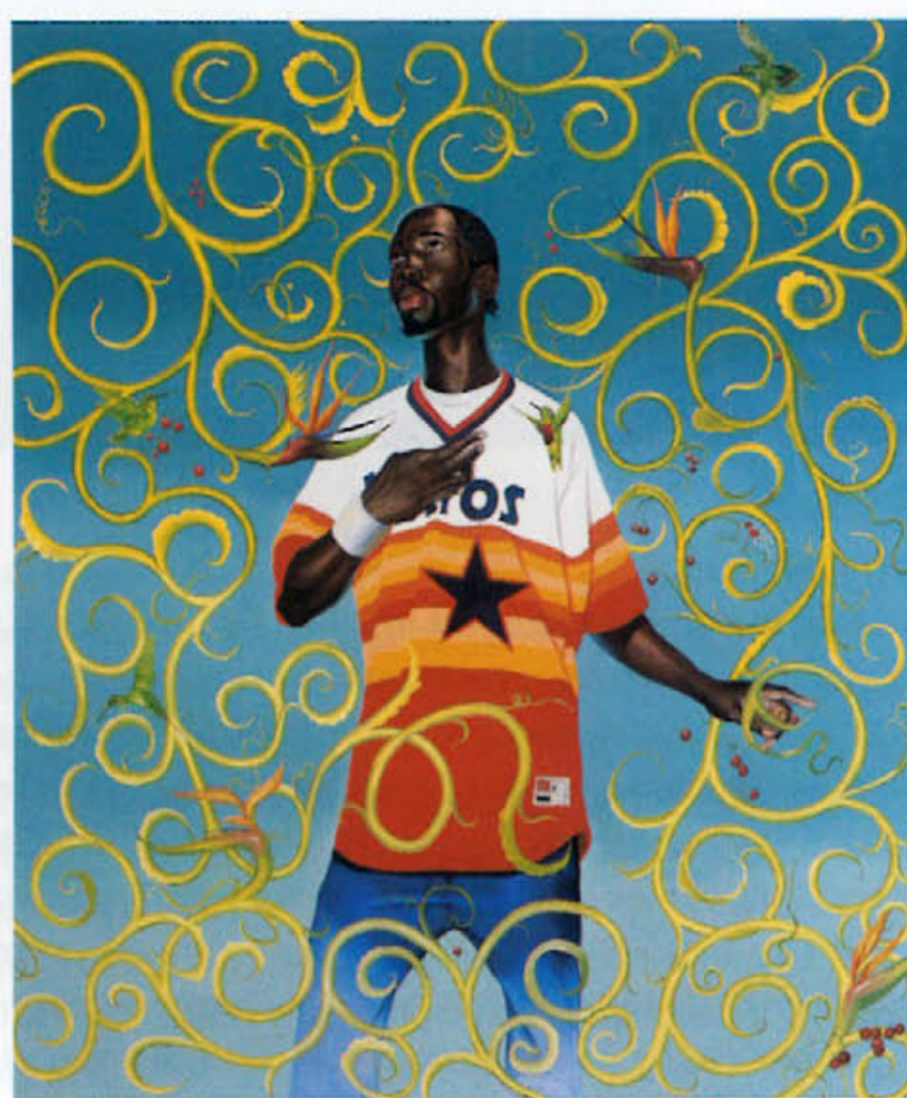
HEADSHOTS

The history of painting has been incredibly good to men, of course, but rarely have they had starring roles on the canvas. Aside from a few moments of masculine obsession—Caravaggio, Jacques-Louis David, and Egon Schiele come to mind—men have pretty much kept to their palettes, making women (nude, nurturing, or otherwise) the uncontested muses of the art world. Perhaps this explains why today portraits of women often come across as trite, while images of men are being explored with an almost naïve curiosity. In the mid-'90s, artist Elizabeth Peyton rose to stardom with her syrupy, nostalgia-bathed paintings of sexy young rockers, princes, and urban neophytes. Taking her lead, a new generation of artists has cast a collective eye toward men—capturing both lothario and prey, both the naked and the buried—in Gortex. **Christopher Bollen**



Australian painter **CHERRY HOOD** found the spotlight recently thanks to her illustrative work in writer JT LeRoy's latest short-story collection, but the slippery psychology of her portraits doesn't require any supplementary narrative. Hood's subjects are children, usually male, and largely reconstructed from photographic sources. By pouring watercolors from buckets directly onto her oversize canvases, Hood creates a leaky, mutating backdrop; skin tones lighten and darken across a cheek or over the bridge of a nose. Hood then draws sharp, distinguishing features that crystallize a character—no matter that the pupils stare at the viewer in an emotional deadlock and that the lips hold on to an impassive, clamped grimace. Nothing is said or shared, but the sheer size of these demanding faces forces a showdown with the viewer. Hood's youthful subjects drift endlessly between sadness, violence, abuse, and yearning—with the implication that the link between childhood and innocence is a myth created by adults rather than children.

Cherry Hood, *Serenity*, 2004, watercolor on paper. Courtesy the artist and Deitch Projects, NYC



Of all the figurative artists of the last decade, Los Angeles-born **KEHINDE WILEY** has managed most successfully to put the visual codes of race, masculinity, and beauty on canvas. The subject of his large-scale paintings is the African-American male, and Wiley depicts his young urban models—straight from the street in oversize hoodies, football jerseys, immaculate cornrows, beepers, and backward baseball caps—with a lush but delicate realism. Wiley, however, doesn't simply resort to making portraits of the neighborhood traffic; nor do the resultant figures stand as ghettoized threats confronting visitors in a white gallery space. Instead, Wiley portrays his posturing youths in expressive, almost angelic poses reminiscent of Renaissance portraiture and decorates his surfaces with rococo patterns, elaborate lattices, and floral brocades. These delicate flourishes strain against the streetwise black men who dominate the frame.

Kehinde Wiley, *Female Prophet Anne, Samuel's Mother*, 2003, oil on canvas. Courtesy the artist and Deitch Projects, NYC



At first, **ALESSANDRO RAHO's** sparse, matter-of-fact portraits appear disturbingly empty. Set against blank, translucent backgrounds, the somber young men who peer from the canvases offer few clues to their location and even fewer indications of their emotional lives. Handsome, stylishly groomed, and posing confidently with an air of practiced masculinity, they bring to mind the impersonal allure of a Polaroid outtake from a fashion shoot. The Bahamas-born London painter—whose stylistic predecessors are Alex Katz and David Hockney—uses snapshots of his close friends as the basis for the paintings. In this way, Raho aims to jigger preconceived notions of photography as a cold, clinical medium and painting as subjective and intimate: his photographs have a sentimental connection to their subjects, but when they turn into paintings, details are drained from the frame. A friendly face is isolated within a foreign body as if it were being prepared for scientific observation.

Alessandro Raho, *Ewan*, 1999, oil on canvas. Courtesy Alison Jacques Gallery, London



BENJAMIN KRESS's sketched investigations of the male figure are almost clinical in tone. In drafting the cheekbones, muscles, and listless mouths of his young shirtless punks, the Brooklyn artist has a predilection for using grids and the kind of tracing paper found in anatomy books. But rather than emphasize concrete characteristics, his studies lead to a pointed dissolution of identity. Kress culls images from magazines and the Internet—especially amateur porn sites, where identities have already been heavily manipulated—but he does not simply copy them. Though the young men's poses are sexually charged, the artist resists giving his viewer more than a hint of the action. Furthermore, he often slices his drawings vertically, leaving us with mere shards of the complete image, and even adds holo-graphic effects, which cause the portrait to morph at certain angles. These tricks remind the viewer of one essential fact about images of desire—half the job of breathing life and lust into them happens in our own willing minds.

Benjamin Kress, *Untitled Transformation #2*, 2004, pencil on mylar, Plexiglas. Courtesy the artist and David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles



Pink is the preferred color for **PAUL P.'s** close-up portraits of narrowly postadolescent males. When the Canadian artist zooms in on the wan, quasi-innocent faces of his subjects, a current of sex rises to the surface—and for good reason. Paul P. uses porn from the pre-AIDS 1970s as his main source of inspiration. With their languid expressions and heads twisted over the shoulder, these boys have clearly confronted something that is draining them of their boyhood. He starts with the pellucid hues of nineteenth-century landscapes, and sometimes adds flowers or bats to his portraits in a manner that recalls baroque "vanitas" painting—where symbols such as the candle or the mirror suggested the brevity of human life. In this way, Paul P. has composed a contemporary anthem to the long-dead, finding a midway point between virginity and the price paid for it.

Paul P., *Untitled*, 2003, Colored pencil on paper. Courtesy the artist and Daniel Reich Gallery, NYC



Canadian painter **KAREL FUNK** meticulously layers acrylics into hyper-real portraits of average men dressed in the latest weather gear by Patagonia or North Face. A contemporary master of detail, he manages to replicate the slightest acne scar or unruly patch of hair with such precision that the intimacy of the surface conflicts with the fact that the models are posed with eyes closed, or turned away. The point, it seems, is that realism does not imply familiarity. In some cases, the figures are enveloped in gear that renders them invisible save for the back of the head; the viewer must therefore struggle to construct identities out of a scant handful of prompts. Funk's decision to paint on panel instead of canvas lends an archaic, religious aspect to his works. It's not impossible to imagine these men as twenty-first-century prophets or martyrs-in-the-making, shielded in monastic rain slickers and double-zipped Gortex.

Karel Funk, *Untitled #3*, 2003, acrylic on panel. Courtesy 303 Gallery, NYC