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“Empire”: TV’s Contemporary-Art Gallery

BY ANTWAUN SARGENT



Toyin Ojih Odutola's "Hold It in Your Mouth a Little Longer" appears in an episode of "Empire."

In 2014, weeks before the pilot was shot for “Empire,” the soapy Fox musical drama, Lee Daniels, the show’s creator, reached out to the artist Kehinde Wiley to ask for permission to include his work in the new project. “He didn’t know if it was going to be the biggest car wreck or the biggest success,” Wiley said. “And I said, ‘Sure.’ ” In the Season One finale, the men of the Lyon family sat at a dining-room table underneath Wiley’s “[Prince Albert, Prince Consort of Queen Victoria](#).” It’s a portrait of a bare-chested and tattooed Jamaican man, one hand on his hip and posturing proudly. Lucious Lyon (Terrence Howard) who had just found out he was not sick with Lou Gehrig’s disease, stood in a gray suit at the head of the table, stately like the figure in the ornate painting behind him, to tell his sons the news. The moment was a dramatic plot twist, and the painting stole the scene. “Just like the script, the music, the set design, and the clothes, the artwork on Empire is its own character and tells a part of the Lyon-family story,” Daniels told me.

“Empire,” the most-watched prime-time show on Fox, is now in its second season. The show’s four-stage Chicago set doesn’t feel like a contemporary art gallery; it’s much less pristine, and the artwork hangs inconspicuously on the walls amid the on-set chaos. But the art world’s influence is

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clear. The paintings on display, mostly portraits, represent a generation of celebrated works by black artists, which have toured America's museums during the past two decades. The works sit underneath special lighting, designed to show off their powerful imagery when the cameras are rolling. The show's set decorator, Caroline Perzan, works with Daniels, art advisers, museum curators, and commercial galleries to pick every piece of the art on the show. In addition to Wiley, the show has featured works by Mickalene Thomas, Barkley L. Hendricks, Kerry James Marshall, and lesser-known artists such as Lobyn Hamilton. "I've been doing this twenty-six years, and I was really excited because rarely do I get a director who includes the art within the shot," Perzan said. "The art has become one of the main focal points of the set design."

The originals of most of the works hang in museums and private collections, so Perzan and her team print and stretch replications onto canvas to be hung in the homes and offices of the Lyon family. "We choose pieces that match the taste of the Lyons and the world they live in—sometimes it's over the top, but most times it's classy and my definition of ghetto fabulous," Daniels told me. His view seems to reflect a yearning to open the artworks up to an entirely new language for interpretation. For example, Wiley's 2007 oil-on-canvas painting "Officer of the Hussars," which hangs in the Detroit Institute of Arts, shows a young male straddling a horse, with a sword in hand. The painting plays with the aesthetics of race, power, and masculinity, as does much of Wiley's work. Hakeem Lyon (Bryshere Y. Gray) is the youngest member of the family, and one plot line follows his attempts to be more than just a rapper; the "Hussars" replica hangs in Hakeem's living room. The characters have never spoken about their taste in art, but Perzan, standing in Lucious Lyon's office in front of golden works by Francine Turk, said that the work she sees as "hip-hop art" is meant to "infuse the art with the message"—that the Lyons, whose family business is hip-hop music, live in gilded surroundings that reflect their taste.

Artists who aim to be embraced by the blue-chip art market traditionally have what Wiley described as "a very strong aversion to popular culture." The artists want their works to be properly contextualized, and museums and galleries take the care to oblige. Now artists are sending Perzan e-mails to see if they can get their works placed on the show. "Empire" gives lesser-known artists a platform to show their work that traditional museums have yet to offer. "Being on 'Empire' is an amazing privilege," the emerging artist Ebony G. Patterson, who has a forthcoming show at the Museum of Arts and Design, said. Her paintings "Untitled VI" and "Untitled I (Khani+di Krew)," which explore gender performance, hang in Jamal Lyon's (Jussie Smollett) penthouse apartment. "I was quite excited and tickled by the opportunity, and it certainly allowed for my work to engage with a much larger audience," Patterson said. "Through yet another layer of popular culture, my work creates even *more* visibility for those who have been deemed invisible." Indeed, what's art without an audience?

For artists, the gamble is that their works will get lost in the action of the show or, perhaps worse, be seen as merely decorative. Some artists who grant permission to the show, along with curators and gallerists who represent the artists, are doing what they can to stop that from happening. After Barkley L. Hendricks's painting "Lawdy Mama" appeared on the show, the Jack Shainman Gallery wrote, "Did you catch the lovely 'Lawdy Mama,' on Empire last week?" to its fifteen thousand Instagram followers.

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And perhaps visibility is the most that an artist can reasonably ask for. During the second-season premiere, Cookie Lyon (Taraji P. Henson), wearing a blue jacket and gold jewelry, stands in front of Toyin Ojih Odutola's chalk-drawn self-portrait "Hold It in Your Mouth a Little Longer." The work explores the sociopolitical concept of skin color, and was exhibited in 2013 at the Louisville Art Center. It is powerfully layered in a museum context, but hanging behind Cookie in that scene it's more striking as an accompaniment to her fashion ensemble. "I remember thinking, Do I just want for it to be in the background?" Odutola told me as she moved about her small studio, overlooking Thirty-ninth Street. "This is not what I am thinking when I am making the work. Then you realize this is a part of a story that is bigger than my work. If someone was going to buy my work this would be happening anyway." Daniels and Perzan have, in a sense, turned "Empire" into a prime-time gallery space for artists to break out of the canonized art world and display their work in a place where it's sure to be seen. Isn't that what art is all about?