

VANITY FAIR

The Secrets of Alicia Keys and Swizz Beatz's Museum-Ready Art Collection

By Nate Freeman

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PHOTOGRAPH BY RENELL MEDRANO; SITTINGS EDITOR, NICOLE CHAPOTEAU.

With their envy-inducing holdings, the Dean Collection, the music-industry power couple have helped lead the way for a generation of collectors of Black art. The rest of the world is finally catching up.

In early 2015, the musician Kasseem Dean, known as Swizz Beatz, went with artist Kehinde Wiley to see his retrospective, "A New Republic," at the Brooklyn Museum. Dean had been churning out hits as a hip-hop producer for more than two decades, propelling singles by the likes of Jay-Z, DMX, Busta Rhymes, and Beyoncé to global inescapability. But Dean, along with his Grammy-winning superstar wife, Alicia Keys, is also a contemporary-art patron who caught the bug well before his peers in the hip-hop game.

“A lot of people used to make fun of me collecting art—I won’t say no names, but they’re the *biggest* names,” Dean told me recently.

“We were so hardcore in music, I was a Ruff Ryder, everybody was more in their street element, and so collecting *art*...” he trailed off.



PHOTOGRAPH BY RENELL MEDRANO; SITTINGS EDITOR, NICOLE CHAPOTEAU.

Walking through the Wiley show in 2015, Dean was already itching to move to the next echelon. The loaned works came from institutions all over the country but also a number of private collectors: a hedge fund executive, a manager at a different hedge fund, the manager of a tech billionaire’s family office. Dean realized, reading the wall labels, that he saw “no last names of color.”

Wiley and Dean walked in front of *Femme piquée par un serpent*, a 25-foot-long painting of a Black man in bed based on a sculpture in the Musee d’Orsay. “Courtesy Sean Kelly, New York,” its label read, referring to Wiley’s commercial gallery. Such wording is often a super-insider way to say, “This might just be for sale.”

Wiley was hesitant at first. While Dean and Keys were globally famous musicians, they had not put in enough time dancing the art world tango of museum donations, gallery dinner schmoozing, gala hobnobbing, and eyebrow-raising purchases that moves burgeoning collectors up the waiting lists.

"I told him, 'Is this work better off going back into storage or being...where we can display your work for the audience that you're saying is lacking?'" Dean recalled.

He paused and looked at his wife.

"And Kehinde was like, 'Do you know what? I'm going to do it.'"



Wiley's gigantic 2008 portrait was added to the collection after Dean saw the work at the artist's 2015 Brooklyn Museum survey. PHOTO BY GLENN STEIGELMAN/ THE DEAN COLLECTION COURTESY OF SWIZZ BEATZ AND ALICIA KEYS.

Nine years later, *Femme piquée par un serpent* is back at the Brooklyn Museum as part of "Giants: Art From the Dean Collection of Swizz Beatz and Alicia Keys," a show of nearly 100 artworks, about a third of the couple's total holdings, that's up until July. On a weekday in early February, as the Deans were preparing for its opening gala, I spoke with the couple about their collection's first major museum exhibition and the effort that brought it to being.

"We've done every single piece of the process, all of the layouts and the whole thing," Keys said. "But the thing that blows our mind the most is that, just like everybody else who's going to walk through these doors, we have never seen this collection hung, ever."

As visitors walk into the museum's center pavilion, there's Arthur Jafa's *Big Wheel I*, a 7,000-pound sculpture of a tire that rises 17 feet in the air. On one wall is Amy Sherald's *Deliverance*, a giant diptych that wowed at Hauser & Wirth during Frieze London 2022. There's an enormous three-part painting by Gagosian-repped multihyphenate Titus Kaphar that the couple acquired directly from the artist's studio and has never been publicly unveiled. The largest-ever work by Meleko Mokgosi, a 21-panel epic, takes up an entire room of the show. There's also a selection of photographs by Gordon Parks and pieces by a grab bag of some of the most exciting artists currently alive: Henry Taylor, Deana Lawson, Toyin Ojih Odutola, Mickalene Thomas, Jordan Casteel, Odili Donald Odita, Derrick Adams, and so on.

And the first works that greet you as you enter are portraits of the collectors by Wiley. I mentioned to Keys that I'd never seen them before.

“We’ve never seen them either,” she said. “They’re still drying.”

“They’re still wet,” Dean added. “We’re not joking.”

The Deans have built strong relationships with the artists they collect, allowing them access to primo works that would otherwise be held for the world’s greatest collections. Nicola Vassell, who was the curatorial director of the collection for years and now has her own gallery in Chelsea, attributed their ability to build a world-class collection to “the trust and love that the artists have for them.”

“Say you have a group of three, four amazing collectors who could get a work,” Vassell said. “Sometimes what shifts the balance is the artist, who they hope can own the work, and the context in which the work will live.”



The Chicago-based artist Nick Cave is known for his “soundsuits,” so named for the rustling they would make when he wore them. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK, PHOTO BY JOSHUA WHITE/ JWPICURES.COM; FROM THE DEAN COLLECTION, COURTESY OF SWIZZ BEATZ AND ALICIA KEYS.

The Deans also were collecting Black artists, especially Black figurative artists, at a time when the art market has started to correct for decades of neglect. Dean was particularly struck by the contrast he saw between visits to the homes of old-guard collectors and his peers. It further fueled their collecting. (The

couple put many of their largest-scale works on view at their homes—including a \$20 million mansion in La Jolla, California, that is said to have inspired Tony Stark’s house in *Iron Man 3*—and have never sold a work since the inception of the collection.)

“You have a Bearden, you have a Basquiat, you have this, you have that. You had Ernie Barnes, you had Gordon Parks,” Dean told me. “Then I go to my friend’s house, they didn’t have none of those things.”

In 2019, Dean and Keys made the *ARTnews* Top 200 Collectors list, the definitive ranking of global art buyers. With it came access to primary-market works usually reserved not for the top 200 collectors but the top 20. Sources indicated that the waiting list for one of the only four large-scale Sherald works at her first show with Hauser & Wirth was enormous, but the gigantic diptych went to the Dean collection. Brooklyn Museum director Anne Pasternak has also had a front-row seat to the Deans’ rise. Shortly after taking the job, she was at the Brooklyn Heights town house owned by board vice chair Stephanie Ingrassia, where she was introduced to Dean. After just a few minutes of talking, she and Ingrassia asked him to join the board.

“I will tell you that there were artists and others who were really skeptical, who would dismiss them from the get-go as just celebrities, like, ‘What do they have to offer?’ ” Pasternak said. “They have absolutely proven themselves to be true and blue, and absolutely committed to the artists in a way that artists all see now—and they *all* want to be in this collection.”

In the years since, the couple opened an artist residency in Arizona called Dreamland and an art-and-music festival called No Commission that pops up at art fairs like Art Basel Miami Beach. In 2019, they staged a selling group show at UTA Artist Space in LA called “Dreamweavers” that consisted partly of work consigned directly by artists, and “Gordon Parks: Selections From the Dean Collection” opened at the Ethelbert Cooper Gallery at Harvard. During the COVID-19 lockdown, Pasternak started thinking about putting together a show.

“They call it the Dean collection—they imagine it to have its own wing in the museum at some point in the future,” she told me. “My mind really started to think seriously about doing an exhibition, in part because he and Alicia have used their platforms as artists to celebrate and fight for the rights of other artists, with real passion.”

When the show was announced, there were some grumbings about a major New York institution giving a private collection such cherished real estate. Pasternak dismissed the notion, citing the fact that “30 Americans,” a show of work from the collection of Don and Mera Rubell, toured museums for years to great acclaim. In 2019, the Smart Museum at the University of Chicago staged an exhibition of work owned by Pamela J. Joyner and Alfred J. Giuffrida.

“Look at the Lauder collection at The Met, right?” she said.

Both Keys and Dean were born in New York and became young phenoms at nearly the same time. In Hell’s Kitchen, Keys’s mother would play the records of Billie Holiday and other jazz greats, which led Keys to a classical music education on the piano and, at 21, more Grammy statuettes than she could hold at once. Keys racked up several more platinum records in the years since—for the rest of time, you will not attend a Big Apple sporting event without her voice reminding you that New York is a concrete jungle where dreams are made of.

Dean grew up in the Bronx with a father who was close with DJ Kool Herc at the birth of hip-hop and two uncles who started the influential crew Ruff Ryders. After starting to DJ at age 12, Dean began messing

around with beats at an Atlanta studio in 1998 and showed DMX the beat that would become “Ruff Ryders’ Anthem,” a harbinger of the kitchen-sink percussion-meets-earwormy sonic idiom he has since deployed.

The hits bought houses, and suddenly something needed to go on the walls. Dean grew up seeing street art in the South Bronx, where Keith Haring would put up tags. Keys, too, recalls having a poster of Gustav Klimt’s *The Kiss* on the wall growing up and later discovering Ernie Barnes through the sleeve of a Marvin Gaye record.

“For those who don’t know that, collecting art is a drug,” Dean said. “It’s a serious drug. And once you get hooked on to the drug, just like any drug, it’s hard to get off.”

By the time Dean and Keys married in 2010, they were completely devoted to collecting living artists in depth, visiting their studios, consulting them on the installation of the work, and hanging out as much as possible. Vassell, who has worked at Deitch Projects and Pace, pointed the couple toward emerging artists who would soon become young stars, including Nathaniel Mary Quinn, Ebony G. Patterson, and Tschabalala Self.

Those relationships were on full display at the Brooklyn Museum opening night, where the artists had gathered prior to the arrival of the board of trustees and other VIPs. Wiley’s white-on-white Celine trainers zipped from one end of the room to the other as Dean came out to greet him with a bow and Keys emerged from behind a backdrop to yell “Hola!” at Nick Cave. Casteel came in with Ojih Odutola, and as I was chatting with Kaphar, he looked ahead and announced: “Oh, the *legend* just walked in.”

There was Mickalene Thomas. Jafa came in with Hank Willis Thomas, who was just with Kennedy Yanko and Sherald. Adams approached Nina Chanel Abney with a bit of a stutter step and embraced a number of the artists. Eventually, Jamel Shabazz showed up to snap pictures of everyone.

“This is like *my* Met Gala,” said a Brooklyn Museum employee.

After a few minutes, Keys clapped and told the artists, “Everybody please join us downstairs, on the first floor, for a toast, at six on the dot—5:55, actually.”

The crowd filtered downstairs. Most openings attract a few hundred museum members and guests; attendance of the invite-only bash would top 1,200, including the artist KAWS, Ford Foundation president Darren Walker, and Art Basel CEO Noah Horowitz.

Waiters passed around flutes of Hennessy Paradis for a toast, and Pasternak joined Dean and Keys on a riser to address the room. She suggested that, before the VIP crowds got to the museum, the artists in the show should join their collectors to see it—only Dean and Keys and the artists, no curators, no board members, no directors of the museum.

“Is that fair?” she asked.

It was deemed fair. Dean walked toward the door to the exhibition, with Keys strolling into the show with Ojih Odutola and Casteel, the three of them arm in arm.