

THE ART & DESIGN ISSUE  
**TOWN & COUNTRY**



2016

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TINA FEY  
COMEDY HAS  
NEW  
DRAMA QUEEN

AN INSIDER'S  
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ULTIMATE ROYAL WEDDING  
GUIDE: THE DRESSES, THE  
JEWELS, THE FLOWERS

# THE ART & DESIGN ISSUE

# TOWN & COUNTRY

APRIL 2016



**CREATIVE DIPLOMACY**  
Painter Kehinde Wiley,  
one of the award-winning  
African-American artists  
whose work is featured in  
U.S. embassies.

*Photograph by Jason Schmidt*

## STATE CRAFT

?

love

The

truth

## HANK WILLIS THOMAS

The State Department's Art in Embassies program organizes exhibitions all around the world, like the one in Pretoria in 2014 that honored 20 years of democracy in South Africa and the 50th anniversary of the Civil Rights Act. For AIE's curators, the political sting of Thomas's work, with its focus on race and pop culture, struck the right provocative note. The artist—collected by the Whitney and MoMA—is soft-spoken, with a conversational style that alternates between introspection and mischief, but in his high concept visuals (public sculpture, video, takeoffs on glossy ads) he's a power puncher. In "B@anded," for example, a series begun after the murder of his cousin in a mugging, he showed the torso of an African-American man with Nike logos on his chest—seemingly the result of a scarification ritual. As might be expected from an artist who plays so deftly with advertisement, Thomas is a master of public engagement, and while in Pretoria he and a delegation of AIE artists visited a seventh-grade art class in the township of Mamelodi. "We showed our work, then critiqued theirs," he says. "In a strange way, they were so advanced. There was no hand-holding. They explained the ideas in their art in a way that was beautiful and touching."

**TRUE DETECTIVE**  
Thomas, at his installation in Brooklyn's MetroTech Center. DIOR HOMME SUIT AND T-SHIRT; CONVERSE JACK PURCELL SHOES

# A GROUP OF *ICONOCLASTIC AFRICAN-AMERICAN ARTISTS* ARE GETTING THEIR WORK ON WALLS *AROUND THE WORLD*—AND ACCESS TO AN *INTERNATIONAL AUDIENCE* OF MILLIONS. THE RADICAL PATRON BEHIND IT ALL? THE *U.S. STATE DEPARTMENT*.

By Kevin Conley  
Portraits by Jason Schmidt

## MARK BRADFORD

For the new United States embassy in London, the AIE program had the task of finding a showstopping work by an American artist for the building's two-and-a-half-story atrium. "I had just seen Bradford's amazing show at White Cube in London," says Virginia Shore, AIE's chief curator, "and he was willing to work with us even though our budget was minuscule." The Los Angeles-based painter, whose works sell for millions, not only agreed; he more than halved his usual fee. The result is a grid of 32 paintings that contains the text of the entire U.S. Constitution—a giant work in pastel tones overlaid with sanded silver, to catch the changing daylight. "I thought, We're in London. We're in an embassy, which is all about reading codes and cultural and political exchange," Bradford says. "So I thought, Let's go back to the foundation of our country, whether we agree with a lot of it or not." Nearly all his work involves layers of printed matter soaked in water. When the layers dry, he paints over them, incising them here and there with a knife or sander, revealing history, color, nuance. "The funny thing is," says Bradford, who used to work in his mother's L.A. beauty shop, "I spent 20 years in hair salons, standing with my hands in water. Now it's 20 years standing with my hands in water again."

RENAISSANCE MAN  
Bradford, in his studio  
in the Florence district  
of South Central L.A.

## DIPLOMACY

Usually the term *art world* is a grandiose touch, a misnomer that really means, depending on the circumstances, famous artists and museum personnel, people who attend art fairs, the 200 or so blessed souls who bid on record-setting lots at auction, or the folks who claim to understand what's written in *Artforum*. But for the lean, low-profile outfit known as Art in Embassies, the global connotation fits. A cadre of career employees of the U.S. Department of State, AIE maintains operations in more than 170 countries, and the annual visitor count at the many temporary exhibitions and permanent collections it is in charge of easily exceeds those of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art combined. It is, in short, one of the most influential and farthest-reaching programs on earth.

Created during the Kennedy administration, AIE can claim those attendance figures because of a simple reality: U.S. foreign service offices granted 9.9 million visas in the last year on record, and artworks installed by the program are in view of applicants. In the new embassy in Santo Domingo, for example, which processes more than 55,000 visas a year, a huge AIE commission faces the sunlit hall where visitors wait for appointments: a vibrant portrait by Kehinde Wiley (*right and below*) of four aspiring artists from the Dominican Republic.

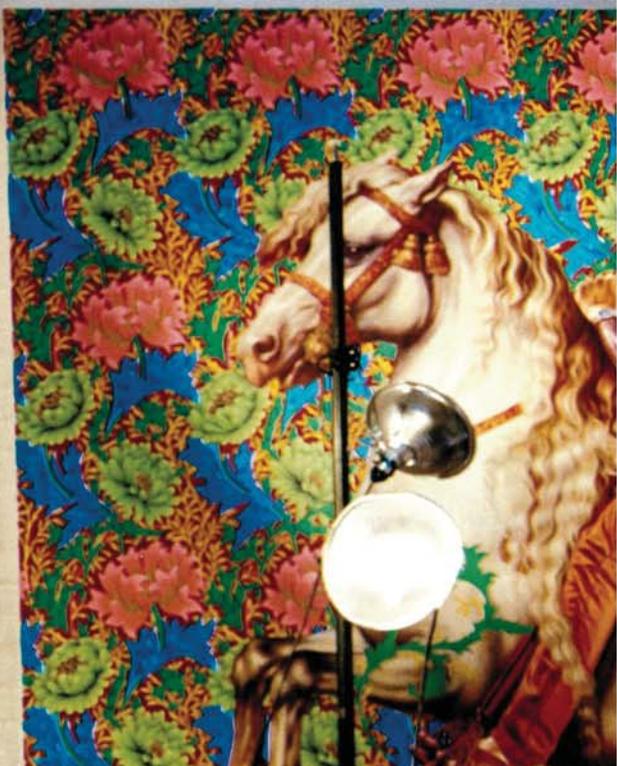
"Initially we called ourselves a global museum," says chief curator Virginia Shore, who, with her staff of seven, is based on the sixth floor of the Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations in Arlington, Virginia. "And we soon realized that's exactly what we're not. Whatever these spaces are, they're not a museum, and this is part of the appeal for the artists we work with." ➡



**NAVY MEN**  
When Secretary of State John Kerry presented Kehinde Wiley with the State Department's Medal of Arts in 2015, he told the artist, "I need to get that suit."



**PATTERN LANGUAGE**  
Wiley in his Williamsburg studio.



### KEHINDE WILEY

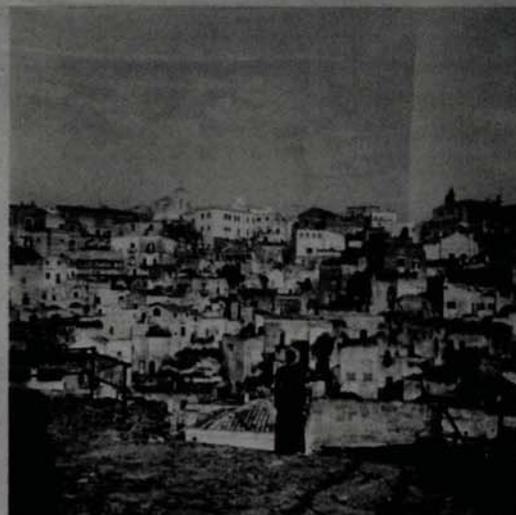
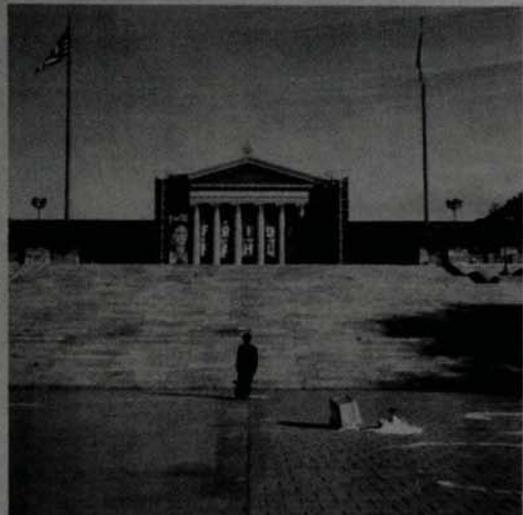
When Wiley was 12, he traveled to the Soviet Union with a group of fellow students. "It was 50 American kids and 50 Soviet kids studying art together—a sociocultural exchange in the forest, in this defunct military base outside Leningrad," the painter says. "My friend and I were two black-brown kids from the 'hood who couldn't afford the trip." Michael Milken's charitable organization paid for them to go, and for Wiley it was life-changing. "My trajectory was set. It proved to me that this interest in art would take me to interesting places." Sure enough, the artist, who specializes in portraits of young black and brown people in heroic poses taken from the history of portraiture, now has studios in Dakar, Beijing, and Brooklyn. So when AIE commissioned him to create a piece for the U.S. embassy in Santo Domingo, in the Dominican Republic, Wiley immersed himself in the local art scene, eventually choosing four Dominican artists to include in one portrait, now the focal point of the embassy's main hall. "It's always telling at any point in time to see who a society's artists are," says Wiley, who observed similarities between the skin color politics of Dominicans and Americans. "They are kind of a swatch of a nation's issues, concerns, and obsessions."

TRIPLE THREAT

Carrie Mae Weems, and two of her photographs, at the Shainman gallery, New York City.

ESCADA TOP; CHRISTIAN LOUBOUTIN PUMPS; SIDNEY GARBER NECKLACE AND BRACELET

DIPLOMACY



CARRIE MAE WEEMS

The artist's award-winning photographs, films, and videos often feature tableaux: a family around a kitchen table, figures in poses familiar from history. But when Weems herself gets in front of the camera, she can't sit still—arms thrown wide, legs on the table, all in such rapid succession you wonder why modeling is considered a young person's game. Her work has, from the beginning, focused on the consequences of racism, power, and gender inequality, and she is something of an ambassador herself when it comes to promoting her fellow female artists. It was Weems whom Shore tapped when she needed art

to fill the New York residence of the U.S. ambassador to the UN before a visit from the African delegation. "I had no idea my pieces would be included until I arrived at the party," says the artist, who had spoken highly of the work of Lorna Simpson and Shinique Smith. In fact, there were four Weems photographs in Susan Rice's suite, on the 42nd floor of the Waldorf Astoria. "They were large and dominated the space," she says, still clearly impressed by that and the event. "As with all parties, people start to leave, and finally there are five people left having a drink: me, Lorna, Shinique, Ambassador Rice, and her husband, having a great conversation about her new position."



### GLENN LIGON

The work of the Bronx-born conceptual artist hangs in museums around the globe and commands prices in the millions. Ligon is a superstar in his world, a big draw wherever his pieces go, but it was an eventual beneficiary of AIE who introduced him to his most powerful fan. In 2012, as Ligon waited outside New York's Apollo Theater before an Obama campaign benefit (the one where the president sang a riff from Al Green's "Let's Stay Together"), someone from the Democratic National Committee approached him and offered VIP seats for the evening show. "After the concert," Ligon says, "they came up and

said, 'Do you have a moment for the president?'" Indeed he did, and when Ligon went backstage he was met by Patrick Gaspard, then director of the DNC. "Patrick seemingly knew every artwork I had ever made, and he introduced me to Obama by saying, 'Glenn's *Black Like Me* #2 is in your personal quarters.'" (The painting consists of a quote from John Howard Griffin's 1961 book repeated until the words disappear into a uniform blackness.) When Gaspard became ambassador to South Africa, that moment was repaid. "I was happy to lend him something to grace the walls of his residence," says Ligon, of *Stranger Study* #18, now hanging in Pretoria.

⇒ In the program's 15 years under Shore, out of sight of most Americans, AIE has expanded its mission and vastly multiplied the value of its holdings. When she started, as an intern in the last year of the first Bush administration, the total value of works on loan was roughly \$10 million; now the value of works on loan to the State Department and those acquired for permanent collections in new embassies (as the Wiley was) is approaching half a billion dollars. "We believed that art could be more than just an accent or part of ambassadorial furnishings, which is how some people saw us for a long time," Shore says.

Starting in the late '90s, she and the other curators began to talk up the program to museums, galleries, art collectors, and artists, urging them to lend pieces and commissioning new ones. Artists, they argued, are a type of ambassador, ones who specialize in inspiration and who can express American ideals, culture, history, or identity in places where such messages are critical.

The expansion coincided with a building boom for the State Department. After the 1998 bombings of embassies in East Africa, which killed more than 200, Congress passed the Secure Embassies Construction and Counterterrorism Act (SECCA), which set aside billions for more secure facilities. In one of the first embassies built to the new standards, in Moscow, AIE installed its first permanent collection, with works by 13 artists, including Pat Steir (an American of Russian heritage), and 12 glass sculptures donated by Dale Chihuly. That precedent has now been institutionalized, and one half of one percent of the building budgets is set aside for the program.

That percentage is not an arbitrary figure; it's the amount the General Services Administration allots for art in government buildings at home. And since the costs of the new, highly fortified embassies—with their mandatory hundred-foot setbacks from the nearest road, their bombproof walls and ballistic glass—can be ⇒

**"I CAN'T TELL YOU THE NUMBER OF TIMES OUR VISITORS HAVE BEEN TAKEN ABACK," SAYS PATRICK GASPARD: "THIS IS NOT THE ART I WOULD EXPECT IN THE HOME OF THE U.S. AMBASSADOR."**

#### MICKALENE THOMAS

Many of the strands that run through Thomas's work—her signature glitter and rhinestones, the collages of brush patterns, the heroic female figures, the graphic energy of 1970s album covers—seem to draw on nostalgia for basement hangouts of the past. This is no coincidence: In more than one series the artist has used her childhood homes as stylistic inspiration, depicting her mother as muse. Thomas has instilled the same spirit into her do-overs of art history, presenting the current First Lady à la Andy Warhol (*Michelle O*) or importing three women in Donna Summer-esque outfits and hairdos into an arrangement drawn from Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*. When AIE approached her to create a mosaic mural for the public space outside the new U.S. embassy in Dakar, Senegal, she traveled the country, taking pictures, visiting artists' studios, translating the inspiring sights—the beautiful landscape, the vendors in the markets—into her own visual language. "I felt well connected to the people. And the blue of the sky and the red earth reminded me of landscapes at home that I respond to," says Thomas (no relation to Hank Willis Thomas). "I'm a black American, and I'm proud to represent who and where I'm from—unapologetically. There's no shame in my game."



**ROLE MODEL**  
Thomas (right), in t  
studio with Racquel  
Chevremont, the  
subject of the colla  
on the wall.  
ON CHEVREMONT, LANI  
DRESS. ON THOMAS,  
BRUNELLO CUCINELLI  
BLAZER. ON BOTH, JIM  
CHOO SHOES





## BETYE SAAR

In the late '60s, partly inspired by Joseph Cornell and his boxes, Betye Saar began incorporating figurines she had collected—Uncle Tom, L'il Black Sambo—into her work. "Slavery was abolished," she says, "but here were images of slaves on cookie jars—still in the kitchen. And I thought, How can I give Aunt Jemima personal power?" By turning her into a rifle-toting warrior in *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, exhibited in Oakland in the '70s, when the Black Panthers were there. "I was apprehensive about what people would think, but everybody got exactly what I meant." The artist, who turns 90 in July, has been part of the State Department's art efforts for decades. Her large commissions in the mid-'80s in Taiwan, Malaysia, and the Philippines came from Elizabeth J. Montgomery, an enterprising curator with the now defunct U.S. Information Agency who ran a program that set the pattern for AIE's later expansion. Saar's work continues to be included in many exhibitions, in places like Morocco, Haiti, and Ethiopia. These days "I have cages, and I keep wondering why I'm collecting them," Saar says during a tour of her home-cum-studio in L.A.'s Laurel Canyon neighborhood. "Then I realize, Oh, racism is a cage. You think you're free, but there's always something holding you back."

BLUE BELLE  
Saar, at her home  
studio in Los Angeles.

→ astronomical (the price tag of the new embassy in London, slated to open in 2017, is rumored to be nearing a billion dollars), the sliver that goes to AIE is nothing to sneeze at. Still, as anyone who follows the art market will realize, even 5 percent of a billion dollars will not buy a lot. And, of course, the biggest budgets go with the largest embassies. London's will cover 500,000 square feet, more than twice the size of the new Whitney Museum.

One way AIE has adapted to budgetary constraints is by presenting an encyclopedic range of American art, including works by quilters, sculptors, potters, photographers, glassmakers, Native American weavers, lithographers, and muralists. Key pieces by well-known regional artists—say, Barbara Ernst Prey, a Maine watercolorist—take the place of comparable works by pricier artists. Another budget stretcher: Artists who command high prices will lend works for extended periods for next to nothing, as Jeff Koons did with his sculpture *Tulips* outside the embassy in Beijing, or they'll work for well below their standard fees, as Mark Bradford (page 139) is doing for the new embassy in London.

The program is so extensive that you can easily spot currents in American art, one of the most important being the internationally collected African-American artists photographed for these pages, all of whom have responded with significant works. Their motives for signing on vary. They're proud to represent their country or eager to engage with a new audience; they're fans of the art or a particular country, or devoted to certain principles that fit well with America's diplomatic message. But all were particularly responsive to AIE's cultural exchange programs, which sometimes pair the work of U.S. artists with local ones in exhibits at the embassies or link artists in collaborations. When Mickalene Thomas (page 144) got a commission to create a mural on the fortified walls outside the new embassy in Dakar, Senegal, the work grew into a collaboration with an emerging Senegalese collage artist called Piniang. "I wanted people walking by to feel as if this façade, this huge wall that divides the people and the embassy, was really not a division but an extension of welcome," Thomas says.

These cultural exchanges also dovetail with one of AIE's original mandates: to provide art for the homes of ambassadors, one of the great perks of the job. Incoming ambassadors meet with the program's curators to discuss their diplomatic priorities and how art might complement their messages. Some take a straightforward approach: They'd like art that looks like home. Others

are more idiosyncratic. When Republican senator Dan Coats of Indiana was ambassador to Germany, he asked for help organizing an exhibition, "Art from the American Heartland," that he hoped would cover themes of family, faith, farming, and fun. Some appointees are already sophisticated collectors, and they collaborate with AIE's curators to create wide-ranging contemporary exhibitions. James Costos, a former HBO executive who is now ambassador to Spain, has in his residence works by Robert Rauschenberg and Josef Albers, and Glenn Ligon's neon *America* is opposite Julie Mehretu's *Plover's Wing* in the formal dining room.

What many ambassadors are coming to realize is that the impact of art can be profound; it can even prove useful in advancing an agenda. In Madagascar an exhibition of landscapes by two *National Geographic* photographers provided the occasion for the U.S. ambassador to discuss environmental efforts with the Chinese ambassador. Patrick Gaspard, the ambassador to South Africa, set up a series of talks in Cape Town and Johannesburg with Ellen Susman (then AIE's director), South African artists, and several African-American artists whose works were in his home; their discussions on race

drew overflow audiences, both black and white.

"This is a tool that needs to be further exploited," Gaspard says. "When you walk into the foyer of our home, two dramatic works greet you: a Rob Pruitt portrait of a young woman and a Kehinde Wiley portrait of a young man with a goatee and a little bit of bling. I can't tell you the number of times our visitors have been taken aback: 'This is not what I would expect in the home of the U.S. ambassador.' For young black South Africans, it lets them know immediately how much of a shared experience there is between us." ◀



#### MOD SQUAD

The AIE team (from left): Jamie Arbolino, Imtiaz Hafiz, Sally Mansfield, Welmoed Laanstra, Sarah Tanguy, Camille Benton, chief curator Virginia Shore, and director Ellen Susman. ALL CLOTHING BY BROOKS BROTHERS; SHOES BY JIMMY CHOO, PAUL ANDREW, AND CHRISTIAN LOUBOUTIN. FOR DETAILS SEE PAGE 175.