

ARTFORUM



Joseph Olisaemeka Wilson, *Red eye gin (do you in)*, 2023, oil on linen, 68 x 66".

NEW YORK

Joseph Olisaemeka Wilson

DEREK ELLER GALLERY

300 Broome Street

July 6–August 25, 2023

Written by Meagan Dolan

Bathed in earthen, ombré tones, the paintings in Joseph Olisaemeka Wilson's exhibition here, "Wali's Farm," conjure folktales of country life—a worthwhile theme for summer, when New Yorkers leave the city for more bucolic settings, or stay put and merely dream about them. The artist's works, however, take you into darker terrain, providing a bit of escapism that is by turns marvelous and menacing.

A selection of portraits lines the hallway near the gallery entrance. In one canvas, *Taking the morning round*, 2023, an aged wayfarer with a tired expression smokes a pipe and carries a knotted-wood walking stick. The morning sun illuminates his Akubra hat, which is festooned with charms hooked onto the brim. A large carrot sticks out of his backpack—surprisingly meager sustenance for what appears to be a rather seasoned traveler. In the painting *Red eye gin (do you in)*, 2023, a figure is asleep in a basement between an armoire and a barrel presumably filled with the titular liquor. He wears a mask that resembles a devil's face, painted with watchful eyes and gritted teeth. A ray of light shines through a partially open door at the top of a staircase. This moment creates a blurring of borders between different realities, and forces one to wonder if what we're observing is actually the subject's dream.

Masks appear everywhere in this show, as do costumes laden with various symbols—stars, letters, and strange buttons—making Wilson's characters seem like traveling performers, or even a ragtag group of superheroes, rather than farmers. The artist's figures often appear melancholic, a reminder that even in a romantic, rustic setting, one's heart can always be broken. But the overall tenderness of Wilson's presentation, like a bittersweet summer, is both memorable and beautiful.