



New Haven artist wins Rappaport Prize

By **Graham Ambrose**

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When artist Titus Kaphar left New York City for New Haven, his friends made sure he knew: “Your career is over,” Kaphar remembers their saying. “What’re you doing? You’re leaving the mecca!”

New Haven, nicknamed [the Elm City](#), was not the Concrete Jungle. And that was the point: It had fertile soil in which Kaphar has since raised a family, emerged as an eminent American visual artist, and, in turn, helped water a sprouting arts scene.

Now Kaphar’s influence is being recognized. The 42-year-old has been awarded the 2018 Rappaport Prize by the deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum, in Lincoln, a \$25,000 annual prize given to an artist with a proven record of achievement and a strong connection to New England.

“Titus represents the exact kind of artist we want to celebrate, an artist engaged in social issues who makes strongly visual work,” said John Ravenal, the deCordova’s executive director. “He’s a powerful advocate in his art and his actions.”

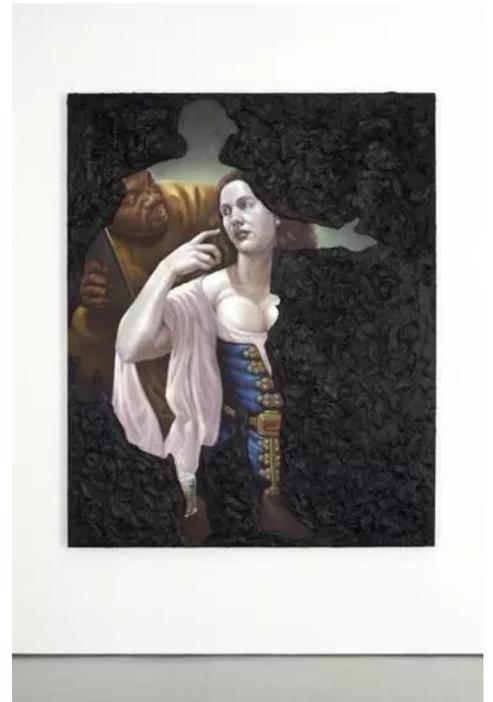
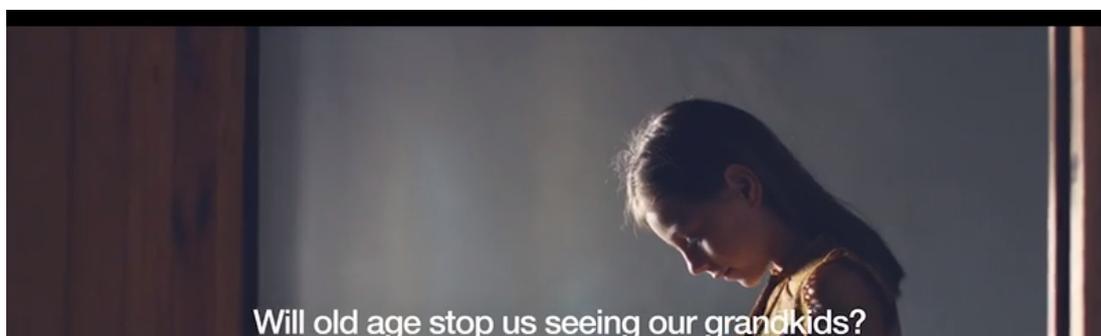


IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Titus Kaphar’s “Historical Nonfiction” questions inequalities in art history.

ADVERTISING



A visual artist and a social critic, [Kaphar](#) is known for using styles and quotations from canonical paintings to question inequalities in the history of art. His paintings might look like copies of well-known works, but they include crucial revisions, additions, and subtractions that are both arresting and illuminating.

“My work deals with history directly,” Kaphar said in a recent phone interview. “Coming to New England, seeing the history of this place, seeing the beautiful architecture that’s been around for hundreds of years, was mind-blowing for me. It was a direct inspiration for the work.”



CHRISTIAN HÖGSTEDT

Titus Kaphar

One painting, “[Absconded From the Household of the President of the United States](#),” buries a portrait of George Washington beneath a fall of rusted nails and shredded yellow paper. It’s an [advertisement](#), from 1796, promising a reward of \$10 “for the capture of Oney Judge,” a fugitive slave owned by the first president.

Another work, “[Behind the Myth of Benevolence](#),” on display at the National Portrait Gallery, in Washington, D.C., turns a painting of Thomas Jefferson into a curtain partially covering the portrait of a black woman. The painting-sculpture is a literal representation of how American artists have valorized a pantheon of heroes and relegated other, less-recognized persons to the background.

Kaphar said that the work has been damaged by museum patrons three times.

“We are steeped in history here [in New England]. But we are steeped in history told from a very specific perspective,” Kaphar said. “My approach attempts to add another voice to

what has been a monologue. It tries to introduce a conversation that was always there but was silenced, understated, and by and large ignored.”

The Rappaport Prize, established in 2000, is selected by Ravenal and deCordova curators. They do not accept applications from artists; prize recipients do not know that they had been considered for the prize until they win. Recent winners include Sam Durant, Barkley Hendricks, and Matt Saunders.

The \$25,000 prize, endowed by the Phyllis and Jerome Lyle Rappaport Foundation, is open-ended, freeing artists to use the funds however they wish. Kaphar said he plans to use the money for his ongoing “[Monumental Inversions](#)” project, which uses sculpture to address civic issues like the legacy of slavery.

Kaphar said he [doesn't want to erase](#) repellent representations of history, reminders of what he called “the horrors of our past.” Instead, he said he wants to use art to build upon and complicate public narratives.

“If you talk to artists, you see a desire to make new monuments that contend with old monuments, ones that can do battle with historic injustices represented in bronze and steel,” Kaphar said. “These monuments represent the period at the end of the sentence. I believe monuments should be thought of as commas. Because every generation is going to need to add a subclause to the last one.”



IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

“Monumental Inversions: George Washington.”

“

‘My work deals with history directly. . . . My approach attempts to add another voice to what has been a monologue.’

Born in Kalamazoo, Mich., Kaphar received a bachelor of fine arts from San Jose State University, in 2001, and a master of fine arts from Yale, in 2006.

He will deliver the Rappaport Prize Lecture on Oct. 30. Tickets are available on the deCordova [website](#).

Kaphar said he was excited and surprised to have won.

“I had no idea,” he said about hearing the news. “It was definitely the best phone call of the year.”

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Titus Kaphar

It is not enough to simply rename our buildings, tear down our statues and de-accession the relics of our flawed past. What do we do with the monuments of men whose values stand in utter contradiction to the Constitutional edicts that we hold so dear? I suggest what I call “Monumental Inversions” — sculptural amendments to our national monuments. The current iterations of this series I’ve created are made of wood, glass and marble.



A proposal for a series of “monumental inversions.”

Artwork by Titus Kaphar; Photograph courtesy of the artist and Princeton University Art Museum



National Portrait Gallery: Titus Kaphar and Ken Gonzales-Day Explore 'UnSeen' Narratives in Historic Portraiture

by VICTORIA L. VALENTINE on Mar 28, 2018 · 7:58 am



WASHINGTON, D.C. — Hanging half loose from its stretcher, a portrait of Thomas Jefferson reveals an image of a black woman behind it. It's a provocative juxtaposition that raises a question about the relationship between the two subjects. Her hair is covered while her partially shown shoulder and leg are bare. She is brown-skinned with an indeterminable gaze. She evokes both assertion and alarm.

Titled "Beyond the Myth of Benevolence" (2014), the painting by **Titus Kaphar** was inspired by a Rembrandt Peale portrait of Jefferson made in 1800.

"This painting is about Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, and yet it is not," Kaphar said. "The reason I say, 'And yet it is not,' is because we know from the actual history that Sally Hemings was very fair. Very, very fair. The woman who sits here is not just simply a representation of Sally Hemings, she's more of a symbol of many of the black women whose stories have been shrouded by the narratives of our deified founding fathers."

"This painting is about Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, and yet it is not. ...The woman who sits here is not just simply a representation of Sally Hemings, she's more of a symbol of many of the black women whose stories have been shrouded by the narratives of our deified founding fathers."

— Titus Kaphar

Based in New Haven, Conn., Kaphar makes paintings in the style of Classic and Renaissance portraiture. Defined by physical manipulation, his work literally reconstructs accepted narratives. He rips the canvases from their frames, rolls them up, cuts them or white washes them with strokes of white paint, in order to surface suppressed histories, reckon with the nation's racial past, and undo certain biographies and expose their multifaceted nature.

The artist's depictions of prominent white men in U.S. history explore their relationships and complex interactions with African Americans and Native Americans. The Jefferson portrait hangs in a gallery alongside paintings of Andrew Jackson, Christopher Columbus, and Thaddeus Stephens (1792-1868), the congressman from Pennsylvania, who had a common law relationship with his widowed housekeeper, a "mixed-race" woman named Lydia Hamilton Smith (1815-1884).

In his portrait of Stephens, Kaphar concentrates on his eyes. The rest of his face is obscured because the canvas has been inched up to reveal a seated black female figure. A red blanket falls around her hips and she appears to have raised the canvas by pulling a red string, an act of agency lifting the veil on their connection.



TITUS KAPHAR, "Drawing the Blinds," 2014 (oil on canvas). | Collection of Dr. Charles M. Boyd, © Titus Kaphar. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

KAPHAR'S PAINTINGS ARE ON VIEW in "UnSeen: Our Past in a New Light, Ken Gonzales-Day and Titus Kaphar," a new exhibition at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery. The show examines the absence of African Americans, Latino Americans, and Native Americans in historical portraiture and weighs how their invisibility has influenced our understanding of U.S. history.

"UnSeen" examines the absence of African Americans, Latino Americans, and Native Americans in historical portraiture and weighs how their invisibility has influenced our understanding of U.S. history.

The museum is marking its 50th anniversary this year with a series of special exhibitions and events examining the history of American portraiture and the challenges of representation. Unveiling the portraits of President Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama in February was a major part of the programming.

Dating back to the nation's founding, white men who owned land and could vote were the subjects of formal portraiture. As an art form, portraiture affirmed social standing. Few women and people of color appeared in portraits. When they did, their appearance was most often alongside the white male subject or often in the background, serving to confirm the power and status of the main sitter.

Co-organized by Asma Naeem, the museum's curator of Prints, Drawing and Media Arts, and Taina Caragol, curator of Painting and Sculpture and Latino Art and History, "UnSeen" is the National Portrait Gallery's first anniversary exhibition to feature work by contemporary artists.

The exhibition consists of two solo shows presented in parallel. **Ken Gonzales-Day** collaborated with Caragol and Naeem worked with Kaphar. After a welcome from museum's director Kim Sajet, the artists and curators walked the press through the show on Thursday in advance of its March 23 opening.

Both artists concentrate on untold histories and reframing the American narrative, but their practices are vastly different.



Profiled Series: KEN GONZALES-DAY, "George Washington by Augustus Lenci, copy after Jean-Antoine Houdon, plaster, c. 1843, National Portrait Gallery," 2014/printed 2017 (chromogenic print). | Courtesy of the artist and Luis De Jesus Los Angeles. Copyright 2017, Ken Gonzales-Day, all rights reserved

LOS ANGELES-BASED GONZALES-DAY mines museum archives and photographs sculptural objects most of them rarely, if ever, displayed publicly. His work deconstructs racial hierarchies, considers beauty ideals, and evaluates how artists have treated and interpreted white bodies and bodies of color. He embarked on this aspect of his practice in 2008 during a residency at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles. Over the past decade, he said he has been given free reign to explore the collections of about 20 museums around the world.

In "UnSeen," one gallery focuses on busts and life masks found in Washington, D.C., museums. Gonzales-Day said he wanted show how "our" country presents its people in the nation's capital. "13 Plasters: Presidents, Men of Art and Science, and Military Men at the National Portrait Gallery" is a large-scale tableaux image of casts of figures such as Abraham Lincoln, Ben Franklin, and George Washington—all white men, no women or people of color. Individual images of Native American busts from the National Museum of Natural History hang on the opposite wall.

The busts were made in the late 19th and early 20th centuries with the cooperation of living Native Americans under the guidance of Smithsonian anthropologists, either in the course of field research or through meetings with Native American delegates visiting Washington to negotiate land rights and sign treaties.

"By juxtaposing these two types of sculptures and these individuals, Ken is asking us to consider them on equal ground as integral people to American history," Caragol said. Then she pointed out one of the busts, "Gives to the Poor, Pawnee Scout Battalion, United States Army" (1887), and said until recently the subject had been identified with the wrong name.

"We've been working together for four years on this project and this is a lot of thinking about not just *what* is missing, but *who* is missing. I've looked up the genealogies of all of these individuals going back as far as I could. It's not only about absence or erasure, this is really about trying to fill in some gaps," said Gonzales-Day.

"The sculpture was unidentified on a shelf and now he has his name back ("Gives to the Poor"). ...It's been misidentified for 100 years. You are the first people to know his real name outside the community and it's only because Taina and I worked together, mostly Taina on this one, to help give that name back. There are stakes here that are very real. She was just emailing descendants."

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— Ken Gonzales-Day



Profiled Series: KEN GONZALES-DAY, "Gives to the Poor, Pawnee Scout Battalion, United States Army by unidentified artist, plaster, 1887; National Museum of Natural History," 2014/printed 2017 (archival ink on rag paper). | Courtesy of the artist and Luis De Jesus Los Angeles. Copyright 2017, Ken Gonzales-Day, all rights reserved

HIS GROUNDBREAKING RESEARCH extends to the history of lynching. Generally from the late 19th to mid-20th centuries, blacks in the South were the targets of lynchings at the hands of whites. Lesser known is the history of other races victimized by lynching.

Historically, the NAACP kept track of lynchings, categorizing victims in two distinct groups—black or white. The vast majority were black and, according to Gonzales-Day, those recorded as white, in most cases were actually Latino American, Native American, or Asian American.

In the exhibition, he examines the gamut, emphasizing the violent incidents that took place in the Western United States. He also notes prior research that uncovered documentation of 547 Mexicans killed by lynching between 1848 and 1928.

The artist's "Erased Lynchings" series is based on archival images of lynchings that occurred between 1850 to 1942. Modest-sized gatherings and mob scenes near trees and hanging scaffolds in places like Canon City Colo., Delphi, Ind., Tampa, Fla., Atlanta, Ga., and Downieville, Calif., are shown in the historic photographs. The captions reference "Executing Bandits in Mexico" and describe some victims as "Unidentified African American."

Gonzales-Day presents 21 images previously circulated as postcards and souvenirs in a gallery-style installation. Using digital editing, he has removed the victims from the images, in order to avoid re-victimizing them and concentrate on the people gathered to witness their violent deaths. The wall text describes the bystanders as "men in suits, children looking perplexed, and soldiers smiling broadly."

The artist's "Erased Lynchings" series is based on archival images of lynchings that occurred between 1850 to 1942. Mob scenes near trees and hanging scaffolds are shown in the historic photographs. The wall text describes the bystanders as "men in suits, children looking perplexed, and soldiers smiling broadly."



Erased Lynching Series: KEN GONZALES-DAY, "Disguised Bandit, Unknown Victim, c. 1915," 2006/printed 2018 (archival ink on rag paper). 1 Courtesy of the artist and Luis De Jesus Los Angeles. Copyright 2017, Ken Gonzales-Day, all rights reserved

ACROSS THE CORRIDOR, Kaphar is showing 17 paintings and one sculpture. "UnSeen" is the largest presentation of his work to date. Similar to Gonzales-Day, his output is the result of an inordinate amount of time spent in museums. Kaphar has an affinity for history and art history and obsessively studied early portraiture to enhance his academic training (he has an MFA from Yale) and become a better painter. But the exercise was not without conflict, which is evident in his work.

Kaphar addresses the marginalization and absence of African Americans in portraiture by foregrounding them and introducing interventions that speak to the complications of American history. A portrait of a white woman and black man in formal dress titled "Civil Union," acknowledges interracial unions dating back centuries. "The Fight for Remembrance II," an image of a black Union soldier in uniform, responds to the little-told contributions of African Americans in the Civil War. Kaphar applied bold slashes of white paint to both of these paintings, partially obscuring the images to emphasize the historic erasure of the narratives.

(He used the same white-washing technique in 2014 when he depicted a contemporary moment for Time magazine—the protestors in Ferguson, Mo., who took a stand against the police killing of Mike Brown.)

A pair of paintings imagines how Billy Lee (1750–1828), George Washington's valet, and Ona Judge (c. 1773–1848), who served as a personal attendant to Martha Washington, would appear if they had the opportunity to sit for formal portraits. The fine silk clothing worn by the enslaved figures contrasts with the black tar impasto covering their faces, a gesture Kaphar employed to speak to the absence of their images in the American canon and his inability, therefore, to depict them accurately.

His "Columbus Day Painting" subverts the hero narrative of Christopher Columbus, the Italian explorer and colonizer. Inspired by John Vanderlyn's 1846 painting, "Landing of Columbus," Kaphar shrouds Columbus and his crew in raw canvas, shifting the viewer's focus to the indigenous people easily overlooked in the background, on the margins.



TITUS KAPHAR, "Columbus Day Painting," 2014 (oil and mixed media on canvas). | Collection of Dr. Robert B. Feldman, © Titus Kaphar. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

"I at once see the fact that these images support Colonialist ideas and at the same time, as a maker, as a person interested in material, as a person interested in history, I still really love them," Kaphar said. "So the works themselves exist in that place of conflict. It's not simply a critique of the past, in that way. It's a wrestling, trying to come to an understanding within myself."

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THE SMITHSONIAN, America's foremost public, cultural institution, ranks among major organizations such as [National Geographic](#), the [New York Times](#), and universities that benefitted from slavery, that are beginning to reconcile the narrow narrative they have been promoting for generations with the more complex truth of the nation's founding, its shameful history with race, and the diverse figures who contributed to its progress. Introducing Kaphar's work, Naeem spoke to the revolutionary symbolism of the images presented in "UnSeen."

"We're asking some tough questions," she said. "We're asking questions that may have not been asked before and we are asking questions about whose history is told. Who is shown on our walls? Who has been erased from our histories and hasn't been shown and how can those exclusions lead to different interpretations of history?" CT

"UnSeen: Our Past in a New Light, Ken Gonzales-Day and Titus Kaphar" is on view at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C., March 23, 2018-Jan. 6, 2019.



From left, TITUS KAPHAR, "Billy Lee: Portrait in Tar," 2016 (oil on canvas). | Collection of Bill and Christy Gautreaux, Kansas City, Missouri, © Titus Kaphar. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York; and TITUS KAPHAR, "Ona Judge: Portrait in Tar," 2016 (oil on canvas). | Collection of Ellen and Steve Susman, © Titus Kaphar. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

CORRECTION (03/28/18): This story was updated to cite the correct source regarding the lynching of 547 Mexicans. The information does not come from the research of Ken Gonzales-Day, but prior findings documented by William D. Carrigan and Clive Webb and published in their book "Forgotten Dead: Mob Violence Against Mexicans in the United States, 1848-1928."

TOP IMAGE: TITUS KAPHAR, "Behind the Myth of Benevolence," 2014 (oil on canvas). | Collection of Guillermo Nicolas and Jim Foster, © Titus Kaphar. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

The New York Times

‘The Legacy of Lynching,’ at the Brooklyn Museum, Documents Violent Racism

By **HOLLAND COTTER** JULY 26, 2017



“The Jerome Project (My Loss)” (2014) by Titus Kaphar in the exhibition “The Legacy of Lynching.”
Credit Titus Kaphar/Brooklyn Museum

Some exhibitions are as much about life as about art. [“The Legacy of Lynching: Confronting Racial Terror in America,”](#) at the Brooklyn Museum, is a collaboration with the Equal Justice Initiative, founded by the lawyer and MacArthur fellow Bryan Stevenson to target racism in the criminal justice system.

The initiative’s contribution to the show includes an interactive video display documenting (without the use of explicit photographs) thousands of lynchings of black Americans in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The museum has surrounded the display with related work by artists in its collection, an exceptionally forceful lineup featuring Mark Bradford, Elizabeth Catlett, Melvin Edwards and Kara Walker. (Through Sept. 3; brooklynmuseum.org.)

A version of this article appears in print on July 30, 2017, on Page AR3 of the New York edition with the headline: Art; Documenting Violent Racism. Order Reprints | Today's Paper | Subscribe

EDUCATION

A Contemporary Artist Is Helping Princeton Confront Its Ugly Past

A new sculpture project thoughtfully grapples with the school's participation in slavery.

JACOBA URIST NOV 9, 2017



Titus Kaphar's Impressions of Liberty (COURTESY OF PRINCETON UNIVERSITY ART MUSEUM)

These days, public sculptures often seem intertwined with historical regret. There's the bronze Robert E. Lee statue in Charlottesville, Virginia; the Roger Taney effigy outside the Maryland State House; the Confederate soldier in front of North Carolina's Durham County Courthouse. This historical regret has inspired a rush to topple sculptures. But the feelings of remorse and shame have also stirred impassioned debate about the ways in which art ought to reflect America's complex legacy: Who should embody the values of today? What distinguishes art from political propaganda? And which artists will fill the empty plinths?

Princeton University has one answer to these questions with a new public-art project that confronts the school's participation in the nation's early sins. On Monday, the university unveiled *Impressions of Liberty*, by the African American artist Titus Kaphar. The sculpture is the conceptual core of a campus-wide initiative that begins this fall and aims to reconcile the university's ties to slavery. The Princeton and Slavery Project's website has released hundreds of articles and

primary documents about slavery and racism at Princeton, which was once jokingly described as the “northernmost outpost of Southern culture.” There is perhaps no better-suited artist than Kaphar to help the school grapple with past inequities and consider the stains of its founders. His art concentrates on the way history is remembered, highlighting the figures and inconveniences, as one 2009 *Art in America* review described it, who are “habitually ... written out of grand historical narratives.”

Princeton is hardly the first college to reckon with the racial injustice that defined its founding, and to seek a kind of rhetorical cleansing. Georgetown, for example, announced last year that it would grant admissions preference to descendants of slaves whose sale it profited from in the early 1800s. Harvard, Brown, Emory, the University of Maryland, and the University of Virginia have also acknowledged their shameful pasts, examining through more traditional academic symposiums how slavery shapes their current environment.

But Princeton's decision to deploy art is particularly incisive. It captures the extent to which writing the country's history is as much an emotional process as it is a practical and cerebral one, particularly at a time when issues of historical record are far from settled. This fall, Princeton may begin confronting the wrongs of a relatively small bucolic campus. But the university presents a case study for better understanding the role contemporary art will play in how America confronts its legacy of slavery and discrimination.

* * *

Like many American institutions, Princeton shares a raw paradox with its nation: From the start, liberty and oppression were inseparable. Over the last four years, Martha Sandweiss, a Princeton history professor, has mined university and local archives to get a complete picture of the school's links to slavery. Her research forms the basis of the Slavery Project. On the one hand, according to records, Princeton was a bastion of liberty, educating numerous Revolutionary War leaders and in 1783 hosting the Continental Congress, a pivotal moment in the country's struggle for freedom and newfound independence. At the same time, Sandweiss found that the institution's first nine presidents all owned slaves at some point, as did the school's early trustees. She also discovered that the school enrolled a significant number of anti-abolitionist, Southern students during its early years; an alumni delivered a pro-slavery address at the school's 1850 commencement ceremony.

For the next month, Kaphar's sculpture will occupy the lawn of Maclean House—the former home of university presidents, including Reverend Samuel Finley, who enslaved people there until his 1766 death. “Art is a language,” Kaphar told me during our first interview in his studio. “There is always a narrative coded in painting and sculpture. When you look at something, ask yourself, *who is represented and who is invisible?*” *Impressions of Liberty*, he said, is a direct response to the university's findings that Finley's slaves were auctioned at Maclean House. His artwork inverts the mythical hero-figure of a founding father—typical of public monuments—and the human beings Finley enslaved on campus. As with much of his art, Kaphar's goal is to upend Old Master painting techniques to expose how images endure and shape the country's idea of truths.

This summer, I accompanied him on a visit to the Yale University Art Gallery, where we stood before one of his depictions of George Washington (now in Yale's collection). This three-dimensional painting may be Kaphar's most aesthetically compelling work yet to challenge ideals in art and U.S. history. *Shadows of Liberty* employs a Colonial art tradition—an oil painting of a political leader on his proverbial white horse—but masks Washington with cascading fragments of his slave records and, in a nod to the symbolism associated with African power figures, rusty nails. Kaphar explained how Yale's classic portraits, by the likes of John Trumbull and Thomas Eakins, inspired his reconsideration as a graduate art student of Washington the patriot *and* Washington the slave owner. The strips nailed to Washington, according to Pamela Franks, the gallery's contemporary-art curator, open “new ways of understanding American history” for its museum visitors.

 An art installation with an image of George Washington on a horse, covered with shredded documents that appear nailed onto the canvas.

Titus Kaphar's *Shadows of Liberty*, 2016, at Yale University Art Gallery (Courtesy of Titus Kaphar and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York)

In a similar vein, the piece Kaphar has sculpted for Princeton features layered photographs, etched in glass, of Finley and black actors dressed in period costumes to represent the slaves the former university president held in his campus residence. Kaphar created a composite bust in negative relief of Finley, coating it with graphite and encasing it in Sycamore wood to echo the campus's "liberty trees" nearby, which were, according to Princeton legend, planted to commemorate the repeal of the Stamp Act.

"There are no Gods among us. I'm trying to tell the story of America without demonizing or deifying our forefathers," Kaphar told me over phone in September, weeks after white supremacists converged in Charlottesville, Virginia, to protest the removal of the Robert E. Lee statue. His aim, Kaphar explained, is to create an experience akin to that of a manual-focus camera, that now-anachronistic device in which perspectives slide in and out of view. Kaphar does not want his work "to erase history," but rather to ask viewers to contend with competing images in the foreground and the background—something the eye and brain struggle to do.

"There's so much power that happens," Kaphar said, "when we shift our focus or our gaze—just slightly, momentarily—and confront the unspoken truth." Asked to describe his reason for back-illuminating Finley's carved-out bust, he explained, "I'm trying to create a literal space for anyone who passes this sculpture to begin

thinking about iconic leaders in history, how glorified images of the past affect the world we live in today.” For generations, slave-owning Christians—including Princeton’s founders—used religious ideas to justify a horrific national practice, he noted; Finley is holding a bible in *Impressions of Liberty*. But, Kaphar added, “art should never tell anyone what conversation to have. It’s not a didactic sculpture. I want people to sit with the idea that Finley doesn’t represent good or bad.”

The sculpture alone is a bold, exquisite way to visually confront what research has revealed about the school’s roots in slavery. But Princeton University is spreading the mission across various pieces of art through a show this fall entitled “Making History Visible: Of American Myths And National Heroes.” At the exhibit’s entrance, viewers begin with Kaphar’s piece *Monumental Inversion: George Washington*—a sculpture of the leader astride his horse, made out of wood, blown glass, and steel. The sculpture depicts the former president’s dueling nature: He’s glorified within a great American equestrian monument but he’s also sitting astride a charred cavity, surrounded by glass on the ground. In juxtaposing Kaphar’s artwork and a George Washington plaster bust, “Making History Visible” forces visitors, hopefully, to see *and* feel the contradiction in colonial leaders who sought freedom from tyranny but did not extend that ideal to slaves. It’s a strong lesson for any college in how a painstakingly curated exhibit can, hopefully, prompt questions about the ways society ought to remember the past, and how those decisions affect the way students understand historic truths today.

 A sculpture depicting a figure on a horse

Titus Kaphar's *Monumental Inversion: George Washington*, 2016, at Princeton University Art Museum (Courtesy of Titus Kaphar and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York)

Art is about the power of symbols, according to James Steward, the museum's director. "The conversation we are having now about monuments and their visual power are about so many of the same issues in this exhibition," he said when asked about the country's removed statues. "Part of our job and what Titus does is to make the past visceral." Some museum visitors, Steward admits, have had a strong, negative response to *Monumental Inversion*—which he respects, at least, as an opportunity to open a dialogue.

Like anybody else, students become inured to historical names and concepts taught in the same, conventional classroom ways or frameworks, according to Bradford Vivian, the author of *Commonplace Witnessing: Rhetorical Invention, Historical Remembrance, and Public Culture*. A professor of communication arts and sciences at Pennsylvania State University, he described why art can provoke, in an individual, forms of reflection, interpretation, and even feeling that she hasn't before experienced.

Kaphar describes his mission as an attempt to amend history through contemporary art. But not every such effort has succeeded. In 2011, the New York-based artist Fred Wilson met impassioned outcry—from people of all races—for his now-abandoned *E Pluribus Unum* public-art proposal. Invited by the Central Indiana Community Foundation to create a sculpture for the "Indianapolis Cultural Trail," Wilson's design reimagined the only monument in the city's downtown depicting a black person as a new statue. The design replicated the black man, replacing his manacles with a multicolored flag, and rendering him in an elevated, assertive posture on a plinth of his own; it was to be erected blocks from the original. But local groups didn't want an artist to critique the city's visual history with a new sculpture near their old one; a letter published in the *Indianapolis Recorder*, for example, called for the art to honor one of the city's prominent black business owners.

The artist Titus Kaphar stands next to the sculpture he created, outside of a Princeton University campus building.

Titus Kaphar stands next to his commission for Princeton University, *Impressions of Liberty*.
(Courtesy of Titus Kaphar and Kaphar Studio)

The University of California, Los Angeles, architecture professor Dell Upton, who wrote the book *What Can And Can't Be Said*, has been researching monument building in the contemporary South. He cautions that the impact of Princeton's art will prove tremendously limited if it can't show students the vast economic tentacles between past and present. Upton pointed to Hans Haacke's famous 1971 project, which used photographs and charts to illustrate power structures and financial entanglement in New York real estate as an example of some of the city's most dubious landlords. Princeton's racist history enabled it to provide social and political benefits for alumni—an advantage that students will continue to enjoy well into the future.

When *Impressions of Liberty* is removed from Maclean House in December and enters Princeton's permanent museum collection, its greatest achievement may lie in the realization that no apology or recompense can ever suffice. But the potential of teaching through art is that there is also a central emotional component, an

ingredient that can be missing from more standard ways of learning about one's predecessors. "Each history deserves disruption," the Chicago-based artist and founder of the [Rebuild Foundation](#) Theaster Gates told me, "but atoning for something is very different from grappling with it."

 An art piece featuring a wrapped-up fire hose.

Theaster Gates' *In Case of Race Riot II*, 2011, at the Brooklyn Museum (Courtesy of Brooklyn Museum)

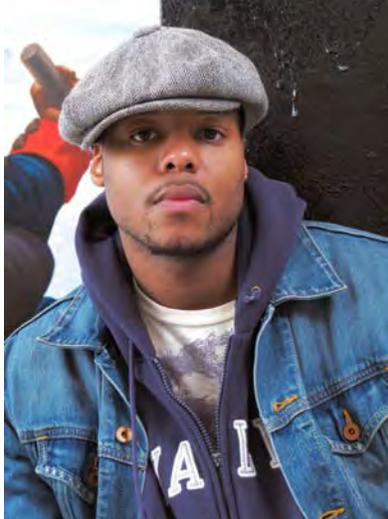
I asked Gates in October about the extent to which art can reconcile with the past. His 2011 sculpture *In Case of Race Riot II* was recently on view as part of the Brooklyn Museum's "[The Legacy of Lynching](#)"—an attempt to spark "an honest conversation" about racial injustice in America today. *In Case of Race Riot II* is simplistically haunting art, a wood and metal box housing a coiled fire hose, alluding to the high-pressure water hoses police used on peaceful African American demonstrators in 1963 in Birmingham, Alabama.

"People receive information and empathy in different ways," he explained. "No civil-rights project can ever fully redeem anything. But when we stumble upon a piece of artwork—in a museum or anywhere else we find it—we might lean in and see better through a visual language. And that language might create a bridge to understanding."

We want to hear what you think about this article. Submit a letter to the editor or write to letters@theatlantic.com.

February 2, 2017

SPOTLIGHT: TITUS KAPHAR



Titus Kaphar. (©Titus Kaphar. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York)

Titus Kaphar tops my list of ‘Artists to Watch’, though it seems that most of the art world had their eyes trained on him already. When it come to iconography in art, Kaphar seems to be screaming the loudest. His series of solo shows, project and installations continue to bend and shape conversation on race, hidden histories, and our justice system – or lack thereof.

“My work is an introduction to my vocabulary,” Kaphar says. “It looks at the way I deal with history and my different modes of intervention.”

Indeed it does. [Kaphar](#) works with conceptual goals; he reimagines historical events looking for his truth.

You stand before his paintings – these contextual Classic and Renaissance painting styles and just as your brain begins to dive into that natural art recall, a reprogramming starts. You notice the intentional cuts, bends, and sculpts in the canvas’, reconstructing and manipulating the way people of color are seen in this version of art history. Kaphar confronts you with the possibilities of exploring new narratives – there is no onrushing of guilt or innocence an appropriating that doesn’t feel de humanizing but that challenges the originality of story that once took precedence on the canvas, until Kaphar reshaped that narrative.



Titus Kaphar, *Stripes*, (2015) at Jack Shainman Gallery, NY

Enjoy exploring these great links to more information on Kaphar:

- Titus Kaphar [website](#).
- In this [Time](#) video, watch Kaphar in the process of making his oil painting, “Yet Another Fight for Remembrance” for Time Magazine’s cover of the Ferguson protests.
- Titus Kaphar: [History in the Making](#) – a short video on his 2009 Seattle Art Museum Show
- Dismantling History: [An Interview with Titus Kaphar](#) | Art21
- See what engages him by taking on some books from Kaphar’s [‘Recommend Reading’](#).

Feature photo of Titus Kaphar with *Gift of Shrouded Descent*, 2014, Oil and mixed media on canvas by Kubiati Nnamdie.

Photos by Haha Magazine

Titus Kaphar on Art, Race and Justice

“A painting may inspire, but it’s people who make change.”

By BILL KELLER

The painter Titus Kaphar made his name as a portraitist of criminal justice with his 2014 show at the Studio Museum in Harlem, the “Jerome Project.” Kaphar had been researching the prison records of his estranged father, Jerome, and discovered scores of other imprisoned men who shared his father’s name. Working from mugshots, he painted small oil portraits of the Jeromes, their faces haloed by Byzantine gold leaf and partially submerged in tar -- evoking the disproportionate representation of black men among America’s incarcerated.

His most recent work continues to explore the confluence of race, punishment and protest. He provided a selection of new work, and spoke with The Marshall Project’s Bill Keller. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Maybe we should start with the square portraits you did of Dwayne Betts, El Sawyer and Shontina Williams, former prison inmates who have become activists for criminal justice reform. Why did you decide to paint them?

So when I started all of this work, it came from this very personal place of investigating the criminal justice system and using my father's name as a kind doorway into this bigger, broader issue of the Prison-Industrial Complex. I had been on several panels after doing the “Jerome” exhibition and had the opportunity to read more, talk to people, and it was broadening my understanding of the issue and making me realize how complex and how difficult it's going to be to actually make changes.



Shontina Vernon, 2016 TITUS KAPHAR

While that's happening, everything in the country related to police brutality is really beginning to spark people's interest. People who weren't originally concerned or interested in these issues are now concerned, it's directly related to the technology that we all carry. So like everyone else in the country, I began to watch these videos from camera-phones all over the country and watch this kind of harassment and abuse happen. We began to see more and more of these videos, and I continued working on the project, looking at the criminal justice system and mug shots and people who found themselves trapped in the system. Then the Sandra Bland video comes out, [the police dash-cam footage of a Texas state trooper dragging a black woman from her car; she was later found hanged in her jail cell] and I find myself in this loop watching this horrific video over again with some kind of expectation, this kind of hope that something's going to change. If I just keep watching, it will be different, and of course it's not.

I saw myself sort of spiraling down into this depression, and I'm not really a person given to depression. I really didn't know how to manage it. I approached a friend of mine, Dwayne, Reginald Dwayne Betts, and I spoke to him about all the things that were going on. He had been in and out of my studio quite a bit. I felt, after that conversation, that what would be helpful for my soul would be to be able to speak to people like Dwayne, to be able to meditate on the faces of people who have, not just survived the institution, our prison system, but who have come out and really begun to work towards changing the system. That's where those very simple square portraits came from, just a way to meditate on the hope of it.

When you're dealing with these kinds of issues, it's so very easy to get lost in the horror. It's so very easy to get lost in the losses. The wins, the success stories don't often come through. So those portraits, that whole series, are folks who are working in the community trying to make things better for everyone, honestly.

Would you say that you are giving them something of a heroic stature?

I'm deeply interested in portraiture as a form, and when you look at mug shots as a form, that kind of portraiture only has a single purpose. It's to memorialize criminality. It really has no other real aesthetic function. There are no aesthetic questions asked about lighting, about composition, about pose ... three-quarter, portrait, profile ... in a way that would attempt to uplift or glorify the sitter.



Reginald Dwayne Betts, 2016 TITUS
KAPHAR

I didn't set out with the intention to uplift or glorify the sitter so much as I set out to find the individual during the process of painting, to get to know them better through the kind of meditative, painterly process, going over the lines in the faces, the shape of the eyes, looking at them in a way that mug shots wouldn't allow for, an intimacy of care that mug shots don't consider. So most of the folks in that series have at one time been represented by that other form, that mug shot, that kind of imagery. So the painting was more about contrasting that form with the traditional form that I've studied.

When you study an individual's face and you attempt to reproduce that with some sort of honesty, you're bound to get to something of their humanity.

By the way, there is an older form of mug shot photography that was actually done by professionals, that is actually quite beautiful. They're shockingly beautiful photographs, but that's not what we do now.

I'm not a painter that believes you put a painting on the wall and it changes the world. I think it's a conversation starter. I think it can provoke questions. It can move us emotionally, but I believe strongly that, as artists, we need to engage the system in some broader ways if we want to see the changes in the world that we hope for, that we paint about.

I believe in terms of painting or sculpture on their own, they may inspire, but it's the people, it's the people that make change. I think of the work as a sort of a marker, a site for civic dialog, a visual framework to wrap our ideas around and possibly stand as a banner that we erect and march behind. But alternately, if we don't engage the system directly, the objects and the images that we make are ultimately inanimate and inert, and it won't have the impact that we want to see, that we desperately want to see happen in the world.

Would you talk a little bit about the Destiny series?



Destiny I, 2016 TITUS KAPHAR

I was on a panel at the Studio Museum in Harlem, and this woman on the panel with me told the story of giving birth to her first son, who was about my age, giving birth to her first son in prison with shackles on her feet and on her hands. And I felt emotionally broken by that. I felt ashamed that I had ignored the impact of the criminal justice system on women and simply focused on how it is this devastational force in the lives of black men. After hearing her story, I felt like I needed to go back to the studio and engage these ideas deeper and consider the impact on women of color specifically.

I was thinking and doing research for the project, and it became very clear to me that the woman's specific name, the woman from the panel, which was Tina, wasn't the thing to focus on. I needed a name that functioned as a racial identifier, but also a name that lent itself to a kind of tragic poetry.

There are many friends in my community whose names are Destiny. It is a common African-American name for a little girl, but there was this tragic poetry about that name that sort of pushed me deeper. You don't give a person the name Destiny out of a sense of hopelessness. You give them the name Destiny in a desire that they would, from the moment of their birth, believe that there was something better for them in the future.

Actually to go to these mug shot databases and find Destiny after Destiny after Destiny, Destinies devastated by our harsh, overly punitive, unbalanced, and unjust criminal system was horrific, and the name Destiny itself felt like the perfect sort of moniker to tell the story.

So in the painting that you're seeing, each painting includes three Destinies, three different distinct Destinies, each one layered on top of the other. Each portrait of these individual Destinies comes from the same databases. And you see in some of these paintings these eyes that become askew. It's supposed to be visually challenging.

The multiplicity of the figures of the faces layered on top of each other makes it difficult for your eyes to focus on when you see them in person. Your brain tries to render of these individuals as one. And because that can't happen, because they are not one, they are multiple messages, it results in this kind of headache. Even the process of making them left me with a headache. This is not an easy issue that we're dealing with. It is not a simple issue that we're dealing with. It's not a beautiful issue that we're dealing with. Many destinies, as I said, have been stolen as a result of this system.

Now I have to go back to the gallery and look again. You've got a series of three paintings, a car on a road, which I guess is a Sandra Bland reference.

Yes.

Why does it fade to black?

That whole project, that series of paintings sort of functioned as my shovel to dig me out of the depression that I was falling into, as I said before. I needed to do something, because watching that video was not helping. As I said before, I started looking for something to change through the watching, that somehow I was going to watch this video again, and I was going to see something different, and I just felt myself trapped in it. The one thing that I did notice beyond the tragedy of the whole film, there was one moment that felt pivotal. That was the moment in which the officer takes Sandra out of the frame.



Forced Out of Frame, 2016 TITUS KAPHAR

We have this technology that is put in cars, police cars, in order to record these interactions so that we can all see what's going on. He consciously makes a decision to walk her outside of the frame, thereby removing us as a witness, and yet it's her voice that we hear. She narrates her own demise.

So that body of paintings starts using asphalt to represent the road she was stopped on. It takes that tar, that asphalt, and uses it as a painting medium, and it starts at that moment when that officer pulled her outside of the frame, and it shows the image clearly, but with her removed. And then the second frame, the scene becomes darker, and then the final frame is just the complete absence of light.

My colleague Carroll Bogert said that when she saw that series it reminded her of those lonely roads in the South where civil rights activists were murdered back in the civil rights struggle.

Exactly.

The painting that we haven't talked about is the one with the water hoses. One from Alabama in '63, and one from North Dakota last year. I infer from that that you're drawing a connection between the civil rights activism of the 60's and the recent activism of Native Americans protesting the pipeline.

Yeah, I mean, yes, I am, but it's ... This is basically what happened, how that piece emerged. As you know from my work, I'm a person who's deeply interested in history and specifically the resistance movements that have arisen throughout history. And I'm obviously interested in the protest images that result from the different movements. Everyone in America has seen these images of the civil rights movement where officers are siccing dogs on protesters. And everyone has seen these protesters being blasted with water hoses again and again. And these were the images that framed that movement.

And the images are so ubiquitous to me. They're everywhere. I see them all the time, and so the thing that I found shocking as I was watching the protest that's happening over the pipeline ... and I promise you there will be more protesting now that President Trump has approved the pipeline ... I was watching these men turn hoses again on protesters and thought, "We've been through this before."

The only thing that makes sense to me is the people who did this don't actually know the history or they don't care. Both are tragic.



The Jerome Project (My Loss), 2014

TITUS KAPHAR

I am curious to know whether you sense in your world, meaning the art world, an increased interest in criminal justice issues, aside from your own work?

I do. Artists don't make work in isolation, generally. They are influenced by the world around them, and I've seen this conversation come up visually more than I ever have before. It's always been a very personal issue for me, that is, jails and prisons, because in my youth, I visited my father there, and my cousins and brothers' friends have been in and out of that system. So it's very much been a part of my thinking for a very long time. So I do see it happening. I do see a focus on it.

I'm heartsick and sorry about it at the same time because in the justice world it a deeper investigation of the issues is standard. You dig deep to find out answers, and you look more into the issues, and you try to come to some conclusions. Then you try to work towards change.

The art world is not like that, and that's where my fear comes from. The art world can be extremely fickle. The art world is often about just what's novel. I don't want this to just become one of those issues that's in fashion right now, and therefore we're making art about it. That would be disheartening. lol

Last Chance: Titus Kaphar at Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

BY BLOUIN ARTINFO | JANUARY 26, 2017



Artwork from 'Shifting Skies' by Titus Kaphar.
(Courtesy: Jack Shainman Gallery)

The ongoing Titus Kaphar exhibition, titled 'Shifting Skies', at Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, will end on January 28, 2017. This is your last opportunity to check out the works of this American artist at the gallery.

The exhibition is Titus Kaphar's second solo with the gallery, which explores the power of rewritten histories examining the presumptuous notions of innocence and the mythology of heroics. Titus Kaphar's artworks are rich with cuts, bends, sculpts and amalgamation of Classic and Renaissance painting styles, creating formal interactions between fictions and quotations. 'Shifting Skies' investigates into the highest and lowest forms of documented histories, attempting to merge the borders in American history by introspecting the possibilities of manipulation in them through the analysis of Historical portraiture, mug shots, and YouTube stills. Rather than exploring guilt or innocence, Kaphar engages the narratives of individuals and deciphers society's changing perceptions on them over time.

The exhibition is on view at both of Jack Shainman Gallery's Chelsea locations, 524 West 24th Street, New York and 513 West 20th Street, New York.

For details, visit, www.jackshainman.com (<http://www.jackshainman.com/>)



TITUS KAPHAR, *Destiny 3*, 2016, oil on canvas, 60 x 48 inches



TITUS KAPHAR, *Destiny 5*, 2016, oil on canvas, 40 x 30 inches

All artworks: ©Titus Kaphar. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

[Miss Rosen](#) is a New York-based writer, curator, and brand strategist. There is nothing she adores so much as photography and books. A small part of her wishes she had a proper library, like in the game of Clue. Then she could blaze and write soliloquies to her in and out of print loves.

ARTSY

Titus Kaphar Is Painting Images of the Criminal Justice System We Need to See

ARTSY EDITORIAL
BY ANTWAUN SARGENT

JAN 5TH, 2017 7:06 PM



Titus Kaphar. Courtesy of the artist.

As he typed “Destiny” into the search bar of a state and federally maintained prison database, Titus Kaphar thought about how the promise parents have for their children is often reflected in the names they give them.

The query returned a screen filled with mug shots of women, mostly black, who had been convicted of varying felonies or were awaiting trial, plus their criminal records and personal details—full name, age, height, weight, race, date of birth, scars, piercings, and tattoos. Kaphar began to paint many of the women and created a new, six-part series of portraits, titled “Destiny” (2016), which is now part of his two-venue painting and sculpture exhibition, “Shifting Skies,” at Jack Shainman Gallery in New York.

“In a way, the ‘Destiny’ series, takes something that was never intended to be aesthetic, never to be beautiful, but intended to be the lowest form of representation and turns it into something else,” Kaphar tells me, as he stands in the 24th-street gallery surrounded by these portraits. In the exhibition, the 40-year-old artist, who’s now based in New York and Connecticut, takes the images that “memorialize criminality” and transforms them into art that tells the story of the tragedy of our criminal justice system. *Destiny II* (2016), for instance, features several different Destiny’s, with locks, braids, and straight hair pulled back, that together form one, blurred face with multiple sets of shifting eyes, mouths, ears, and noses. The images are set against a flickering blue background, the backdrop the women stood before to have their mugshots taken.

“I was attempting to take multiple Destiny’s and layer them one on top of the other,” says the artist, who received his MFA in painting from Yale. “Their different destinies have tragically come together in this horrific conclusion of jails and prisons,” he adds. “When I was thinking about the series, I was remembering women’s names: my cousins, friends, and family, names that I knew in the African-American community. All I remember is when I said it out loud—*Destiny*—the poetry of it wasn’t lost on me.”



Installation view of Titus Kaphar's "Destiny" series on view at "Titus Kaphar: Shifting Skies" at Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. Photo courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Kaphar's interest in portraying prisoners began a few years ago. After two decades of not speaking to his father, the artist first used the prison database to look him up. His father, Jerome, and 99 other men, who shared the same first and last name, appeared in the search results. Astonished, the artist was inspired to create "The Jerome Project" (2014), a series of confessional-style paintings of mug shots of prisoners who had all been convicted and jailed for committing nearly identical crimes. He covered some of these portraits with varying layers of tar, accented with flakes of gold leaf—a symbolic gesture to reflect the amount of time the men have spent behind bars. Mounted together, as they were at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2014, the paintings demarcate what it means for nearly a million black men and women to serve prison sentences for committing mostly non-violent crimes. In *Jerome I* (2014), the tar climbs up to the figure's chin, while in *Jerome V* (2014) half of the 10-inch painting is obscured, suggesting that the relatively young man had spent half of his life in prison. Later, aware of the ongoing hurdles and aftereffects that former prisoners face after being released, Kaphar stopped using the tar.

For the 2016 female-focused series, Kaphar returns to this fact of American life: The United States penal system disproportionately arrests, sentences to harsher penalties, and mass incarcerates its black citizens. The works draw on a tradition propelled by artists like Kerry James Marshall, Philip Guston, and Jenny Saville, who have each explored issues of race and identity. Saville's portraiture, for example, shares a similar sense of multiplicity with Kaphar's technique.

Recently, other artists, like Kaphar, have made work that ties the phenomenon to slavery. ("If you understand the criminal justice system, you will immediately know those historical paintings over on 20th Street are the reason why we have these systems we have today," Kaphar offers, gesturing to his signature racially charged revolutionary-style paintings being shown at Jack Shainman's 20th street gallery.) Cameron Rowland's 2016 solo exhibition, titled "91020000," at Artists Space displayed slave insurance bonds and objects—school desks, church pews, sewer rings, firefighter uniforms, among other goods—created for the public by prisoners who are paid between \$0.10 to \$1.14 per hour in New York State. The filmmaker Ava DuVernay's recent documentary, *13th* (2016), posits powerfully that the initial rise in mass incarceration is due to an exception clause, or what the director calls, a "loophole," in the amendment that ended slavery. It reads:

"Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction."



Installation view of “Titus Kaphar: Shifting Skies” at Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. Photo courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

“The 99 Jeromes could easily be 99 Tyrones,” says Kaphar, reflecting a growing knowledge of the criminal justice system. “What I realized in working on the project about my father, was that his name wasn’t really significant. What was significant is the degree to which that name functions as a racial identifier. So anytime you choose a name and type it into these databases you get similar results.” He says, “If you do Tyrese, Tyrone, Chanel, or any of the names that are traditionally associated with black folks, you get similar results. Particular groups are, to a degree, being targeted, and find themselves similarly stuck in the system.”

Toward the front of the gallery, Kaphar points to a series of five small brown portraits and says, “This is my hope.” The works picture men and women—Vivian D. Nixon, Reginald Dwayne Betts, Shontina Vernon, El Sawyer, and Asha Bandele—some of whom were formerly incarcerated, who are now all working to improve the criminal justice system and the lives of those who are impacted by it. The simplistic portraits represent “an optimistic celebration of the potential” for Kaphar. “We speak so much about the destruction but there are survivors, and those survivors go on to do amazing things in the world.”

A few minutes later, one of those survivors, Reginald Dwayne Betts, along with his wife and three young boys walked into the gallery. When Betts was a teenager, he carjacked someone and spent nearly nine years in adult prison for committing the crime. “This recalls a particular part of my past,” Betts tells me. “For me, this is about the journey of my own life.” Eventually, Betts, now 36 and a lawyer, wrote several books including a memoir, *A Question of Freedom: A Memoir of Learning, Survival, and Coming of Age in Prison* (2010), which details his time spent in solitary confinement.



Installation view of “Titus Kaphar: Shifting Skies” at Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. Photo courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

“I have a client right now, 17 years old, facing felony charges, so I work with the Destinys on the wall,” Betts, who recently earned his degree from Yale Law School, says as he gestures to the paintings. “We have been living through these struggles for a long time and it didn’t seem like these stories mattered to a larger landscape. And then, all of a sudden, I won’t say legitimized, but you see yourself reflected in a way that hasn’t been done.” He enthuses, “A hundred years from now, someone is going to be like, ‘I remember dude.’”

When you put a painting on the wall, do you think it can change the world? It is a question that lingers among social practice art like Kaphar's. "The Jerome Project" is a kind of social sculpture now; the work inspired a two-day prison reform conference at Yale University Art Gallery and other community initiatives that exist outside of the museum system. It hasn't inspired massive change in the prison system itself, but it has provided a measure of representation to the lives of prisoners.

"Destiny is all of us," says Betts. "My nine year old found out I was in prison when he was five; one of his classmates' parents had Googled me," he explains. "We all deserve to be able to move on from our mistakes. We also all deserve to have the crime, sentence, and punishment interrogated, and not just taken as just." He adds, "To me, this exhibition is a counterweight to the images that already exist in the world."

—Antwaun Sargent

In His New Work, Titus Kaphar Examines Racial Injustice In The Prison-Industrial Complex



David Alm, CONTRIBUTOR

I write about film, the arts, and design.



Titus Kaphar, Destiny V, 2016, oil on canvas, 40 x 30 inches ©Titus Kaphar. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Titus Kaphar began thinking about his latest series of paintings, *Destiny*, when he met a woman named Tina Reynolds, who had given birth to her first son in prison. They were brought together by the Studio Museum in Harlem, along with a group of scholars and other artists, to talk about issues of mass incarceration. During a panel discussion, Reynolds said she'd been shackled during the entire birthing process. The image horrified Kaphar, who, as a father of two boys himself, knows the restraints were unnecessary. "I was at my own two sons' births," he says. "She's not going to get up and run away."

The only purpose of shackling Reynolds, Kaphar says now, was to dehumanize her. *Destiny* represents the artist's effort to do the opposite: humanize the countless women of color who, like Reynolds, have been lost in the prison-industrial complex, whether they committed a crime or not.

Destiny, which is on display at the Jack Shainman Gallery in New York until January 28th, began with a simple idea: to look for women bearing that name in online databases of mugshots -- mugshots.com and busted.com -- and then paint their portraits. He then layered one *Destiny* on top of another. The effect is jarring. Equally jarring is the political statement the project makes about the endemic racism baked into our criminal justice system.

Kaphar, who grew up in a poor, African-American section of Kalamazoo, Michigan, says he chose the name *Destiny* because it's common in the black community, and for what it represents: "Hope, optimism for the future, and a name that defines all of these destinies, all of these women whose lives come together in some way."

"And then when you see how they come together on busted.com," Kaphar adds, "and it's the antithesis of all that hope."



Titus Kaphar, Destiny III, 2016, oil on canvas, 60 x 48 inches ©Titus Kaphar. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

In this regard, the name Destiny isn't the point of the project, but rather the name as a racial identifier. Like Kaphar's previous series, *The Jerome Project*, which was inspired by researching his own father's arrest records, leading him to numerous other men of that name serving time in prison, *Destiny* attempts, as Kaphar says, to "speak to a larger problem in communities of color."

"The names of people I grew up with -- Tyrik, Tanisha, Shamiqwa, Tyrone -- if you put any of these names [into a mugshot database] you'll wind up with similar and distressing results," Kaphar says.

Especially distressing, he adds, is that even if any of these people did commit the crimes for which they're serving time, they have largely been set up to fail from the outset. "It's not a question of guilt or innocence," he says. "A person can be guilty, but so much of that guilt is circumstantial. So much of that guilt could have been avoided if we had addressed the root causes earlier on. The system that we have is not working -- for the guilty or the innocent."

Kaphar says he makes art less to effect change than to wrestle with the "things that rattle around in [his] head," as a "way to get them out."

And he knows the result can be unsettling -- indeed, that's the point. "I hope these pictures are difficult to look at," he says. "I'm not interested in making pretty pictures. I want the images to be as challenging to look at as the issues we're trudging through."



Titus Kaphar: Shifting Skies. Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. December 16, 2016 - January 28, 2017. Courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

ART

AMENDING AMERICAN HISTORY WITH TITUS KAPHAR

By ELOISE BLONDIAU
Photography CHRISTIAN HÖGSTEDT

Published 12/19/16



TITUS KAPHAR IN NEW YORK, DECEMBER 2016. PHOTOS: [CHRISTIAN HÖGSTEDT](#).

By bringing both recent and distant histories to the fore of his art, Titus Kaphar provides a captivating and informed take on our present reality. He leaves it up to the viewer to do what they will with the revelations he offers, but the impetus is to respond to the injustice you have been shown with action.

Kaphar's ability to draw attention to moral crises that are at once modern and age-old is a clear strength of his practice (his 2014 series *The Jerome Project*, for example, set a keen eye on injustices in America's criminal justice system), and one that is particularly patent in his latest exhibition, "Shifting Skies," currently on view at Jack Shainman Gallery in New York. His paintings and sculptures continually interrogate how narratives of American history either forget black people or malign them. While some works are direct responses to mass incarceration or police brutality, other works plunge further into the past, focusing on the plight of the slaves owned by George Washington, a supposedly liberatory figure.

Ahead of the show's opening, *Interview* met with Kaphar—who is based between New York and Connecticut—to discuss history's blind spots and why "better" isn't enough.

ELOISE BLONDIAU: I didn't realize how specific the histories are that you're dealing with in this exhibition.

TITUS KAPHAR: This is one of the first times it's gotten this specific. I decided to focus on George Washington for the first time, and as we're thinking about elections and presidents, it's really interesting to think about the first time all of this happened. That's where the specificity comes from. Also, my family has always—with no evidence—believed that our family was on Jefferson's plantation, and it's something that all of my family members talk about. I don't know where that comes from, but it's this lore. My wife's family is directly related to George Washington and they have all the documentation; it's something her family is very proud of.

[*gestures to Ona Judge: Portrait in Tar, which depicts a woman in a pink dress whose face is covered by tar*] This is my Ona Judge. Ona was a young black woman that George Washington enslaved. She came with Martha [Washington]'s dowry of sorts, and Ona kept running away. She had one major runaway, and she ran away because George Washington brought her to Philadelphia, and it was the first time she had seen all these free black people.

[Ona] sort of talked herself out of slavery. She convinced someone to take her on a boat, and she ended up in New Hampshire some place—started a whole new life for herself. So George Washington installed this advertisement looking for her—they called her "Oney," and she hated that name. And in the advertisement they are just perplexed as to why she would ever run away. No idea why she might have run away! They think she might have been seduced by a Frenchman.

It's so weird to have these things written at the same time as talking about liberty for everyone. *Imperfect God*, [a George Washington biography by Henry Wienczek,] is just an amazing book. It speaks to how [Washington] understood this problem, and he was in distress about it. [*points to Absconded from the Household of the President of the United States, which depicts Washington's face obscured by a shredded document*] So this document is actually the entire written newspaper advertisement for her to come back. And that portrait [*Ona Judge: Portrait in Tar*] is my ode to her.

BLONDIAU: So the purpose of your pieces are to actually show Ona's perspective in a way that those documents do not.

KAPHAR: Exactly. The other thing we know about her is that she was a seamstress, and she made all of Martha's clothing. So that's part of the reason she's dressed up like this.

BLONDIAU: How do your sculptures interact with these portraits of Ona and George Washington?

KAPHAR: I took my two sons to the Natural History Museum, and we were outside, and there's that equestrian sculpture of Teddy Roosevelt, then on the right-hand side of him is an African-American and on the left hand side of him is a Native American. And as we're walking into the museum my 9-year-old son goes, "Daddy, how come he gets to ride on the horse and those two guys have to walk?"

And I said to myself, "Therein lies the complexity, all the complexity, of American history, spouted from the mouth of a 9-year-old." What I realized in that moment is that we have all of this public sculpture, all of these national monuments that don't actually reflect our contemporary values anymore. So I started thinking, "Is there a way to amend public sculpture?" And so that's where this project came from.

Right now my project is to go around the country and scan these national monuments and try to make these "amendments"—not to remove those monuments, not to take them down, but in the same way as we do to the constitution, when we change the laws we add an amendment.

So the idea is that I've been travelling all around the country, doing all the research, placing all these pieces approximate to the actual monuments, and that those sites will become spaces of civic dialogue, where we can come and have conversations about politics and things like that, and compare and contrast.

BLONDIAU: It seems that this exhibition and your previous work, such as *The Jerome Project*, use history in a way that reveals something about now, and shape how stories are told right now.

KAPHAR: The way that I've tended to put it is: All of depiction is fiction, it's only a question of degree. When we think of images, such as the signing of the declaration of independence, we think of that wonderful [John] Trumbull [painting *Declaration of Independence*] that is at the Yale Art Gallery and on the back of our money. When we think of that historical moment we think of that image. That image never happened like that. All of those people were never in that room together to sign that paper. It's a beautiful fiction to help us have an understanding of what went on.

That's the nature of representation; every time we represent something we alter it and slightly change it. And so with that as my foundation, understanding that it's always fictional to some degree, I give myself a certain freedom to really explore and ask myself questions. What might not have been understood at that time? What might have been hidden at that time? What narrative in this particular image wasn't the primary image, but is really important? That is really interesting to me, and then I try to tease that out as much as I can.

BLONDIAU: So, with regard to your body of work that deals with mass incarceration, it's still representation, it's still slicing up history, but it's a different era. Why do people romanticize older histories?

KAPHAR: I'm not sure how to answer that question, but this is what it makes me think of; this is something that happens a lot: We look back at history, and there are certain people who say that we can't judge them based on our contemporary morals. I think that's a problematic argument, and the reason I think that's problematic is that it presumes a kind of moral superiority that we have access to only in this contemporary time, which makes no sense to me. I mean, ask ourselves, what are the things that our children are going to be saying, "Oh my god, how did you let that happen?" about?

BLONDIAU: What led you to create *The Destiny Project*?

KAPHAR: I had started *The Jerome Project*, which as you know is about the relationship with my father [and his incarceration]. ... I realized that I had been so focused on the impact of the criminal justice system on men that I really hadn't thought about it broadly enough to consider the impact on women and women of color in particular. So I started doing more research and this is the project that came about: *The Destiny Project*. It's a continuation of *The Jerome Project* series and this body of work is working with the same databases—mugshot.com, busted.com—finding these women who are all incarcerated, all of these photographs, and all these women have the same name.

And what's happening here is that there are three different individuals—three sets of eyes—and all of them have the same name. All of them are incarcerated, and there's this overlapping that happens, this blurring that happens, and it makes the image difficult to look at and focus on. It should be challenging, it should be uncomfortable, it shouldn't be a pretty picture that you look at and you feel good about. It should be disturbing on some level.

BLONDIAU: It's really emotional, actually, being in this room with these women looking out at you.

KAPHAR: Talk about emotional, I made this work and I found myself entering a depression that I was really troubled by, and I really had a hard time getting out of it.

When the Sandra Bland stuff happened, I was watching that footage over and over again. And I was saying, "Why are you doing this to yourself?" And I kept watching it, and I stopped it. And I thought, "What are you looking for?" And I realized that I was looking for the telltale moment to get some understanding of what was going on. And there was no moment. This whole tool of dashcam is rendered useless when people choose to do something as horrible yet simple as saying, "I'm just going to step out of this frame."

BLONDIAU: And the reason the dashcam isn't helpful is because of the person who has that camera, right? And so in a way the work that you're doing is holding up your own lens, and not having to rely on someone else's camera.

KAPHAR: Right. So I don't see this body of work and that body of work [related to historical figures] as truly disconnected. History is a continuum, it's not these separate moments. That's how we look at it.

In the 1700s in Virginia before there were police officers—there were these groups of men who would wander the countryside—and if they saw a black man or a black woman they would presume that that black man or woman was a slave. If you didn't have the kind of pass that you were supposed to have, then you could be whipped, you could be enslaved, you could be taken into custody—even if you were free. And as I'm reading this I find myself thinking, "How is this any different from stop-and-frisk?"

This is 10th Ave., one block from here, my brother—I was adopted when I was 15, this is my birth brother from Michigan—my brother says, "I want to see you." My mom is concerned about him because he's getting into trouble and she says, "Can you send him out to New York so he can talk to you and hang out with you and get himself back on track?" The first day was kind of boring; my brother didn't really want to talk about much. The second day, I talked to him a little bit. The third day, we were making some headway, and then finally he says, "You know, I want to go see your art." And I said "Really? You've got no interest in my art, but okay." So we came here and walked down the street, in and out of galleries, up and down the street. I thought we were going to be here for 15 to 20 minutes, and we stayed walking around for two hours, and he was just enjoying it, and we were talking about it.

After two hours of walking, an undercover police car speeds up to us, puts their guns up on us, and forces our hands up against a wall. They said, "We've been getting complaints that there are black men walking in and out of the galleries stealing art work. We've been following you for the last two hours." I have artwork in the gallery! Why would I be stealing it? That doesn't even make any sense.

My point is that it's not so different now. I'm not saying that things aren't better. Thank God they're definitely better, but some things are still the same. "Better" is not good enough—it's not. Especially when "better" still means my life is at risk.

TITUS KAPHAR'S "SHIFTING SKIES" IS ON VIEW AT JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY IN NEW YORK THROUGH JANUARY 28, 2017.

Titus Kaphar at Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

BY BLOUIN ARTINFO DATEBOOK | DECEMBER 19, 2016



Artwork from 'Shifting Skies' by Titus Kaphar
(Courtesy: Jack Shainman Gallery)

Jack Shainman Gallery in New York is hosting an exhibition "Shifting Skies" by Titus Kaphar that will be on view through January 28, 2017.

The exhibition is American artist Titus Kaphar's second solo with the gallery, which explores the power of rewritten histories examining the presumptuous notions of innocence and the mythology of heroics. Titus Kaphar's artworks are rich with cuts, bends, sculpts and amalgamation of Classic and Renaissance painting styles, creating formal interactions between fictions and quotations. "Shifting Skies" investigates into the highest and lowest forms of documented histories, attempting to merge the borders in American history by introspecting the possibilities of manipulation in them through the analysis of Historical portraiture, mug shots, and YouTube stills. Rather than exploring guilt or innocence, Kaphar engages the narratives of individuals and deciphers society's changing perceptions on them over time.

The exhibition is on view at both of Jack Shainman Gallery's Chelsea locations, 524 West 24th Street, New York and 513 West 20th Street, New York.

For details, visit: <http://www.jackshainman.com/> (<http://www.jackshainman.com/>)

HYPERALLERGIC

MUSEUMS

Reconstructing the Tattered History of a Fictional 19th-Century Family

Titus Kaphar's *The Vesper Project* is a complex, multimedia project that dissolves the boundary between reality and fiction.

Jillian Steinhauer | 3 days ago

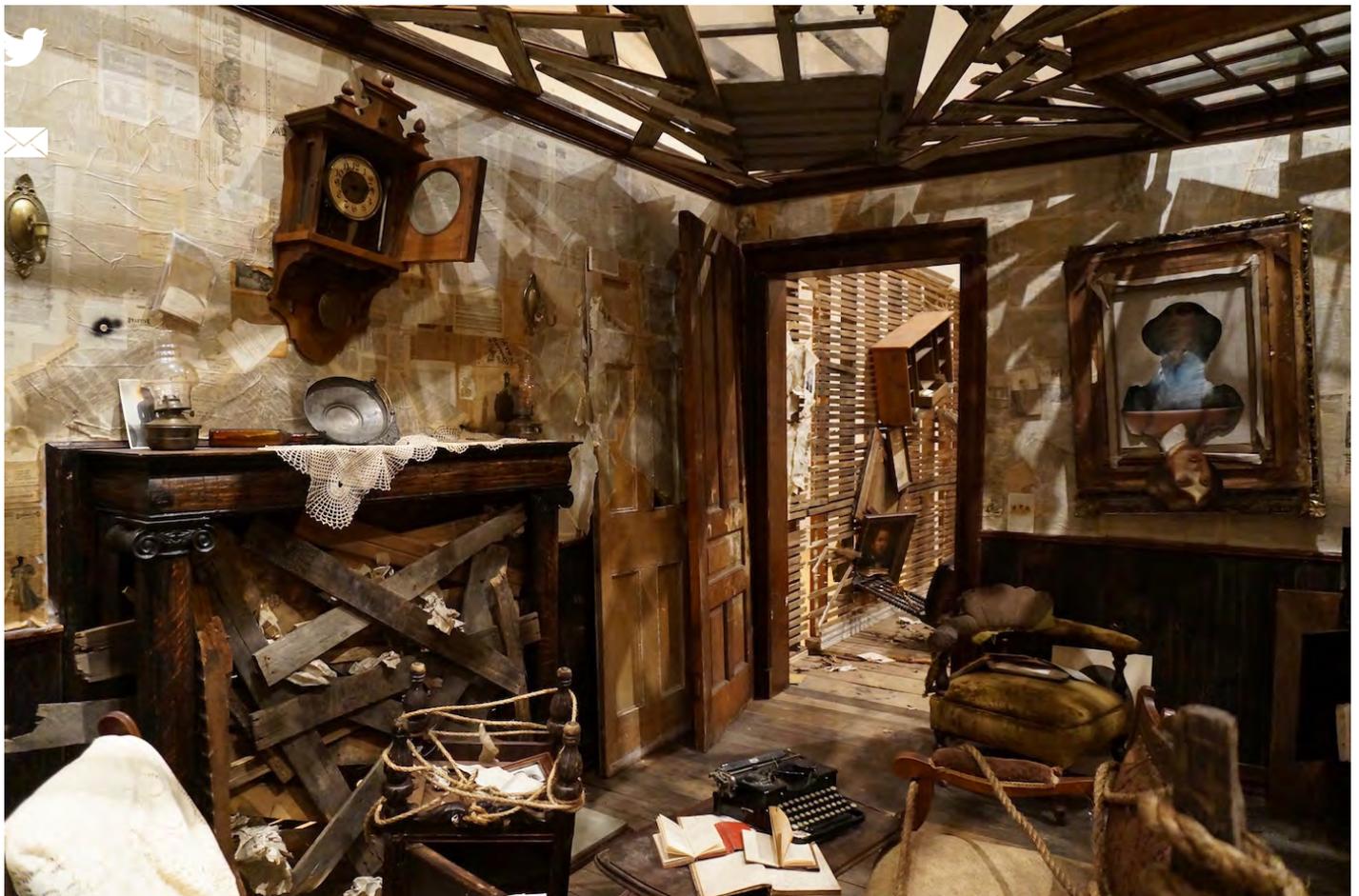


Titus Kaphar: *The Vesper Project* at the Lowe Art Museum, University of Miami (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

MIAMI — A wooden shack stands quietly in the middle of the room. It would be unassuming if it weren't taking up most of the white-walled gallery. The shack is a box, set at an angle but neatly contained within the space. It houses inside it two rooms overflowing with tumult.

Cut- and covered-up paintings, a boarded-up fireplace, dislodged tree branches, tipped-over furniture, strewn and scattered papers — this is just some of the evidence of destruction wreaked upon the house. Looking around, it's hard to guess what might have happened to hurl this domestic space into such a perfectly destroyed state. Did a hurricane sweep through, followed by scavengers? Was the family attacked or evicted? Did an occupant of the house have a psychotic break?

There is a right answer, as far as the artist's intentions go, but I'm not sure that it matters. What's more important is that Titus Kaphar has constructed a profoundly suggestive installation that dissolves the boundary between reality and fiction.



Inside the house in Titus Kaphar's *The Vesper Project*



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Inside the house in Titus Kaphar's *The Vesper Project*

That slippage was the impetus for *The Vesper Project*, currently on view at the [University of Miami's Lowe Art Museum](#). It grew out of an experience Kaphar had of recalling memories of his aunt while painting her portrait — only to realize that the memories weren't true. "It occurred to me that, for some reason, my brain had decided to insert her into periods in my life when I needed extra support," he [told the Huffington Post](#) in 2013 (when the work was first show at Friedman Benda gallery). "That left me reeling; it left me frightened. It made me feel as if I couldn't trust my own memory. I felt like I was losing my mind."

In fact, rather than going crazy, Kaphar was doing something that writers often speak of: hearing the voices of the characters in his work. He began to listen to and communicate with another one, a figure named Ben, in an exchange that lasted five years. It resulted in *The Vesper Project*, a complex, multimedia project centered on an elaborate and fictional history of a 19th-century mixed-race family named the Vespers.

The depth with which Kaphar plotted that history is articulated in a series of texts posted on the [project's website](#). Written in collaboration with Kwamena Blankson, they are transcriptions of documents from the Vesper archives, including poetic journal entries by Ben's aunt Maria and a memorandum outlining a course of treatment for Ben — who, as the story goes, was placed in a mental hospital after attacking a painting by Kaphar. This is part of what gives *The Vesper Project* its convincing confusion: the artist has written himself into it in such a way that he is one of the actors, not just an outside observer.



Burnt photographs in Titus Kaphar's *The Vesper Project*

Unfortunately, none of these documents or texts is on view, or even mentioned, at the Lowe. What we get instead are several glass cases at the entrance to the exhibition, filled with an assortment of objects that suggest a family history: children's books, a pocket watch, a candle holder, dozens of fading photographs. Many of the latter are ravaged in some way, dipped in tar or with the subjects' faces burned out. These marks not only foreshadow the state of the house we're about to enter but also connect to the key formal theme of Kaphar's work: creation by destruction.

The Vesper Project at the Lowe is filled out by two paintings and two sculptural installations that recall stage sets and are presumably further pieces of the house. But its heart is the wooden shack, which may be Kaphar's most ambitious elucidation of the destructive theme. The house is actually real — it's a 19th-century structure that Kaphar found, took apart, and rebuilt, and it infuses the work with an authentically musty smell. What's more impressive, however, is the way he has fictionalized it, transforming the interior into a meticulously crafted capsule of destruction. Every piece of the

installation — from the old newspapers plastered on the walls to the large crack rippling through the floor to the tree parts bound with rope — represents an act of disrepair or repair.

This includes two portraits that viewers might recognize as Kaphar's trademark: cutout and augmented canvases. On their own in gallery shows, these works read as clever commentary but also run the risk of becoming one-note; here, they gain much more purchase. Rather than being general statements on the shortcomings of art history, they evoke a specific, if incomplete, story. The house doesn't tell us which Vespers might have inhabited it or what happened to them, because it doesn't need to — the state of being torn apart is what holds it together.



Inside the house in Titus Kaphar's *The Vesper Project*

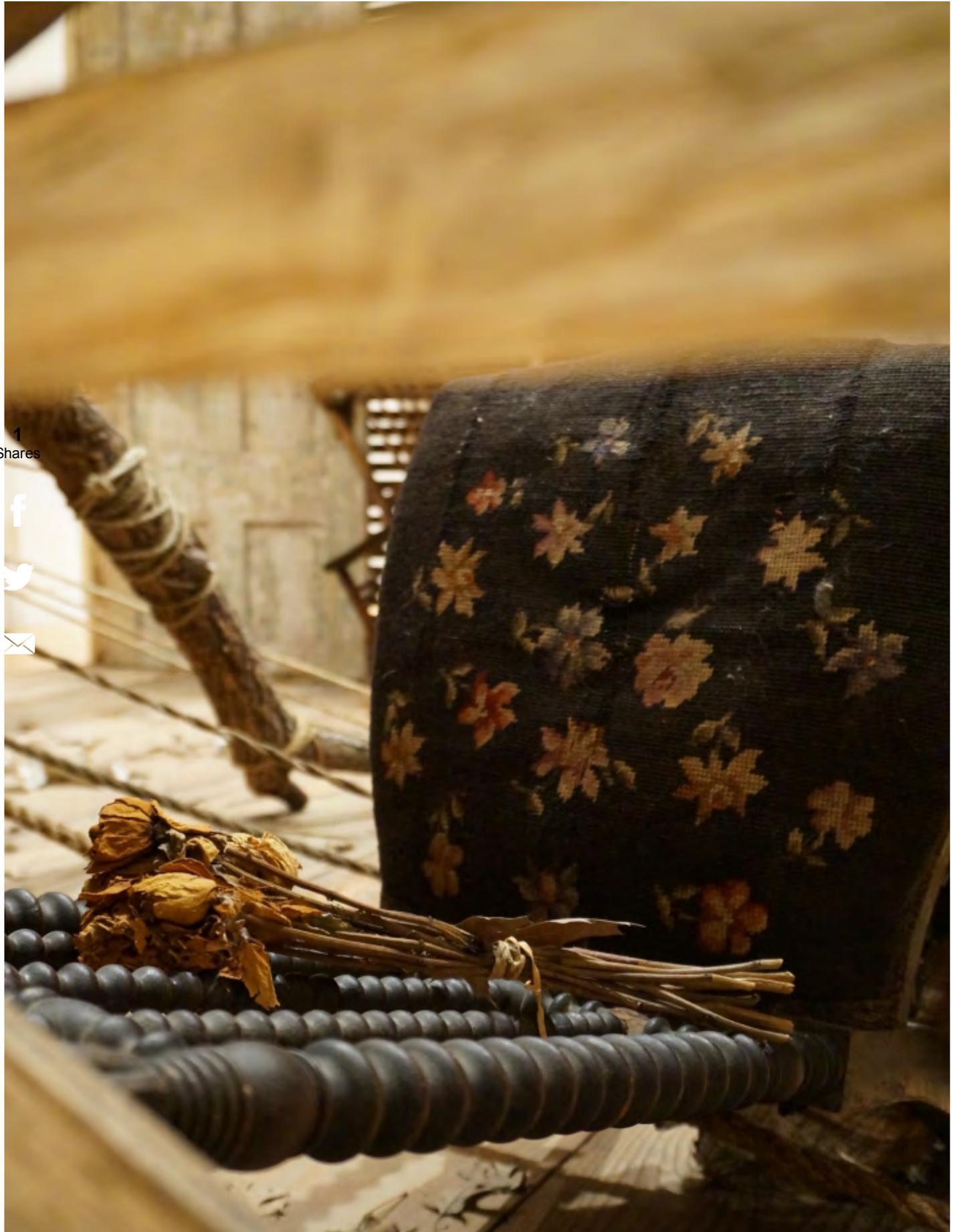




1
Shares



A painting in Titus Kaphar's *The Vesper Project*



1
Shares





Detail of the house in Titus Kaphar's *The Vesper Project*



Installation view, *Titus Kaphar: The Vesper Project* at the Lowe Art Museum, University of Miami





Detail of Titus Kaphar's *The Vesper Project*



Installation view, *Titus Kaphar: The Vesper Project* at the Lowe Art Museum, University of Miami

[Titus Kaphar: The Vesper Project continues at the Lowe Art Museum \(University of Miami, 1301 Stanford Drive, Coral Gables, FA\) through December 23.](#)

Art World

See the 10 Most Exciting Artists in the United States Today

Here's what to look out for in 2017.

Eileen Kinsella (<https://news.artnet.com/about/eileen-kinsella-22>), December 14, 2016

It's that time of the year when we pause to take stock of the artists that caught our eye in 2016, while also looking ahead at the packed roster of exciting museum and gallery exhibitions in the months to come across the United States. There is no shortage of dynamic artists to pay attention to right now, and that's a great thing, given the somber mood after a bruising, unprecedented presidential election.

With this in mind, artnet News brings you our picks for some of the most vibrant, exciting artists at work from coast to coast.



Titus Kaphar, *Yet Another Fight for Remembrance* (2014)
Image: Courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery

2. Titus Kaphar (b. Kalamazoo, MI. Lives and works in New York and Connecticut.)

Audiences can't seem to get enough of Titus Kaphar's masterful paintings that appropriate style and imagery across the canon, while addressing racism head on.

The artist debuted at New York's Shainman Gallery in 2015 with a splash—[a two-part solo show \(https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/titus-kaphar-takes-on-ferguson-takes-over-jack-shainman-217277\)](https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/titus-kaphar-takes-on-ferguson-takes-over-jack-shainman-217277) "Asphalt and Chalk" and "Drawing The Blinds" that capped a string of successes. *Time* magazine commissioned him to create a painting addressing the 2014 protests in Ferguson, Missouri. Titled, *Yet Another Fight for Remembrance* (2014), the piece depicted black men with their arms raised in the "hands up, don't shoot" pose that has been ubiquitous at demonstrations against police violence.

His next much-anticipated solo show at [Jack Shainman gallery \(http://www.artnet.com/galleries/jack-shainman-gallery/\)](http://www.artnet.com/galleries/jack-shainman-gallery/), "Shifting Skies," opens December 16, 2016 and runs through January 28, 2017.

TITUS KAPHAR

Visions of the Black Male Body in the Age of Mass Incarceration

LERONN P. BROOKS

IN 2014 THE ARTIST TITUS KAPHAR BEGAN A NEW AND VERY PERSONAL SERIES OF PAINTINGS ENTITLED *The Jerome Project*. Until this point, Kaphar had been most known for his paintings which critiqued the relationship between white supremacy, canonical paintings and the idea of blackness often subjugated within American and art histories. This was all very important, yet not as personal as his new series and its proposition to explore his troubled and distant relationship with his father who had been incarcerated. According to the artist:

My father and I had been out of contact for a long time. So I went online and I was randomly searching for other things, and then it came into my head: "I wonder what this dude is up to?" I looked up his name (we don't share a surname) and found 99 men with the same one. I was shocked about how many of them had similar criminal records, how many of them were black, and that got me thinking about what was going on with the system.¹

Searching for his father's prison records, Kaphar was surprised to discover an alarming number of police photographs of black men who, like his father, were named Jerome. The name then became a gathering point from which to start a much larger discussion about history, black men, criminality and mass-incarceration.

Kaphar's *The Jerome Project* invites important questions about the vulnerability and humanity of black men within the system of mass incarceration. The United States imprisons more people than any other nation, and mass incarceration empowers the exploitation of labor in prisons. What's more, histories of racist legislation — relative to the post-emancipation eras of the Black Codes, convict leasing, and chain gangs — have served to criminalize black men, subject them to racist legal decisions relative to their offenses (if, in fact there were any at all). Once incarcerated, they are subject to the exploitation of private companies working with prisons who exploit their labor. Therefore, whether or not the crime committed was drug related, racist forms of punishment have exploited and silenced black men and their labor.

The artist works his way through the reality of, and his connection to, mass incarceration with a complex examination of the subject-as-concept. Paintings such as *My Loss* (2014) evoke the long tradition of gilded icons and alter pieces with Western religious art but here that history is conflated with a contemporary American political icon: the incarcerated black male. Holy portraits meet mug shots. The tar covering their mouths and, at times, their entire faces, suggests the brutal silencing associated with incarceration and the overwhelming structural power of institutional racism. The percentage of tar on each panel represents the amount of time each man is, or was, imprisoned. Their faces sink behind these masks and rarely smile. The tar's historical relationship to lynching juxtaposed with the gilded background (and religious connotations) brings the viewer closer to the conceptual tension at the center of the work: condemnation and martyrdom layered onto salvation.

Therefore, the inevitable tension exists between the beauty of the paintings and the reality of its subjects. "Beauty is often a hard word in contemporary art right now, but I definitely wanted the paintings to be beautiful." Kaphar stated:

I wanted people to look at these black men on the wall and say they are beautiful. Then to realize these are men who are incarcerated — that moment of confusion where you are trying to manage the reality of beauty and incarceration is part of the project's goal.²

Kaphar's figures are without bodies, their facial expressions alone suggest the presence of forms you do not see, but can sense. The incarcerated, as property of the state, are subjected to often-brutal forms of confinement and policing. And in this way, the idea of condemnation and criminality are tied to visions of the black male as not only an illegal object but one that can be locked away, erased, and subject to social death while incarcerated and after their release due to punitive federal laws. The reality of incarceration sticks like tar. The men do not own themselves but American history does recognize them as the inheritors of dehumanization and subjugation.



Titus Kaphar
The Jerome Project (The Studio Museum, Installation View)
2014
Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

TITUS KAPHAR: VISIONS OF THE BLACK MALE BODY
IN THE AGE OF MASS INCARCERATION



Titus Kaphar
The Jerome Project
2014
Oil, gold leaf, and tar on wood panel, a
76 1/2 x 59 1/2 x 3 3/4"
Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York



Men such as those depicted in *The Jerome Project* carry the burden of the contemporary legacies such as Jim Crow segregation and now the effects of mass incarceration. The institutional forces of the judicial system work their priorities onto black bodies, thus perpetuating the legacies of Jim Crow segregation. Currently, the system of mass incarceration affects black lives by criminalizing them.

Criminalization is defined as the process of transforming individuals and their behaviors into criminals and crime. Therefore, black lives, whatever their offenses or their actions, can be criminalized too easily. While the mass incarceration of black men is primarily associated with non-violent drug offenses, Kaphar's many "Jeromes" are represented as subject to the same forces of social and legal condemnation behind the general assumption of black males and criminality. In *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America*, author Khalil Muhammad argues that crime as tied to race — as skewed statistical matter of criminology in relation to policy and governance — has devastated black communities. As a result of this economy of criminality, black people are subject to unfair rates of incarceration validated by the perception of their behavior as inherently immoral (anti-social and pre-modern) and their black bodies (especially those of black men), are assumed to be threats to the public good and therefore are disproportionately inclined to be, and deserving of, punishment, confinement and other forms of discipline. Thus, the apparatuses of criminalization are legislative, judicial, and social forces working against the idea of black humanity by processing black bodies through the popular and legislative mechanisms of condemnation.

The mass-incarceration of black men also extends back to slavery and the then-lawful practices within Jim Crow segregation. Kaphar has cited the work of scholar Michele Alexander and her important work on criminalization and mass incarceration as being important to the context of his work. In *The New Jim Crow*, Alexander states poignantly that:

Since this nation's founding, African Americans repeatedly have been controlled through institutions such as slavery and Jim Crow, which appear to die, but then are reborn in new form, tailored to the needs and constraints of the time. [...] Following the collapse of each system of control, there has been a period of confusion—transition—in which those who are most committed to racial hierarchy search for new means to achieve their goals within the rules of the game as currently defined. It is during this period of uncertainty that the backlash intensifies and a new form of racialized social control begins to take hold.³

Kaphar's mixed-media paintings are insightful re-articulations of the effects of these societal and judiciary forces on the black body. And as suggested by Alexander, there is also an intergeneration of tensions and dialogue evidenced in the work. Kaphar's *Jerome Project* poses the question of how the fact of their criminalization and incarceration should not deny his father and the many other "Jeromes" new contexts in which to be seen, envisioned as beautiful, and more importantly, worthy of familial redemption.

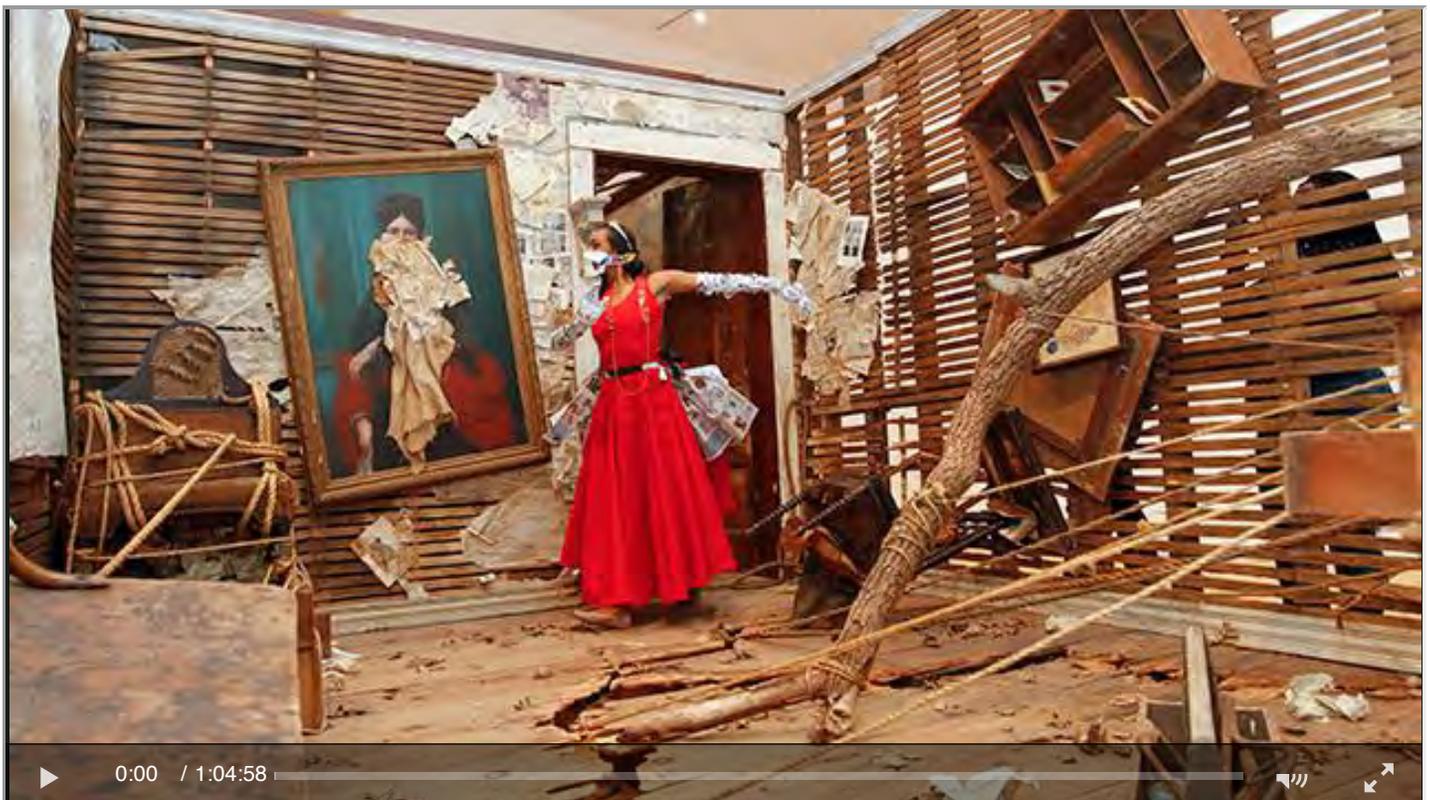
LeRonn Brooks received his PhD in art history from the CUNY Graduate Center. He is an Assistant Professor at Lehman College, CUNY and is the host of the talk show *culture/context*.

Endnotes

1. Antwaun Sargent, "Artist Titus Kaphar on His First Solo Show and Unarmed Black Men in America," *Vice*. 15 Jan, 2015. Web. 13 Jan 2016.
2. Ibid.
3. Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 21.

VIDEO: Titus Kaphar Talks Race, History, and Personal Experience at Anderson Ranch

BY TAYLOR DAFOE | SEPTEMBER 14, 2016



"The Vesper Project," by Titus Kaphar, now on view at the Lowe Art Museum at the University of Miami.
(Photo by Andrew Innerarity)

"When people look at my work, and they talk about my work, a lot of times they talk about it in the context of this sort of social and political work," said New Haven-based artist Titus Kaphar as he began his recent talk at Anderson Ranch Arts Center. "I understand that, but for me, it always comes from a really personal place, some experience that I've had — something that's affected me directly, and I've decided to take it to the studio."

Kaphar's talk was delivered on July 7 as part of Anderson Ranch's Summer Series of panels and discussions featuring artists, curators, critics, and collectors. The artist, known for his multimedia practice that investigates, appropriates, and even invents history — particularly African-American history — went on to speak about his most important projects to date, his role as a teacher (of others and himself), and his relationship to the complex narratives of art history. Kaphar's work feels deeply personal, and indeed his presentation came off that way as well.

The talk was also timely, as one of Kaphar's most ambitious and well-known works, "The Vesper Project," went on view last week at the Lowe Art Museum at the University of Miami. "The Vesper Project" creates an elaborate history for the Vespers, a fictional 19th-century New England family who are able to pass as white in their community though they're legally black. The immersive project features chunks of period architecture and furniture, recreations of old paintings and photographs, and more. For a closer look at the exhibition, [click here](#).

Kaphar's work was also included in the recent exhibition and political project "For Freedoms" at Jack Shainman in New York.

This is the third edition of Anderson Ranch's Summer Series. Other speakers this summer have included Carrie Mae Weems, Charles Ray, Ann Philbin, Jerry Saltz, Eleanore and Domenico De Sole, Alex Prager, Liza Lou, and the Haas Brothers.

ARTINFO is presenting videos of all the Summer Series talks. You can find the previous talks [here](#) published over the next few weeks.

Art installation examines America's history and racial past

September 14, 2016



Multimedia works by Yale School of Art alumnus Titus Kaphar featuring reconfigurations of two early 18th-century portraits of Elihu Yale. (Photo courtesy of Yale University Art Gallery)

A fall installation at the Yale University Art Gallery on the theme "American History Revisited" brings together paintings, sculptures, and photographs by several contemporary artists who reflect on American history in diverse ways.

The installation, in the Modern and Contemporary Art permanent galleries on the third floor, is designed to be in conversation with the issues explored in Carrie Mae Weems' "Grace Notes: Reflections for Now," a new work by the photographer and visual artist that was recently performed at the Yale Repertory Theatre. "Grace Notes" examines themes of social justice, race, and identity in the context of our historical moment.

Some of the artwork on view explores the roles of both the victims and profiteers of the slave trade in the founding of the United States, while others reexamine specific events from the nation's past or contemplate the absence of African Americans from historical accounts. For

Works from Carrie Mae Weems' "Slave Coast" series (1993) are pictured here with Martin Puryear's bronze sculpture "Le Prix" (2006).

instance, Weems' photographic series "Slave Coast" alludes to the West African coast where millions of slaves were held and shipped abroad, reclaiming sites of past violence and oppression.

Martin Puryear merges purist formal language with traditional craftsmanship to create allegorical sculptures that point to centuries of slavery and raise questions about identity and culture.



The installation also questions the role that venerated American institutions such as Yale have played in the racial narrative. Many of the school's prominent benefactors were involved and profited from the slave trade and colonialism, including its namesake, Elihu Yale. Titus Kaphar, a graduate of the Yale School of Art, uses two early 18th-century portraits of Elihu Yale from the gallery's collection as a starting point to scrutinize and respond to his actions.

On Dec. 1, Weems will deliver the Andrew Carnduff Ritchie Lecture at the gallery.

The installation will be on view through the fall. The Yale University Art Gallery, 1111 Chapel St., is open Tuesday-Friday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. (until 8 p.m. on Thursday evenings), and Saturday and Sunday, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. It is free and open to the public.

ARTNEWS

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG FOUNDATION ANNOUNCES 2016 ARTIST AS ACTIVIST FELLOWS

BY *Hannah Ghorashi*

06/29/16 2:03 PM

The Robert Rauschenberg Foundation has announced the winners of its 2016 Artist as Activist Fellowship, a two-year program that funds U.S.-based artists and artist collectives whose work addresses critical social issues. The 2016 awardees are Maria Gaspar, The Graduates, Titus Kaphar, Los Angeles Poverty Department, Jeremy Robins/Echoes of Incarceration, Favianna Rodriguez, Paul Rucker, El Sawyer, jackie sumell, and Shontina Vernon. They are each planning to create works that “address the intersections between race, class, and mass incarceration,” according to a press release.

The group of artists, which together represent Baltimore, Chicago, Los Angeles, New Orleans, New York, Oakland, Seattle, and Philadelphia, have planned a variety of projects and interventions that will address juvenile detention, the effects of incarceration on inmates’ children, the difficulties of re-assimilation, economic, social, and political links between immigration and increased rates of incarceration, the severe and long-lasting effects of solitary confinement, the economic incentives that drive the prison industrial complex, and more.

ARTFORUM

SEPTEMBER 2015



Titus Kaphar,
The Vesper Project
(detail), 2008–13,
mixed media,
dimensions variable.
Installation view.

CINCINNATI

Titus Kaphar

CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTER

The story goes that, while looking at a portrait by Titus Kaphar hanging in the Yale University Art Gallery in New Haven, a man named Benjamin Vesper suffered a sudden psychotic break and attacked the painting. The man was hospitalized but later escaped, and was eventually found squatting in an abandoned nineteenth-century house that he insisted belonged to his family. The history goes that the ancestral Vespers were a well-to-do, mixed-race family living in Reconstruction-era Connecticut. Their light skin allowed them to “pass” as white until an unplanned pregnancy thwarted the proposed marriage between a Vesper daughter and the son of a wealthy white shipping magnate, ultimately exposing the Vesper family’s racial secret and hurtling them into financial and social ruin. Nineteenth-century America’s convoluted legislation banning interracial marriage often deferred to the so-called one-drop rule, which recognized all persons with even negligibly distant African ancestry as legally Negro. In the uncertain space where story and history converge, disrupt, and distort each other, Titus Kaphar’s *The Vesper Project*, 2008–13, takes form. The artist’s creative authorship versus the historical facticity of the show’s backstory is left intentionally opaque in the work’s presentation and in Kaphar’s commentary. Here, a haphazard structure of wood lathing and broken furniture crammed with objects and detritus ostensibly taken from the blighted Vesper house is installed in the third-floor gallery of the Contemporary Arts Center (in a show of Kaphar’s work that remains on view through October 11). The structure, fastidiously and compulsively arranged, yet barely holding together as a stable unit, is flanked by Kaphar’s dream-like photographs and historical paintings modified via techniques of obfuscation including burning, cutting, whitewashing, and dipping in tar (all staples of the artist’s larger painting oeuvre). As a whole, the installation reads like a gigantic talisman of domestic and psychic volatility: a precarious interior architecture choked by the pieces nailed, ripped, bound, and dangled from its extremities.

Kaphar’s ongoing confrontations with the fungible terrains of history and memory are rendered in a high-pitched spatial reconstruction of what “losing it,” in the artist’s words, might look and feel like. The claustrophobic density of the work, which is as obsessively manipulated as it is out of control, is punctuated throughout by slivers of open air, light, and empty space within the structure. These disruptions force the viewer to question whether he is confronting a resolved image or merely a hallucination. Evenly spaced hangings, well-established sight lines, and the pervading logic and clarity of the surrounding architecture all play purposefully against the central pandemonium of the work’s ephemeral atmosphere.

This installation of *The Vesper Project* also marks the first time it has been exhibited alongside *The Jerome Project*, 2011–, another multi-stage undertaking, which Kaphar debuted at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2011. “Asphalt and Chalk,” 2014–, the portion of the project here on view, is a series of large-scale chalk portraits on black asphalt paper. Spare white contour lines form schematic but charged images of faces overlain atop one another, creating a multiple-exposure effect that precludes the possibility of knowing exactly “whom” one is looking at. Researching his father’s prison records, Kaphar came across a striking number of mugshots of men who shared the elder Kaphar’s name, Jerome. This personal face-off with the disorienting archives of the criminal-justice system inspired the project, in which portraits of Tamir Rice, Trayvon Martin, and other publicly recognized victims of police violence are incorporated into the field of semi-anonymous Jeromes that forms the series’ base. Kaphar’s retracing of the material evidence of individuals in the public record produces a kind of anti-archive of precarious persons, a collection of composites that speaks to the simultaneous hypervisibility and invisibility of black men in America. Kaphar commandeers the procedures and materials of investigative police work: collections of mug shots, outlines in chalk, bare asphalt as ground. The *Vesper* and *Jerome* projects, which repurpose the material leavings of narratives historically marked as criminal or deviant to punch holes in the logics of recorded history, cumulatively raise timely and essential questions about the basic frameworks of truth and experience.

—Brynn Hatton

The New York Times

ART & DESIGN | CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Raging at Racism, From Streets to Galleries

Smack Mellon and Grey Art Display Art Sparked by Politics

By HOLLAND COTTER JAN. 22, 2015



"Jerome I" (2014)
from Titus Kaphar's
"The Jerome Project"
at the Studio Museum
in Harlem.

Courtesy the artist and
Jack Shainman Gallery,
New York

On Dec. 3, a grand jury declined to indict a white New York City police officer for the chokehold death of an unarmed black Staten Island resident, Eric Garner. Anger at the verdict, particularly on the part of African-Americans, already stung by the police killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo., was intense. Street protests flared across the country in perhaps the largest public display of resistance since the 1960s.

The same day the Garner judgment came down, one of the biggest contemporary art fairs, [Art Basel Miami](#), opened in Florida. As accounts of demonstrations flooded social media, [Art Basel](#) posted breathless reports of strong early sales. For the next five days, dealers stuck to their booths; artists, curators and collectors schmoozed at pools and

bars. The only protest came from outraged V.I.P.'s left off the guest list for a Miley Cyrus gig.

In some ways, it's kind of nuts to compare a real world of life-or-death crises with cash-machine art fairs. Yet there are things to be learned by placing them side by side. Our culture still encourages us to view art as a conveyor of higher values. The commercial art world has built a lucrative power base on that very myth of specialness, while shaping itself into a mini-version of American elitism: dominantly white; sealed off by privilege.

That, of course, is far from the entire art world story. On Dec. 3, Smack Mellon, a nonprofit alternative space in Brooklyn, heard the grand jury news and swung into action. The gallery's directors, Kathleen Gilrain and Suzanne Kim, rearranged their exhibition schedule, pooled mailing lists compiled by six artists in residence — Esteban del Valle, Molly Dilworth, Oasa DuVerney, Ira Eduardovna, Steffani Jemison and Dread Scott — and sent out an open Internet call for art that directly addressed issues of racism, police violence and social justice. More than 600 proposals or finished pieces soon arrived (more are still coming in), some 200 of which make up a knockout group show with a commanding title: "Respond."

Much of the work is installed salon-style, six pieces deep, in the gallery's two-story-high front space. And it ranges across generations, from a 1985 painting of a salivating police dog in South Africa by Jerry Kearns, and a 1993 Mel Chin sculpture that turns a nightstick into a rapper's microphone, to entries by young artists like Faith Briggs, Elliott Brown and Maya Mackrandilal, who are showing in New York for the first time. The large quantity of painting and drawing gives lie to complaints about the underdog status of these forms, while the predominance of figurative work is a welcome departure from the current craze for abstraction.

Needless to say, much of what's here is topically on point. (One of the few abstract paintings, by Anthea Behm, is done with pepper spray.) Several artists — Albert Areizaga, Mensa Kondo, Ashleigh Sampson, Rudy Shepherd — contribute portraits of Mr. Brown. Mr. Garner's recorded last words, "I can't breathe," and variations on them, circulate like a mantra. They appear as a headline in a newspaper tossed on a chair in an oil painting by Sandra Koponen; as written phrases layered to the point of obliteration in a digital print by Jessica Goehring; and in dialogue boxes in a fine multipart narrative drawing by Rashid Johnson, who sent the piece from a Texas prison where he's an inmate. Mr. Johnson's work, which goes back in time, opens the show to histories. Trayvon Martin's hooded face looms like a giant rose in a 2013 collage of Arizona bottle labels and Skittles wrappers by Amanda Barragry. And in a 2004 film still by Tami Gold the mothers of three victims of police assault — Anthony Baez, Amadou Diallo and Gary Busch — stand side by side with pictures of their children.

Politicized portraiture is also the focus of exhibitions elsewhere in New York. In paintings of male faces by Titus Kaphar at the Studio Museum in Harlem all the subjects are named Jerome but the images are of different people. When searching the Internet a few years back for his father's prison records, the artist came across a mug-shot site with pictures of recently arrested black men, all of whom had his father's name. He painted the faces against a gold ground, like Byzantine icons, then dipped them in tar just far

enough to cover the mouth, obscuring the features, but also suggesting the crippling political silence imposed by the consignment of a high percentage of black men to prison.

Among the people who saw “The Jerome Project” at the Studio Museum was a picture editor for Time magazine, which then commissioned the artist to illustrate its 2014 “Person of the Year” cover. The “person” honored in that artwork, which eventually ran inside, was a collective one: the protesters who took to the streets in Ferguson. (One of them, the artist Damien Davis, is in the Smack Mellon show.) Mr. Kaphar rendered the figures as ghostly presences, hands in the air, faces swiped with white paint as if bandaged. He titled the painting, which is in a show at the Jack Shainman Gallery in Chelsea, “Yet Another Fight for Remembrance,” as if acknowledging in advance the likelihood that awareness of civil rights causes will soon be lost to the news cycle.

The figures in Mr. Kaphar’s Time spread are anonymous. The people in Bradley McCallum’s “Portraits of Justice” series at Kinz & Tillou Fine Art are not. The dozen men seen close-up are, or have been, on trial for crimes against humanity at the International Criminal Court in The Hague. They include Kang Kek Iew, former leader of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, who oversaw prisons notorious for the torture there. He is now in prison for life. And there’s Thomas Lubanga Dyilo, leader of lethal armies of child soldiers in the Democratic Republic of Congo, who was sentenced to a mere 14 years. Trials of other defendants are still underway.

Mr. McCallum, of Brooklyn, has supplemented — you could say softened — these subtly monstrous portrait paintings with photographs in a small group show, “Post Conflict,” which he has organized at the gallery. Most of these pictures — by Pieter Hugo, Alfredo Jaar and Lana Mesic — are of two people standing side by side or embracing. These are survivors of the 1980s civil war in Rwanda, though from different sides of the conflict — one member was the victim of violent assault; the other was the perpetrator. Through a long, intensive process of contrition and forgiveness, they have, impossible though it seems, learned to live with a horrific shared past.

Reconciliation is a tone seldom struck in “Respond,” where a sense of anger and grievance feels fresh, even when projected back into history. A deftly brushed painting by Nicky Enright evokes an example of quietly and persistently furious protest art from the past: the black banner emblazoned with the words “A Man Was Lynched Yesterday” that the N.A.A.C.P. used to fly from the window of its Fifth Avenue headquarters between 1920 and 1938, whenever reports of racially based murders came in.

Mr. Enright’s picture, a reminder of how far we are now from such public gestures of accountability, would fit right in to “The Left Front: Radical Art in the ‘Red Decade,’ 1929-1940” at [Grey Art Gallery](#), New York University, a carefully researched traveling show of political art assembled by the Mary and Leigh Block Museum at Northwestern University, with the scholars John Murphy and Jill Bugajski as curators.

The works were made during the Depression, by artists, many of them European émigrés, dismayed by racism and poverty and confident of left-wing solutions to these wrongs. Maybe because so much of what they did was by-the-book ideology driven — as

most of what's in "Respond" is not — a certain consistency of style and tone prevails: realism and indignation. These features are often cited as political art's inherent limitation, the reason it's doomed to look dated, flat-footed and aesthetically second-tier.

As a genre, it does have problems. It easily can be too obviously on-message, seeking agreement followed by action. Even a fair amount of the work in "Response" is of this sort. It isn't in the business of giving you sigh-over beauty, though there are some surprising delicacies here. (Look, for example, for an ethereal text piece by Colin Chase; Ann Johnson's portrait of a singer, Michele Thibeaux, hand-printed on a feather; and SOL'SAX's shimmery transformation of protesters in Detroit into African dancers.) In the end, it's the show as a whole, its massed voice, that is so impressive, and heartening.

The take-away message from seeing it and the Grey Gallery show together is how little has changed: Economic inequity, class division and racism are as potent and intransigent as ever. A 1932 print by Prentiss Taylor protesting the trial, on false charges, of nine black teenagers in Scottsboro, Ala., and Shani Jamila's 2014 photo of a "No Justice!! No Peace!!" placard in Ferguson tell the same basic story. Maybe the big variable lies in attitude. For the art world of the 1930s, social progress hadn't happened yet; the mainstream art world of 2015 doesn't believe in progress. It only believes in recycling cycles and tweaking them.

"Respond" doesn't come from that world, and it takes a fundamentally different position on the subject of what is and can be. It is asserting, in a very old way, that there's a proactive link between images and ethics, between art and life, studio and street. That link isn't the be all and end all of art, but it's real and may, as Mr. Kaphar hopes, sustain a now-aroused hunger for change. If nothing else, it has produced a soundtrack of shouts, cries, chants and whispers to set against the wall of insulating white noise that enwraps the art world at large.

"Respond" runs through Feb. 22 at Smack Mellon, 92 Plymouth Street at Washington Street, Dumbo, Brooklyn; 718-834-8761, smackmellon.org. "The Left Front: Radical Art in the 'Red Decade,' 1929-1940" runs through April 4 at Grey Art Gallery, New York University, 100 Washington Square East, Greenwich Village; 212-998-6780, nyu.edu/greyart/.



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An Interview With Titus Kaphar

by Ladi'Sasha Jones, Public Programs Coordinator, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture March 6, 2015

As the millennial generation is charged with shifting the country's policing practices and devaluation of Black humanity, artist Titus Kaphar and The Jerome Project makes those impacted by our criminal justice system visible and human rather than statistics of mass incarceration and criminalization. This is a high time to interrogate the (re)memory of our American experience and collective relationship to its criminal justice system.

We are still asking the same questions of this country and ourselves as we did 50 years ago during the Civil Rights Movement. The same questions that reflect those asked 150 years ago when the 36th Congress issued the 13th Amendment, laying the foundation for the modern American prison system.

It is these parallel legacies of America's past and contemporary constructions of Black humanity which framed my interview with Titus Kaphar around The Jerome Project and his recent show at Jack Shainman Gallery in Chelsea.



The Jerome Project, installation image at the Studio Museum in Harlem. Photo credit, Terrence Jennings

Knowing how influential Michelle Alexander's scholarship and more specifically, *The New Jim Crow*, was for the Jerome Project, what else was on your reading list? May you share some of your findings or discoveries that emerged during your research on the criminal justice system and mass incarceration?

The most recent book on this subject that has been truly pivotal in my thinking on this subject is Vesla Weaver and Amy Lerman's book *Arresting Citizenship*. When it comes to the issue of jails and prisons, there are a lot of folks who haven't had to deal with this system directly who believe that if you find yourself wrapped up in it, you probably deserve it, so what happens to you while you are incarcerated doesn't concern them. Vesla and Amy's book does a fantastic job of showing us how, not simply inhumane, but how flawed that reasoning is. They show us how "custodial citizens" those folks who have found themselves in the criminal justice system through jail, parole or probation, and those citizens who find themselves in communities that are heavily policed, are learning about democracy through a system that doesn't in fact represent the values of the nation as a whole. Their book leaves me with a question. What is the impact of our criminal justice system on our conception of democracy itself? What does it imply about us that we so easily strip the freedoms of our citizens of the values that we hold most sacred as a nation?

January 31 marks the 150th anniversary of the 13th amendment. It was passed by congress on January 31, 1865 then signed by Abraham Lincoln on February 1, 1865. Georgia was the last state to ratify the amendment on December 6, 1865, making slavery "unconstitutional" through the U.S. What kind of feelings and thoughts this landmark anniversary might evoke in you as it relates to the question of Black humanity?



As significant and remarkable of an event that was, I think we often forget that in our correctional institutions in this country, slavery is not fully dead. Many of the abuses that occurred during slavery were refashioned. Douglas Blackmon delineates the specifics of what he calls "slavery by another name" that continued on for decades after the signing of the 13th amendment, Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* shows us how that system transitioned into the contemporary prison industrial complex that we are left with today.

Titus Kaphar, Behind the Myth of Benevolence, 2014, oil on canvas, 72 x 60 inches. Jack Shainman Gallery

Your work draws on iconic historical artworks in its examination of past and contemporary histories. Arturo Schomburg begins his seminal 1925 essay, “The Negro Digs Up His Past” by stating, “The American Negro must remake his past in order to make his future.” What do you believe to be the role or legacy of Black archival collections in relationship to a more radical future for Black folks across the African Diaspora?

That’s a difficult question to answer for me. I think it would be hard for me to say what the roles of Black archival collections are in general. My personal use for them is as a catalyst for inspiration and a source for research in my varied projects. It’s these kinds of archives that often stand as my defense when I’m told that the kind of imagery or narrative that I am drawing from doesn’t exist.

Do you believe there needs to be a connection between contemporary resistance movements and the art and cultural production of Black artists? What space do Black cultural art institutions occupy within the landscape of contemporary art production?

I don’t think that that should be a dictate. I think that the problems of this world will be a natural outgrowth of some artists’ practice and the celestial and ineffable will be the focus of others. Attempting to create mandates for the production of art in and of itself can be the death nail to creativity. I think the role of these institutions function best as inspiration for production, space making for production (i.e. artist residencies) and as an advocate for the art that is finally produced.



Titus Kaphar, Yet Another Fight for Rememberance, 2014, oil on canvas, 60 x 48 inches. Jack Shainman Gallery

As you utilize interventions of erasure, historical fact and fiction, and “whitewashing” in your paintings and drawings, do you see yourself as a contributor to constructions of a collective rememory of Black American history?

I don't know that I've ever thought about it in those terms. I find myself trying to present a more nuanced version of what I know exists but what I don't often see in many museums or popular media. This draws me to discussions of absence, invisibility or erasure. In many of my projects, I rely on the research of folks who came before me and in their work I see an emphasis on re-memory that leave its residue on my work. I think it's important for this issue of rememory to be engaged beyond communities of color. Many of the works in this last exhibition address not exclusively, but fundamentally American challenges. It seems to me that there won't be significant progress until the entire nation takes on this issue of re-memory. Otherwise, what happens is that certain groups in the country continue to write fictional histories and call them textbooks that gloss over the tragedies of American history.

[Watch the Livestream studio salon conversation between Titus Kaphar and Dr. Khalil G. Muhammad.](#)



The New York Times *Style Magazine*

Retrospectives of Balthus and Brian Weil, Graham Little's Renaissance Redux and More From the Art Calendar

BY [JOHNNY MAGDALENO](#)

January 12, 2015 2:30 pm

T's list of happenings worth visiting in the week ahead.

THURSDAY, NEW YORK

Timely, powerful works by one of 2014's biggest names

Although his work surged in popularity last year in tandem with national protests over police violence against people of color, Titus Kaphar's paintings have always been a platform for searing, intelligent commentary on race and power throughout Western history. Jack Shainman Gallery is hosting shows at two locations to commemorate his work: "Drawing the Blinds" at the gallery's West 20th Street location, and "Asphalt and Chalk" at its West 24th Street location.

Opening reception from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. at both locations, on view through Feb. 21, Jack Shainman Gallery, 513 West 20th Street and 524 West 24th Street, New York, jackshainman.com



Left: *Behind the Myth of Benevolence* from Titus Kaphar's exhibition on view at two Jack Shainman locations through Feb. 21. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

frieze



CONSTRUCTED PHOTOGRAPHY *New Directions*
 IDA ERBLAD *talks to Zoe Dyer*
Walking across Africa PAULO HAZARETH
 W.A.G.E. *Payment for Artists*
Reviews Special: 15 COUNTRIES, 28 CITIES

TITUS KAPHAR

Jack Shainman Gallery,
New York

Contemporary artists interested in race and gender often seek to revise history's exclusionary narratives, written primarily by white men, by inserting non-white, non-male bodies into pictorial conventions that have traditionally ignored them. Titus Kaphar, in his first solo show at both branches of Jack Shainman Gallery, did this and more in his examination of US iconography. The name of the exhibition in the gallery's main space, 'Drawing the Blinds', came from his series of historical portraits of white gentry that are peeled back, like curtains, to expose images of their black mistresses and slaves underneath. Also showcased were multi-figure compositions – re-created genre scenes of a sentimental variety, which cover or remove principal figures to bring black background actors into focus. In *Gift of Shrouded Descent* (2014), for instance, the triumphant man at the centre is wrapped, mummy-like, under yellow-stained canvas, drawing attention to the black boy in patronizingly 'exotic' garb on the right. *Space to Forget* (2014) shows a servant on all fours with a child-shaped hole on her back.

These works complicate the notion that presence alone is restorative. Kaphar's figures remain tangled in the imbalanced power structures at play in the paintings' first iterations. The black characters existed in the original canvases, though overlooked; the missing figures in the revised versions are without race, though their dominant positions in these intentionally outmoded constructs suggest they're white.

In Ferguson, Missouri, the fatal shooting of an 18-year-old black man by a white police officer last August provoked protest and civil unrest in a community where tensions between the majority-black population and the majority-white city government and

police are longstanding. Events there inspired Kaphar's *Yet Another Time for Remembrance* (2014), the central piece in 'Asphalt and Chalk' in the gallery's second space, and a work originally commissioned by *TIME* magazine. Protestors, covered with streaks of white paint, march with their arms up – a depiction that memorializes their struggle while anticipating that this history, too, will be whitewashed. The focus on contemporary events continues in selections from Kaphar's 'Jerome Project' (2011–ongoing), mixed-media portraits of incarcerated men found on mugshot websites who share his father's name. He canonizes them with round, gold-leaf paintings that look devotional, and with black and white chalk sketches that soften their likenesses.

Ultimately, though, Kaphar seems less interested in rehabilitating his subjects than in making conspicuous the processes through which they fall prey to historical erasure or, as in the mugshots, skewed representation. *Stripes* (2014) and *Tax Collector* (2011), from 'Drawing the Blinds', bravely show what it might look like for white figures to receive comparable treatment. In *Stripes*, a blue-eyed man in a powdered wig (a Founding Father, perhaps) is reduced to abstraction, the canvas cut into strips that are nailed, or crucified, to the wall around the frame. The subject of *Tax Collector*, a copy of Thomas Gainsborough's *Portrait of Thomas John Medleycott* (c.1763), is cut out and unceremoniously dumped in a rubbish bin, next to which lies a paint-splattered jumpsuit – perhaps a nod to Aleksandr Rodchenko, the founder of constructivism, who was known for painting in a work suit of his own design.

Unlike the constructivists of 1917, Kaphar has no utopian mission, but the unapologetic violence he wreaks on these canvases suggests he might share some of that movement's belief that art can right social wrongs or, at least, provoke nuanced discussion of the underlying structures that cause them. A debate about the extent of racial inequality in America is one that, sadly, feels most timely.

HANNAH STAMLER

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Titus Kaphar Sets Out to Comment on History and Winds Up Making It

By **Christian Viveros-Fauné** *Wednesday, Feb 4 2015*



©Titus Kaphar. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

A bullet to the heart: The faces of Michael Brown, Sean Bell, Amadou Diallo, and Trayvon Martin

Black men in America, the headlines tell us, are under surveillance. But it's one thing to understand the soul-crushing phenomenon of walking while black and another entirely to experience it. For artist Titus Kaphar, the latest indignity came last year as he and his brother strolled the gallery stretch of Tenth Avenue. Two undercover NYPD officers stopped them, hands on guns, and accused them of being part of a "black ring of art thieves." To add brazen irony to racist injury, the Yale-trained artist was just then working on a series of paintings related to police violence that he is currently exhibiting at the Studio Museum in Harlem and at Jack Shainman's two Chelsea spaces.

Kaphar has made a regular practice of literally rumpling, tearing, sewing, cutting, and shredding his own eighteenth- and nineteenth-century-inspired paintings to expose art history's bigoted underside. Yet the painter has gained national attention recently less for his examination of longstanding art world issues

than for turning a colder eye to urgent real-world problems. After inaugurating an exhibition of pictures called "The Jerome Project" at the Studio Museum in November — the show's five tar-on-gold-leaf paintings are based on mug shots of people who share his father's name — Kaphar came to the attention of a *Time* art director who commissioned him to create a painting for the magazine's "Person of the Year" feature. The subject: the latter-day Selma, Alabama, that is today's Ferguson, Missouri. (The "Ferguson Protesters," collectively, were one of four runners-up to the magazine's top pick, "The Ebola Fighters.") The result, *Yet Another Fight for Remembrance*, depicts protesters with arms raised above their heads in the now-familiar "hands up, don't shoot" gesture. It is an image of searing intensity that invokes both the present and the age-old forces that have brought us to this latest civil rights battleground. If the brown faces in the painting are largely obscured by strokes of white paint, it's because the artist wanted to evoke simultaneously his subjects' presence and their absence. As Kaphar told one interviewer, the most accurate portrayal of this watershed event demanded that he get a jump on its concurrent whitewashing.

On view at Jack Shainman's new space on 24th Street along with several related paintings and drawings, *Yet Another Fight* is part of a two-gallery show Kaphar has split between his more recent works and pieces done in his signature art-historical vein, the latter of which hang at Shainman's original space on 20th Street. In this unintentional *mano a mano*, the Ferguson-inspired pictures far outshine the Old Master-ish works. Kaphar's fake vintage canvases deliver on their slice-and-dice revisionism, but they are upstaged by something more forceful: critical subject matter rendered with compelling directness.

Titled "Drawing the Blinds," the assemblage of twelve oil paintings at 20th Street features works that use one or more canvases to alternately hide and reveal power relations among the artist's faux-canonical subjects. Among these is the title work: a canvas depicting a nude black female, over which a second piece of painted cloth, representing the white male gaze, is pulled up like a literal shade. Another painting, *The Myth of Benevolence*, seconds Kaphar's curtain trope: Thomas Jefferson's pleated image playing hide-and-seek with a postcoital Sally Hemings at her toilette. But these images and others — like *Holy Absence II*, featuring Jesus cut out from the cross and a black male peeking through the opening — enact their own clichés. Front and center here is the artist's over-earnest attempt to officially redress art history. Lead-footed and righteous, Kaphar's 20th Street show can feel like touring Colonial Williamsburg while listening to an audiotape of the film *Dear White People*.

At 24th Street, on the other hand, cunning gems beckon: Four graphite drawings of black men's faces, each done on two pieces of paper in the manner of exquisite corpses; five works done in chalk on asphalt paper, each of which overlays outlines of headshots of several men. One of the latter images confuses the features of Michael Brown, Sean Bell, Amadou Diallo, and Trayvon Martin, making identification impossible. The result is a bullet to the heart. Few pieces I've seen this decade prove as moving or as guileful.



Painting by Titus Kaphar for TIME

Behind Titus Kaphar's Ferguson Protesters Painting

Dec. 10, 2014

By TIME Staff

To capture the impact of the Ferguson protests, Kaphar created a 4-ft by 5-ft oil painting he titled, "Yet Another Fight for Remembrance." Kaphar, who lives and works in New Haven, Conn., and New York, mixes the work of Classic and Renaissance painters.

In this video, directed by Horacio Marquinez, Kaphar documented the process of making this painting.

"Like so many others, I've been struggling with what to do in response to what is happening in Ferguson and throughout the rest of this country," says Kaphar, who received his MFA from Yale University's School of Art. "Over the last few years I've found myself immersed in criminal justice research. I've been trying to make paintings that speak to the gravity of the situation. Honestly, it feels beyond me. What I make ends up feeling more like catharsis than communication."

Kaphar's work has been featured in more than a dozen exhibitions, including the current "The Jerome Project" at the Studio Museum in New York City through March 8, 2015. "The act of painting itself becomes a fight to remember the names of all the young black men who were taken too soon. A fight to remember that when this issue disappears from the media, it is not permission to forget. A fight to remember that change is possible."

With special thanks to editor Mr. Magic, Julianne, Savion and Daven Kaphar, Emma Saperstein, Jack Shainman Gallery and TYCO New Haven.

[\(See More: Ferguson Protesters, 2014 Person of the Year Runner-Up\)](#)

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THE INTERNATIONAL REVIEW OF AFRICAN AMERICAN ART PLUS
EXTENDING THE COVERAGE OF THE PRINT JOURNAL

Titus Kaphar's Time Magazine Commission

The Commission, Like His Other Work, Stems From A Strong Political Conscience



[\(Enlarge Image\)](#)

Time Magazine
commission: Titus
Kaphar, *Yet Another
Fight for
Remembrance*, oil,
5 x 4 ft.

With a timely magazine commission and an installation at the Studio Museum in Harlem, Titus Kaphar currently is receiving high visibility for his work related to policing and incarceration in this country.

TIME commissioned Kaphar to portray the Ferguson protestors who, collectively, were chosen as one of four runners-up for TIME's Person of the Year. (The Ebola fighters were named the collective person of the year because of the risks they took and sacrifices they made to save lives.)

"Like so many others, I've been struggling with what to do in response to what is happening in Ferguson and throughout the rest of this country," Kaphar told the Time staff. "Over the last few years I've found myself immersed in criminal justice research. I've been trying to make paintings that speak to the gravity of the situation. Honestly, it feels beyond me. What I make ends up feeling more like catharsis than communication."

In Time's video of the work in progress, Kaphar wears a hoodie with hood pulled up over his head and the Travon Martin symbolism of this aspect of his appearance will not be lost on most viewers, even though Kaphar probably didn't intend to signify this when he donned his work garb. Or maybe he did. A message that he sent to friends and associates reveals his concerns about the policing issue becoming yet another cause celebre that gets lost in a perspectual news cycle:

Several weeks ago an art director from Time Magazine stumbled into my exhibition "The Jerome Project" at the Studio Museum in Harlem. Soon after, he contacted me about making a piece that addressed what has

been happening in Ferguson and New York and the rest of the country as it relates to the relationship between African American communities and the police. I had already made a few pieces about the subject, so although I make it a rule to avoid most commission proposals, I decided that I would give it a try. I wanted to make something that didn't feel like an illustration of an idea but an expression of a feeling. The feeling that even after the ink dries from the printing of the magazine, I know that many will feel permission to forget what's written on those pages. The very nature of our media cycle erases the gravity and the impact of a situation as it becomes just another short lived flash across our screens. When I finished the piece it didn't feel like anything I could imagine in Time Magazine. I was satisfied with it. For me this piece was never simply about Ferguson. That's how it was editorialized, but this is the reality in Oakland, Detroit, Philadelphia, Chicago, and hundreds of other cities around the country.

View a video of the work in progress on the [TIME webpage](#).

Kaphar is most well-known for his paintings and mixed media works based on historical conventions of European art. He departs markedly but not entirely from this signature style for the **Jerome Project, on view Nov 13, 2014 - Mar 8, 2015 at the Studio Museum of Harlem**. The project began with Kaphar's search for his father's prison records, as the exhibition announcement explains:

When he visited a website containing photographs of people who have recently been arrested, he found dozens of men who shared his father's first name, Jerome, and last name. The artist was influenced by the writings of Michelle Alexander and William Julius Wilson on the prison-industrial complex and the use of policing and imprisonment by the US government as a means to address economic, social and political problems. The panels are based on police portraits of the men named Jerome that Kaphar found online, which represent only a portion of each man's identity yet are preserved in the public record.

Initially Kaphar covered the bottom portion of the paintings with tar to represent the percentage of time the men were imprisoned. This intent was abandoned, then resumed to make a statement about the consequences of imprisonment and the shortcomings of the criminal justice system.

Kaphar reconnects with traditions of classical painting for the *Jerome Project* via the gold-leaf backgrounds and single central figures in the project which have a visual parallel to Byzantine holy portraits, specifically those depicting Saint Jerome, the patron saint of librarians and scholars. [See more here](#).



[\(Enlarge Image\)](#)

Titus Kaphar
Jerome II, 2014
Oil, gold leaf and
tar on wood panel
4-ft by 5-ft ©Titus
Kaphar Courtesy
the artist and Jack
Shainman Gallery,
New York



[\(Enlarge Image\)](#)

Installation view of Titus Kaphar's *Behind A Veil of Beauty* exhibition, SEM-Art Gallery, Monaco. Photo: courtesy the gallery

Titus Kaphar manages to explore a broad range of styles and media while maintaining a common denominator throughout. For example, the whited-out figures in his Ferguson-themed commission for TIME recall the white cut-outs prevalent in his classical, European-styled works such as those in his 2012 *Behind A Veil* exhibition at the SEM-Art Gallery in Monaco. Reviewing this show for the *IRAAA*, Ashleigh Coren asked Kaphar about the meaning of the cut-outs.

The cut-outs prod viewers to "consider not just the work that is in front of them but the work that is referenced," he replied. He also said he uses his paintings to "make a physical representation about an argument" about racially insensitive and misogynist imagery within the Western art tradition.

Alumnus artist Titus Kaphar creates, connects, and builds community in New Haven

By Michael Morand

August 3, 2015



Titus Kaphar '06 M.F.A. and Camille Hoffman '15 M.F.A. (center) with Artspace Summer Apprentice Program students Lisa Mwinja of Wilbur Cross High School, Tyler Reid of Coop High School, Arianna Alamo of High School in the Community, Mekaylah Stricklin of Common Ground High School. (Photo by Chris Randall, Artspace)

"Art can change the world," says alumnus [Titus Kaphar '06 M.F.A.](#) He believes this because it changed his world, providing him with a way to understand history and society, develop his talents, and share knowledge. It's a belief he brings both to his studio and to the neighborhoods of New Haven.

For years Kaphar has shown through his art that black lives matter. Now he is helping a new generation find its artistic voice, contributing to the local creative community and inspiring young artists at [Artspace in the Ninth Square](#) and throughout New Haven — even as his art gains growing national notice in museums and the media.

"I started realizing very early on that, as a painter, when I was doing portraits, everything I was doing was like an illusion," he told a group of young people and their parents in late May [at a Newhallville community celebration](#). "If I paint a picture of you, you're not actually there. There is nothing there. It is a flat canvas. And so, when I started thinking about how I wanted to talk about the history of art, I wanted to do something that was a little bit more physical.

"The physicality of the work became a really important thing," he continued. "I didn't want to just paint

pictures anymore. I wanted to do something that felt like what I was experiencing.” He recalled wondering: Rather than make a painting about torture, what might it mean to torture a painting?

That question, he said, changed his work. He began cutting up paintings, dipping paintings in tar, and “all kinds of crazy things.” It was both scary and liberating, said the artist, and he began to develop a practice that allowed him to convey more effectively what he felt.

“The Jerome Project”

The intersection of societal interrogation, art history, and technical physicality found expression in Kaphar’s recent series “The Jerome Project” It was exhibited for four months at the Studio Museum in Harlem and was the foundation for his work this summer with Artspace. (See related story.)

[See a slideshow of works by Titus Kaphar](#)

According to the Artspace website: “Kaphar began this investigation in 2011, when an online search for his father turned up mug shots of 99 incarcerated African American men with the same first and last name. Since 2013, Kaphar has drawn from this revelatory moment to account for larger issues around the depiction of black men and youth in the news and media, exploring how these images shape the criminal stereotype, and perpetuate a culture of fear founded on distance and ignorance.”

According to the Studio Museum exhibit: “Although each work depicts an individual, this series represents a community of people, particularly African-American men, who are overrepresented in the prison population. ...With their gold-leaf backgrounds and single central figures, Kaphar’s portraits visually parallel Byzantine holy portraits, specifically those depicting Saint Jerome, the patron saint of librarians and scholars. Although these panels reference religious artworks, they are not meant to carry any assumption of innocence or guilt. Instead they allude to the notion of forgiveness of past transgressions, which is central to many religions. The artist views the inability to offer forgiveness as a shortcoming of the current criminal justice system.”

Widespread acclaim

It’s been a busy year for the artist. In addition to the Studio Museum show, he had dual exhibitions, “Drawing the Blinds” and “Asphalt and Chalk,” at the Jack Shainman Gallery in New York City.. In January, Kaphar was honored with a [2015 Creative Capital Artist](#) award. His work “Yet Another Fight for Remembrance,” was featured in [Time Magazine’s Person of the Year issue](#). The Museum of Modern Art and other collections have recently acquired his work. Kaphar’s “The Vesper Project” is currently on view at the [Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati](#) through Oct. 11 as part of a tour that continues through 2016 with stops in New Britain, Washington, D.C., and Philadelphia. A Village Voice headline on Feb. 4 proclaimed, “[Titus Kaphar Sets Out to Comment on History and Winds Up Making It,](#)” in which critic and curator Christian Viveros-Fauné wrote, “few pieces I’ve seen this decade prove as moving or guileful.”

Kaphar’s critical success comes as no surprise to those who have known him best since he came to New Haven more than a decade ago to study at the Yale School of Art.

Sam Messer, professor of painting and associate dean of the school, observes: “Titus Kaphar came with a serious traditional tool set of representation already in place. His curiosity and determination to be more and do more led him to create opportunities and make connections across the university, including at the Yale University Art Gallery. These experiences pushed him down the path of investigation that has informed his current work.”

Describing his Yale years, Kaphar said, “My life experience was completely different from everybody else in my class. But I was around people who loved art, who believed in art, and who encouraged me to keep going.”

A fundamental commitment

The artist has said that one constant about his work is that while it speaks to and about history and society, "I don't make anything unless it starts inside."

If his work is fundamentally personal, Kaphar has an equally fundamental commitment to community. Most recently, he and New Haven theater artists Aaron Jafferis and Dexter Singleton collaborated with 18 students in the Summer Apprentices Program at Artspace to create new work inspired by "The Jerome Project." The program is the prototype of a "post-master's" program Kaphar is developing for recent art school graduates to live, work, and develop in New Haven — just as he has done.

Kaphar describes the program as "a tiered mentorship program" that brings together recent M.F.A. graduates and high school students to introduce the latter to the "practice of art and to what a life of art making looks like."

The crux of post-masters program, Kaphar says, is "not just artists simply making work that goes out into the art world, where people sort of bid and barter for our products as if they were some sort of commodity, but creating situations that would allow those artists to build relationship with students to really impact their life through art making." One of the first artists to serve as a mentor in the program was Camille Hoffman '15 M.F.A.,



Titus Kaphar watches the students in the Artspace Summer Apprentices Program at work. (Photo by Chris Randall, Artspace)

"We are truly grateful that Titus

Kaphar sought to root his evolving Jerome Project in his home town of New Haven, and bring the work out of the white box/museum space into the community. New Haven's next generation of artists are the beneficiaries of his commitment, and we are doubly grateful that he chose to incubate his ideas at Artspace," says Helen Kauder, the group's executive director.

In addition to intensive mentoring with artists Kaphar, Singleton, Jafferis, and Hoffman, the 2015 Artspace summer apprentices program included visits to the New Haven Museum, the Yale University Art Gallery, and a prison. Students engaged in conversations on race, art, and the criminal justice system, and had studio time to develop their own work. According to Kaphar, some students stayed well beyond assigned program hours to pursue their learning through art. Many in the Yale community supported in the program, including Artspace designer and facilitator Jerome Harris '16 M.F.A., Yale President's Public Service Fellow Julia Hamer-Light '18, art gallery educator Elizabeth Williams, and poet Ifeanyi Awachie '15.

The summer program garnered praise from the critics who matter the most – the high school student participants. "Titus really changed my view on drawing! Before, I drew mostly stick figures. Titus showed me the ropes and told me to find my inner artist. And I did," said Emmanuel Luck, a student at Metropolitan Business Academy. "I've grown so much in my three weeks of being here." Jasmine Smith, a student at Hillhouse High School, said, "For me art is the only thing even relatively close to the freedom I wish I could have."

At his talk in Newhallville, Kaphar had challenged the adults in the room, especially the teachers, to consider the power of art to inform and transform lives. "I was that loud, wild kid in the back of the class. I was the one that you were thinking just wasn't trying hard enough," he said. "Sometimes it's just a matter of saying, 'Okay, this is not their language. Maybe the visual language is their language. Maybe music is their

language. Maybe dance is their language.”

He has taken up the challenge himself through the Artspace program to demonstrate how, in New Haven, art can help young people develop their language and find their voice. As his post-masters program develops further and finds a permanent home, Kaphar hopes that young voices will continue to grow and become more powerful.

'Arresting' exhibit at Artspace explores patterns of racial disparity

The work of 18 high school students from the New Haven Public School district who collaborated with Kaphar and theater artists Jafferis and Singleton to create new work inspired by “The Jerome Project” is on display at Artspace through Sept. 13, together with “ArrestingPatterns,” an exhibition curated by Sarah Fritchey with Kaphar and Leland Moore.



“Arresting Patterns” brings together a group of artists who seek to uncover the often-overlooked patterns of racial disparity in the United States Criminal Justice system. The featured artists include: Jamal Cyrus, Maria Gaspar, Titus Kaphar, Iyaba Ibo Mandingo, Adrian Piper, Laurie Jo Reynolds, Dread Scott, and Andy Warhol.

The exhibition also features a reading room, where viewers may read texts, essays, and archival clippings on the impact of the criminal stereotype on prisoners, their families, and entire communities.

The exhibition will close with a free two-day conference organized by Moore, an attorney, and the Artspace staff, which will be held Saturday-Sunday, Sept. 12–13 at the Yale University Art Gallery, 1111 Chapel St. [Learn more and register now.](#)

Galleries: One view of how people of color are portrayed in pre-modern art

By Mark Jenkins December 4, 2015

A painting of an old sailing vessel, the canvas slipping from the frame and partly edged in tar. A musty, full-size cabin, its rickety walls and floor half-rotted and its rooms scattered with evocative artifacts. The exhibition that encompasses such things — Titus Kaphar’s “The Vesper Project,” at the American University Museum — must have an interesting backstory.

So it does. The story goes like this: After Benjamin Vesper defaced one of Kaphar’s paintings in a gallery, the men began to communicate. Vesper had been institutionalized, so they never met face to face. But the patient sent letters about his family’s history, which inspired the artist to tell the whole tragic tale: Vesper is descended from a merchant who prospered in 19th-century New England, but only until his neighbors learned he was “passing” as white. Then the Vesper clan imploded.

One other notable thing about this tale: Kaphar made it up. Yet pieces of it, like parts of the fictional Vesper’s ramshackle hideaway, are real.

The New Haven-based Kaphar, who is African American, addresses the way people of color are portrayed in pre-modern art. He paints in a neoclassical style, but with figures removed or obscured to represent gaps in personal and collective memory. His installation does much the same thing in a more immersive way. With its absent inhabitants and missing floorboards, the Vesper house is a powerful, and suitably eerie, metaphor for loss. It symbolizes the decay of human memory, but also how aspects of American history have been deliberately forgotten.

The grimy house, largely hidden behind a clean white wall, is one of several installations at the museum whose images burst into 3-D form and engage the space. In “Free Fall Flow,” Micheline Klagsbrun uses formed paper, poured colored inks and bits of found wood to express a favored theme: metamorphosis. Following the shape of the room, the artist has created a long, curved piece, but there are also ones that hug the wall or hang from the ceiling. The translucent paper, liquid pigments and blue-heavy palette suggest water and flight, while wood and bark represent the heavier and more grounded. Klagsbrun illustrates how life changes both in and by her work, which itself is transforming from traditional painting into something more abstract and sculptural.

Susanne Kessler’s “Jerusalem” and Beverly Ress’s “The World Is a Narrow Bridge” are adjacent to Klagsbrun’s show. Ress does

small, precise nature drawings on large pieces of paper. She then carves intricate patterns into the sheets and retains the cut-out parts as a compositional element. The drawings and lacy paper are both delicate, yet the way the cutouts spiral off the pictures is quietly emphatic.

Making dramatic use of an open three-story stairwell, Kessler's exuberant installation includes a cloud of tangled wires, cables and twisted plastic bags. The artist was inspired by a topographical map, but the swirling assemblage hangs in midair, more heaven than earth.

Also dangling are three ladders, too precarious to be climbed by anyone carrying the weight of everyday life. The piece's layers represent Jerusalem's strata of history, culture and belief, but its airborne quality points to something beyond.

Upstairs is work by Joe White, who became known in the 1970s as a neorealist, but who began with abstraction. He has found his way back to a version of that with "Post-It" (credited to Joseph rather than Joe).

The selection doesn't quite add up to a retrospective, but it does include two early abstracts and six 1980s representational pictures.

The newer work is 40 geometric doodles on multicolored, 3-inch paper squares, and two large paintings derived from them. The latter differ not just in scale but also in that they employ light-colored strokes on darker backgrounds to assert that they're not merely sketches. Although these line-oriented compositions are unlike the more elaborate earlier abstractions, both are hard-edged.

So are the realist pictures, which include four cityscapes — one of New York and three of the District. These paintings combine realistic detail with expanses of bold, flat color, demonstrating that White always thinks about form, whether he's rendering simple lines or a complete landscape.

Titus Kaphar: The Vesper Project; Micheline Klagsbrun: Free Fall Flow; The World Is a Narrow Bridge: Drawings by Beverly Ress; Suzanne Kessler: Jerusalem; and Joseph White: Post-It On view through Dec. 13 at the American University Museum, 4400 Massachusetts Ave. NW. 202-885-1300. www.american.edu/museum.

Graham Caldwell

Although he works with glass, Graham Caldwell doesn't necessarily make the material. The pieces in "Invisibility Cloaks," at G Fine Arts, start as standard windowpanes, which the Brooklyn artist manipulates by melting and sometimes breaking. Most become slumped mirrors, reflective in flatter areas but foggy in the more rumped ones.

Retaining the shapes of the frameworks that supported them as they softened in a kiln, the sculptures often have a topographic quality or sensuous, human-like curves.

The pieces are usually edged in black epoxy, which Caldwell also uses to affix small shards to the edges of a few of them. White epoxy binds the shiny spikes of "Polymorphous Light Eruption," the most complex composition and the only one of colored

glass. It hangs across from “Shattered Mirror Box,” whose undulating contours have been smashed by multiple blows. The two — disparate yet complementary — reflect each other’s glimmering facets.

Graham Caldwell: Invisibility Cloaks On view through Dec. 12 at G Fine Art, 4718 14th St. NW. 202-462-1601.

www.gfineartdc.com.

(<http://theglobalpanorama.com/>)

Understanding the Middle East: Afghanistan (<http://theglobalpanorama.com/understanding-the-middle->

Titus Kaphar knits past and present

By Luke Mayo (<http://theglobalpanorama.com/author/luke-mayo/>) on December 7, 2015



Titus Kaphar pulls history to the foreground in his contemporary work, as he rewrites the past with paint and brush

We would all like to make some kind of mark on history and leave behind some sort of legacy that impacts the lives of others.

One of the many ways of doing this is to follow previous examples. The past contains many wonders, so to work on that foundation would be to add to that wonder.

Titus Kaphar is an artist who has done such a thing. Relatively new on the global art scene, Kaphar was born in 1976 in Kalamazoo, Michigan, and now divides his time between New York and Connecticut. He has developed a strong interest in the history of art, from which he appropriates styles and mediums.

As the man himself observes, "I've always been fascinated by history: art history, American history, world history, individual history—how history is written, recorded, distorted, exploited, reimagined and understood."

It's clear that, when it comes to art, the past doesn't simply exist in and of itself. It's there to be appreciated and admired in the present moment, as well as to be used to generate further admirable pieces for future generations.

Kaphar's work typically involves either partially or totally removing the bulk of figures within his paintings, so that only their blank outline remains. The effect, to say the least, is mysterious.

A prominent example is his recent piece, *Yet Another Fight for Remembrance* (2014). According to Kaphar, he painted this, "to capture the impact of the Ferguson protests"—a period of unrest in Ferguson, Missouri, over a racially charged killing of an 18-year-old black man by a white policeman. In the painting, there are two marching protesters depicted with their arms raised. Only their eyes and foreheads are clearly defined and detailed. The rest of their bodies have been painted with pure white. In an interview with the *Observer*, Kaphar explained how he felt starting the *TIME*-commissioned work:

'The news cycle is so fast that I feared I was participating in the process of erasing the subject matter. When I started working on sketches I wanted to do something that incorporated that idea: the sense of being erased, this place of presence and absence at the same time. And that's how I've used the white wash in my paintings in the past.'

Kaphar has commented that he is "immersed in criminal justice research" and wants to convey the "gravity of the situation" in Ferguson, and the resultant painting feels "more like catharsis that communication."

The main thing we can learn from Kaphar is that the past is far from dead. History is there to be explored and appreciated, and only by building on what those who went before us started can we hope to leave a mark on the world—just like Kaphar has done. By observing what exists and improving it, we can, as Kaphar claims is his aim on Jack Shainman's website, "investigate the power of a rewritten history."

— Luke Mayo (<http://theglobalpanorama.com/author/luke-mayo/>), Correspondent (Art)

Image Courtesy: Poster Boy (<https://flic.kr/p/gAU14Q>), Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic | Flickr

Bio	Latest Posts
	Luke Mayo Luke Mayo has recently completed an English degree at University Campus Suffolk. Working in English has given him an interest in writing, and he is keen to pursue this in his career. His experience in journalism includes his contributions to the online blog for Youth Employment UK.

Titus Kaphar

“MIS PERSONAJES ESTÁN DICTANDO LA HISTORIA”
“MY CHARACTERS ARE TELLING HISTORY”

History, fragments of it mixed with fiction and the abstract. Titus Kaphar's eye weaves a narrative that is visually perched on history and deconstruction. He exhibits hidden ideas. Therefore the power of the present appears; that which can even twist and drape over an inherited image, a piece that stroked its last brush-stroke hundreds of years ago.

Por Natalia Vidal Toutin. Periodista (Chile).
Cortesía del artista y Jack Shainman Gallery, Nueva York.

“Many of the paintings, though they rely on the visual tropes of history, are in fact invented in order to have more control of the narrative”

Titus Kaphar

Something hidden is dismantled upon opening the curtain or peeling an orange. The portrait of a well-off man, the facial expression of a lady or the strict family composition of the Renaissance, are abruptly interspersed on the scene with the face of an African-American person. Then Copley, Eakins and Delacroix's portraits appear spread out in a new perspective, images never before seen.

The mission that Titus Kaphar has put into practice is removing the history from pieces where art shows neat and finished work, like extracts from a golden age monarchic utopia. All of a sudden, certain revelations emanate in his work, an extract from history that hasn't been told with a golden frame. He suggests an ignored message, a distinct interpretation that makes room for today, that time of artistic sublimity.

They are cuttings or clippings exiled from the cited work along with the chronology, adopted from our time to pervade these works with a more inclusive, panoramic view. Therefore, for example, one of the protagonists is separated from the painted scene. It is replaced by its silhouette in white, a revelation of absence. Its existence is decontextualized, thus leaving behind, a space to reflect, to shroud with an interpretation, argument, feeling or perhaps logic, whatever the void allows or represents.

Titus's hand produces an irreverent, bulky decomposition, full of motives and meanings, superimposed and integrated ideas, where he tries to immortalize the context more than a person, a comprehensive idea. He ridicules, dismantles

and provokes, covers and reveals layers on a whim; he composes on top of what already exists. He uses the painted surface and that recognized by time and collective memory and brings it back with an additional angle, or without any angle. The mission is to show and expose that unanswered question that challenges the positioning of African-Americans in art history, from their current anonymity to the current artwork. A shortcoming, an oversight.

Classicism works of art and works from the Renaissance are blended with contemporaneity. They weave together in a narrative game that decomposes the masters that kept historic pieces, in order to build new realities upon him, real or fictional, with actors that have been behind the scenes until now. He has said in an interview with Times, "I draw from all time periods in the canon of art history, with an emphasis on American and European traditions from 1700 and 1900, for my image references and 1900 to contemporary for my interventional gestures."

Thus, the materiality and details strip down a fragment; this creates texture and causes movement in the painting. It produces a feeling of motion. The people that filled the paintings until then are left white, and only space is left, that void of white light that proclaims something with its absence.

The way in which he has pursued the mission of creating consciousness and interrupting every single meaning of some pieces, have lead him to experiment with an endless number of materials, a push towards different visual art techniques to make comprehensive and uninhibited work. With it, cuts, sculpture, diverse materials and fusion, join together throughout his professional career. The result: a hybrid style, a challenging mix, an impartial mix, a critique.

As a consequence, the effect that this work has on the inherited works is the history that the art tells. They suddenly shake the artistic models that become unstable and malleable, an object that could be questioned, a story that we could add paragraphs and ideas to. "I feel that my characters are dictating the story and that you are a scribe. I think this is the clearest way to describe the monologue I have in my head," he says. Through this, the painter's authority is questioned to make history through his pieces, and a collective memory is built and deconstructed over time and with the voices that erect and praise it. In this case artistically, the replicas of great painters become vulnerable to the present, to the hand that narrates it, to the space that receives it. Pervious to time.

The void and overlapping leave an unwritten destiny in the end. They leave doubt. The history told not only starts to disappear, but to reinvent itself. Titus Kaphar isn't afraid to carve up the presences and fill his work from others. He expresses and brings feminine and African-American absence in classic painting to the table and denounces it through his particular way of creating new scenes: cutting, separating, binding. The image is violent, the African-American woman gazes through the dismantled portrait, staring, hegemonic in defense of her existence, and she sees how they have kept her hidden. In another case, a hollow wooden frame is what holds the endless number of strips that destroy the facial expression of a former gentleman. And the proposal is made, the trend that redounds to critique, social affairs and a longed for justice appears. **AAL**

‘The Vesper Project’ sheds light on contemporary race issues

Posted: Saturday, August 1, 2015 12:00 pm

Chris Strohofer | Staff Reporter | **0 comments**

“The Vesper Project” by Titus Kaphar sheds new light on the past, while adding to present conversations about race.

Kaphar’s work, displayed at the Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center (CAC) through Oct. 11, inspires viewers to take a closer look at what really constitutes history.

Is history what is in timeworn books and newspapers? Does it lie within historical art pieces? Or is it what is written in school textbooks?

While seemingly unimportant, details that are lost over time prove to be absolutely essential to the understanding of past realities.

“The Vesper Project,” is a fascinating pursuit in the long-running theme of Kaphar’s comprehension of art’s historical context.

In much of his work, Kaphar peels off layers that portray wealthy white families, only to reveal black workers that made it all possible despite never reaping any of the benefits.

This new installation tackles this concept while also probing the reality of personal history, which can be just as elusive as the unwritten past.

Kaphar explores these ideas by constructing the fictional narratives of several characters, complete with fictional genealogies he created in order to navigate personal crisis.

One of those characters is Benjamin Vesper, a troubled young man disillusioned with his past, who sought refuge from a mental hospital by squatting in a rundown 19th century home ravaged by civil war.

This emaciated home is the central installation of “The Vesper Project.”

Visitors are encouraged to wander around this dilapidated two-room cabin and explore the space Vesper used to confront his past and better understand his role in contemporary society.

There are plenty of significant details to be seen, whether partially hidden within thin splintered walls or prominently placed in the room.

Each portrait relates to Kaphar’s constructed narratives and represents the probable experiences of these past fictional characters, whose stories were never told in their own time.

A recurring detail in Kaphar’s work is the covering of subject’s mouths with newspaper or tar.

One of those portraits displays a black woman pretending to be white. Most of her skin is covered with newspaper, and her covered mouth is meaningful in multiple ways.

For instance, the covered mouth represents how she was unable to speak on her true past.

As a result, the words of white men continue to occupy history and the painting remains as poignant and truthful as ever.

How we understand the totality of history is especially important, especially in regards to race in America. The exhibit makes visitors wonder how they are going to look back at this period.

Perhaps it will look like "The Jerome Project," a counterpart project by Kaphar displayed along with "The Vesper Project."

"The Jerome Project," inspired by Kaphar's search for his estranged father, took on a life of its own over after several unarmed black men fatal shootings dominated public discourse.

Comprised of a handful of simple overlaid portraits, Kaphar creates a powerful image of young men lost to history.

Visitors are also given unique insights into Kaphar's inspirations and thoughts, all through a phone number provided by the CAC that plays a recording of the artist explaining his pieces.

In describing "The Jerome Project," Kaphar sounds weary yet hopeful that America can rise above a system stacked against disadvantaged black men.

With such powerful statements on historical context and contemporary issues, visitors walk away with newfound perspective and understanding for those who were denied a voice for hundreds of years.

Furious Moments: Titus Kaphar at the Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center

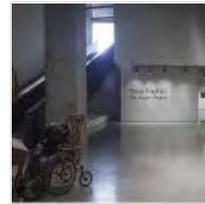
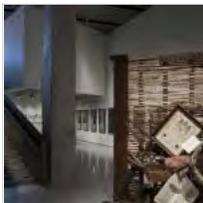
June 23rd, 2015 | Published in [* \(http://aeqai.com/main/category/282/\)](http://aeqai.com/main/category/282/), [June 2015 \(http://aeqai.com/main/category/june-2015/\)](http://aeqai.com/main/category/june-2015/)

The current exhibit of Titus Kaphar's works at the Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center, titled "The Vesper Project," surveys history, heredity, race, architecture, and just plain old visual art, intermingling parody, autobiography, destruction, and reinvention into a chiaroscuro carnival of unearthly but somehow palpably earthbound delights. All of Kaphar's brilliant artistic/literary amalgamations and tricks manage to tear away pieces of your perception, the way a tsunami takes down buildings and bridges, leaving behind a messy mass of twisted roots shaped into meaning you barely understand but absolutely feel.

In a media- and social-media- drenched world of constant updates and scandals and comments, a visual-art tsunami is nothing less than a miracle, and Kaphar accomplishes such bad weather through a strict adherence to his own sense of outrage and elegance. In his suite of portraits of prisoners titled "The Jerome Project," he creates a process that is born from his need to know who his father was. Kaphar's dad, a criminal who abandoned the family when Kaphar was very young, is named Jerome. Investigating his father's criminal records, Kaphar came across a large number of men named "Jerome," so he began painting portraits of each, and then dripping these portraits into tar. In an extension of that process, titled "Asphalt & Chalk," he layers the tar with chalk outlines of each of the men, conflating chalk-outlines at crime-scenes with a delicate ghostly penitence.

All of this dead-on, obsessive playfulness is devastating and yet also so tucked into itself you feel distanced from the subject matter just enough to understand how cheap it is to be sentimental about it. You just take it in. That's Kaphar's main trick and triumph, draining monolithic power-plays concerning "blackness" and "maleness" of all their glitter and pomp, and creating a new and sobering space not to reflect or act, but just to hear voices you can't hear, above the drone and patter of news cycles and chants and poses.

That's a lot of work to do, and Kaphar's complete and enraptured dedication to his project is something to behold. The centerpiece of the show at the CAC, from which the whole exhibit gets its name, is an installed environment fashioned from Kaphar's fever-dream imagination, boiling together William Faulkner, Toni Morrison, Oscar Wilde, and Edward Keinholz into a pointedly theatrical narrative concerning history, insanity, and the propensity for memory to turn itself into myth, as well as the accompanying need and final determination to rip all of it to mother-fucking shreds.



Installed in the relatively small space at the CAC are whole remnants of a house, painstakingly reconstructed but also messed with in ways that reveal it's not war or even desolation. Kaphar is referencing and/or poeticizing, it's the dream of war and desolation trapped inside themselves, flooding out in painful rivulets of rot, wood, and rope.

"Power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategic situation in a particular society," writes Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality*. Kaphar seems to agree; he is constantly in search of how power, once unleashed from its happy home, actually operates and functions in culture: an obfuscation that hinders insight, obscuring the very nature of its birth so it can continue to grow and prosper in the same way century after century. By twisting wood into amnesia, by repelling ghosts and ripping apart history page by page, painting by painting, Kaphar employs a brand new strategy with which to counteract a power narrative we're always stuck with, and yet never agree on how to critique. He destroys and then captures that destruction in a furious moment of insight, focusing on the vacuum caused by power's relentless hunger for what is always ahead.

-Keith Banner

THE AESTHETE



SHOULD BLACK ARTISTS RESPOND TO THE MOVEMENT?

by Antwaun Sargent
Writer

In the aftermath of the recent killing of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, 148 artists showed work at the alternative art space Smack Mellon in a show entitled *Respond*. The show included a diverse group of artists who contributed a range of work that served to survey the national reaction to the black deaths that have incited the growing Black Lives Matter Movement.

Respond, in raising questions about the ongoing failure of the nation to protect its black citizens, also posed a question: Should black artists specifically respond to the historic, recent, and continued killing of innocent black men and women in this country?

We asked nine contemporary black artists to continue the dialogue that *Respond* started and to answer the following question: Do you think black artists should respond to the events surrounding the Black Lives Matter Movement?



Hank Willis Thomas, *Two Little Prisoners*, 2014, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Hank Willis Thomas

“I don’t believe anyone should do anything they don’t want to do, unless they feel they must. I don’t believe that having a specific hue of skin should obligate or validate what they make. I believe that the more voices that feel compelled to speak out against injustice, the better. The fact of the matter is that broad injustice takes place everyday and all the time. The question for me is, ‘How do we find new and innovative ways to respond and call out when we are oversaturated with image, music, text designed to distract and nullify us?’ I’m still in search of answers.”



Titus Kaphar, *1968/2014*, 2014, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Titus Kaphar

“I think that the problems of this world will be a natural outgrowth of some artists’ practice and the celestial and ineffable will be the focus of others. Attempting to create mandates for the production of art in and of itself can be the death nail to creativity.”

ARTslant



Drawing the Blinds

Titus Kaphar

Jack Shainman Gallery 20th Street

513 W. 20th St., New York, NY 10011

January 15, 2015 - February 21, 2015

Titus Kaphar Pulls Back the Curtains on Racial Injustice Past and Present

by Stephanie Berzon

If 2014 is to be remembered by one social narrative in America, it's the involvement of law enforcement in the black community. The world was still mourning the death of Trayvon Martin when NYC Mayor Bill de Blasio announced his promise to end the often abused, racial profiling police tactic known as stop-and-frisk; Michael Brown was fatally shot in Ferguson by a cop—so were Romain Brisbon and Ezell Ford—and the video of Eric Garner's last words "I can't breathe" went viral on the Internet. After US grand juries didn't indict either officer involved in the Brown or Garner deaths, political unrest hit the streets with waves of protests that ranged from setting police cruisers on fire to officers escorting protestors to shut down the main highway in Miami during Art Basel. These enduring footprints establish a strong contemporary significance in artist Titus Kaphar's conceptual framework. He carries this conversation into the New Year and to the

forefront of the art world at both Jack Shainman Galleries in Chelsea. His two shows, *Drawing the Blinds* and *Ashphalt and Chalk*, opened on January 15th.



(left) Titus Kaphar with *Gift of Shrouded Descent*, 2014, Oil and mixed media on canvas. Photo of the artist by Kubiati Nnamdie, styled by Clarisse Benhaim

(right) Titus Kaphar, *The Jerome Project (Ashphalt and Chalk) I*, 2014, Chalk on asphalt paper. © Titus Kaphar. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery

While studying at De Anza College in Cupertino, Kaphar took an African American Literature class. The seeds of his artistic practice were planted when he was introduced to the art of the Harlem Renaissance with Omonike Weusi Puryear. Nine years later he found himself as an Artist-in-Residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem, in the creative center of that historic movement.

In 2011 Kaphar launched the *Jerome Project*, which sprung from his findings after researching his father's prison records. He found the files of 99 other incarcerated black men who shared his father's name: Jerome. This personal investigation materialized into an ongoing body of artwork on the overrepresentation of black males in the prison system. For Kaphar's show at the Studio Museum, he painted the different Jeromes based on police portraits he found online. Each panel was dipped in tar at least up to the mouth to protect each man's identity. The material also symbolizes the silencing of their individual rights and the great disparity in the racial makeup within the prison system.



Titus Kaphar, *The Jerome Project (my loss)*, 2014, Oil, gold leaf and tar on wood panel, Diptych, Approximately 6 x 5 feet each panel. © Titus Kaphar. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

At the *Asphalt and Chalk* show at Jack Shainman's 24th Street location, two striking portraits of Kaphar's father and cousin are noticeable upon entrance due to the sheer large-scale of them. They are an extension of the *Jerome Project*. The space also holds white chalk sketches of unarmed black men who were fatally shot by police, including Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Sean Bell, and Amadou Diallo. The drawings' superimposed layers generate a dizzying result that alludes to the swelling pattern of black youths unjustly killed by law enforcement; they share effect.



Titus Kaphar, *Space to Forget*, 2014 oil on canvas 64 x 64 x 2 3/4 inches. © Titus Kaphar. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery

Although it runs thick in the blood of Kaphar's work, it would be a great disservice to focus solely on its contemporary racial vernacular. The exhibit at the gallery's 20th Street location, *Drawing the Blinds*, takes a step back in time and challenges the deeper role of tradition and its repressive veins through recorded history in painting. Kaphar gives form and authority not only to black men, but also to the women who have been objectified or erased altogether from the art historical canon. They surface through formal interruptions in the painting process—whether through a ripped opening in the canvas to expose an interracial love affair in *Falling from the Gaze* or camouflaging a woman with the green curtains behind her in *Lost in the Shadows*. In *Space to Forget*, the spirit of the house is released in the form of a woman who has become physically inseparable from the place of her domain; an outline of her right arm blends with the wooden floor she kneels down on, sweeping. The cutout of a child sits on her back, a place of their domain. The blank figure, however, is not the subject being overlooked as described in the title. It is the individual black woman who is buried in the collective art historical memory.



Titus Kaphar, *Behind the Myth of Benevolence*, 2014, Oil on canvas, 59 x 34 1/4 x 7 inches. © Titus Kaphar. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery

In what seems like an investigation on the infallibility of the American founding fathers, in *Behind the Myth of Benevolence* Kaphar takes a portrait of Thomas Jefferson and draws it back as a curtain to reveal another portrait of a black woman, transforming painting into sculpture. She is erotically painted in an Orientalist manner: seminude in a turban that addresses exotic fetishes found in the mythology of black sexuality. The “revealing-the-unseen” positioning behind a white man—a powerful US President who wrote the Declaration of Independence—sets the stage for a world of metaphors for the viewer to unravel. The artist points out fundamental problems in representation, then trusts his audience to create the narrative form. Above all Kaphar makes these creative jumps accessible.

—Stephanie Berzon

(Image at top: Titus Kaphar with *Boys in Winter*, 2013, Oil on canvas, 64 x 64 x 1 1/2 inches. Photo of the artist by Kubiati Nnamdie, styled by Clarisse Benhaim)

Posted by [Stephanie Berzon](#) on 2/10

The Best Art Exhibitions to See This Month

BY DEANNA KIM

“Drawing the Blinds”

February 7, 2015

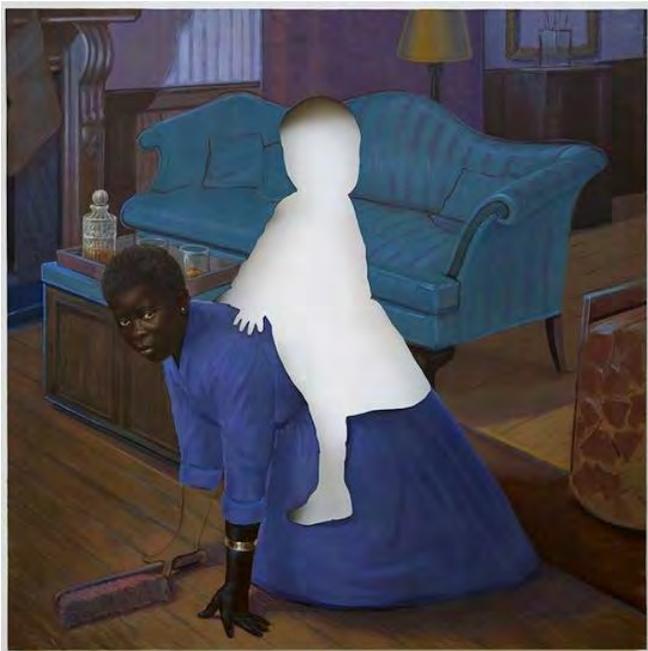


Image via [Jack Shainman Gallery](#)

Location: [Jack Shainman Gallery](#), 513 West 20th Street, New York 10011

Dates: Jan. 15 - Feb. 21, 2015

Last year, New York-based artist Titus Kaphar was commissioned to create a painting about the Ferguson protests for *Time's* Person of the Year issue. Titled “Yet Another Fight for Remembrance,” this work, along with a survey of Kaphar's other paintings, will be presented in his first solo exhibition. “Drawing the Blinds” ultimately is an exploration of the overrepresentation of African American men in the criminal justice system; Kaphar slashes, whitewashes, and scrapes at his paintings, placing his figures “in a mysterious space of presence and absence.” In doing so, he draws attention to the bodies and communities that historically have been relegated to the background, reconstructing dominant social narratives and memories into something that is profoundly personal.

ARTFORUM

February 6, 2015

Titus Kaphar

JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY | 513 WEST 20TH STREET
513 West 20th Street
January 15–February 21

JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY | 524 WEST 24TH STREET
524 West 24th Street
January 15–February 21

Titus Kaphar's timely two-part exhibition formally addresses the obfuscation and silencing of black bodies through portraiture. "Asphalt and Chalk," the title of the Twenty-Fourth Street portion of the show, references the materials Kaphar utilized to produce the majority of the works on view while also evoking the outline police use to mark the position of a fallen dead body. Kaphar's subjects include the late black men killed at the hands of white male police officers as well as scenes from the collective nationwide outcry in response. For *Asphalt and Chalk*, *Michael Brown*, *Sean Bell*, *Amadou Diallo*, *Trayvon Martin* (all works 2014), Kaphar superimposes the four faces of the titular victims of police brutality in a single chalk-on-asphalt paper drawing. The conflated portraits signal the persistent attack on black masculinity and mourn the loss of these individuals. In *Yet Another Fight for Remembrance*, Kaphar depicts anonymous Ferguson protestors in "Hands Up, Don't Shoot" gestures of solidarity against the killing of unarmed Michael Brown. Here, Kaphar provocatively whitewashes the figures with sweeping brushstrokes, pointing to the erasure and removal of black existence that catalyzes the show.

With "Drawing The Blinds," the Twentieth Street section of the exhibition, Kaphar critiques the historical eradication of blackness within the representational field through revisionist remixes to the genre of history painting. He reworks the canvas itself, shredding or removing tableaux of white sitters from the picture plane altogether. In other instances, Kaphar lifts the veil with double-canvas paintings that feature black sitters emerging from behind rolled-up or half-draped displays. Taking these parts in tandem, the exhibition acts as a corrective rejoinder to the problematic lineage of history painting while also reconfiguring contemporary calls to action.



Titus Kaphar, *Asphalt and Chalk, Michael Brown, Sean Bell, Amadou Diallo, Trayvon Martin*, 2014, chalk on asphalt paper, 49 x 35 1/2".

— Alex Fialho

Titus Kaphar's poignant works on view in Chelsea and Harlem

Alison Martin | January 31, 2015



"The Jerome Project (My Loss)" by Titus Kaphar
The Jack Shainman Gallery

Rising contemporary artist Titus Kaphar is gaining major prominence in the New York City [art](#) scene. In addition to an exhibition currently on view at The Studio Museum in Harlem, his work is also being featured at two Chelsea galleries this month. Jack Shainman Gallery is presenting two exhibitions of Kaphar's work at both of its Chelsea locations.

One of these shows titled *Drawing the Blinds*, features a collection of paintings in which the canvas is cut, slashed, stripped, layered, and peeled. With these works, Kaphar manipulates these images to create an alternate history. For instance *Gift of Shrouded Descent*, features an iconic image of George Washington but Kaphar hides the figure so that the viewer focuses on the young man and horse in the background, a part of the narrative that is often overlooked. Similarly, in a painting of Thomas Jefferson titled *Behind the Myth of Benevolence*, in which a layer of painting is peeled and folded over to reveal a darker, alternate history.

Also intriguing is *Collaging the Emptiness III* which features a symmetric flipped image of a figure from the chest up where the top half is covered in gold leaf, while the lower half is covered in fabric. These cut-out shapes cover the faces of two individuals kneeling over parts of a basket with a baby's legs visible inside, as an unattached hand hold it. The figures stand out with their color against a gray backdrop of the inside of their home.

One big highlight of the show is a mixed media piece titled *Columbus Day Painting* which references John Vanderlyn's iconic painting of Columbus' landing. In Kaphar's work, Columbus and his explorers are hidden by a textured material, drawing attention to other elements of the painting, such as the explorer's flags and weapons, and the native American figures in the background who seem apprehensive of these strangers who are claiming the land.

The other show titled, *Asphalt and Chalk*, is part of a larger body of work, known as *The Jerome Project*, which Kaphar began working on in 2011. The idea for the Jerome Project came about when Kaphar came across his father's mug shot online, he came across the mug shots of the several other young men who had the same first and last name as his father.

The younger Kaphar began working on a series of small portraits of these men based on their mug shots, painting them with oil and gold leaf and dipping them in tar. The amount of tar covering each person's face varies, representing the proportion of time each individual has spent in prison. With these smaller-scale works on view at the Studio Museum, Kaphar presents two large-scale Jerome paintings in his Jack Shainman exhibition.

Other works in the *Asphalt and Chalk* exhibition include drawings in which Kaphar layers the mug shots he has collected, resulting in distorted images. Both the Jerome paintings and the mug shot drawings represent a group of African American men who are excessively represented in our nation's prison population.

Asphalt and Chalk also includes paintings where Kaphar uses a technique he calls "white washing." These works have swift, white paint covering the subjects where Kaphar uses a form of erasure, obscuring and removing a subject entirely.

One such painting titled *Yet Another Fight for Remembrance* is an example of the "white washing" and depicts two black males raising their arms. The painting was commissioned by TIME magazine for their Person of the Year issue and responds to the Ferguson protestors.

Drawing the Blinds will be on view at [The Jack Shainman Gallery](#)'s 513 W. 20th St. location, and *Asphalt and Chalk* will be on view at the gallery's 524 W. 24th St. location through Feb. 21. Both gallery locations are open Tues.—Sat. from 10 a.m.—6 p.m.

Titus Kaphar Talks Criminal Justice, His *TIME* Painting, and First Show at Jack Shainman

By Alanna Martinez | 01/09/15 3:19pm



Titus Kaphar, *Stripes*, (2014). (©Titus Kaphar. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York)

Titus Kaphar is having a big year. The artist, who splits his time between New York and Connecticut, has his first solo museum exhibition in the New York, titled “The Jerome Project,” currently on view at the **Studio Museum in Harlem** through March. Fortuitously, the show drew the attention of *TIME* magazine’s art director, who saw it and commissioned Mr. Kaphar to do a painting **for the magazine** inspired by the events in Ferguson, Missouri that have kicked off protests nation-wide. On Wednesday, Creative Capital announced that the artist was one of its **2015 awardees**, set to receive funding to continue work on the “The Jerome Project.” And next week he will open his first **solo show with Jack Shainman gallery**, filling both its Chelsea locations. The *Observer* spoke with Mr. Kaphar earlier this week by phone. We discussed everything from what will be on view at the gallery to where he finds himself now that his art has graced the pages of *TIME*.



Titus Kaphar. (©Titus Kaphar. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York)

He explained that the works at the West 24th street location will be a continuation of “The Jerome Project,” a series started in 2011 based on mug shots of people who shared his father’s name. He’ll present a new drawing series titled “Asphalt and Chalk,” comprised of multiple images superimposed together to create a jarring visual effect. And the work at the West 20th Street locale will be “an introduction to my vocabulary,” he said. “It looks at the way I deal with history and my different modes of intervention.”

Mr. Kaphar frequently incorporates historical research into his paintings, drawing on figures and events that have been excluded from the art historical canon. Many of the pieces are interventions into that canon; he manipulates classic paintings by obscuring existing figures, inserting new ones, and blurring historical narrative.

So when it came to the *TIME* commission, while at first hesitant, he accepted the challenge because the subject overlapped with themes he’d already been working with. The painting, titled *Yet Another Fight for Remembrance*, depicts marching protestors with their hands held above their heads, half of their faces and bodies removed by large strokes of white paint. “In a way, I’ve been making this work for a long time—these issues have been happening for a long time,” he told us. “My work has a certain level of diversity: different branches on the same tree. People are looking at this particular branch right now, but that branch has been there for a long time. I will continue working on that project, and other issues with criminal justice.”

He explained further saying:

I was really concerned when I was approached for that specific project, but I felt like it was something that I needed and



Titus Kaphar, *Yet Another Fight for Remembrance*, (2014). (©Titus Kaphar. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman

Gallery, New York)

wanted to do. The way the media cycle works is not to necessarily canonize things, and in fact it's often the opposite. The news cycle is so fast that I feared I was participating in the process of erasing the subject matter. When I started working on sketches I wanted to do something that incorporated that idea: the sense of being erased, this place of presence and absence at the same time. And that's how I've used the white wash in my paintings in the past.

So far, the public's conversations surrounding the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, among others, have yet to wane. Instead, they've drummed up widespread concern over police procedures and the deaths of unarmed suspects, particularly people of color. A host of **responses have come from artists**, and recurring symbols have emerged, such as the "hands up" image that has been shared among activists nationwide.

We asked him if he thought recent events had struck a different, more resonant chord:

The optimist in me wants to say yes, but the only way to really be sure is to see if it endures. The fact that we're still talking about it is a good sign, but it hasn't even been a year yet. So, we'll see. There are a lot of people coming to this information as if it were new, and they're shocked that so many people would need to have this fear and discomfort about police. And then there's a whole other community for whom this happens all the time, every day, in every city in America.



Titus Kaphar, Jerome (Set). (©Titus Kaphar. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, NY)

Mr. Kaphar shared a recent, personal experience with the NYPD:

I was in Chelsea just last year with my brother who came up to visit me. We were walking around and I said, "Hey I have an exhibition up here, let's go check it out." We were having a good time, having a conversation, and as we were walking down 10th Avenue an undercover police car speeds up to us, two officers jump out, hands on guns, and say "Stop, can we speak to you for a second?" I'm like, yeah, sure, "What's going on?" And they said, "We've been following you for the last two hours, going in and out of

galleries, and we've heard that there's been a ring of folks stealing art," Actually, what he said, and I wrote it down afterward because I was so shocked, "a black ring of art thieves" that were stealing art from the galleries. I told them "I've got a show up right around the corner, we didn't do anything, as a matter of fact if you've been following us for the past two hours then clearly you'd know that we didn't take anything, so what's going on here?" And they said, "Let's have your IDs." I'm getting frustrated, and the officers are like "We need to pat you down." "Pat me down?! What do you need to pat me down for? We didn't do anything, we didn't take anything, If you've been following us than you'd know that." I was getting more agitated, and I'm trying to keep my calm because my brother's there, so finally I said, " I don't understand why you're doing this. You know we haven't taken anything. I don't get this." I didn't say it calm because I was upset about the situation. And the last thing the officers said to me was "I hope you never find yourself in a situation where you need the police."

On whether he planned to continue making work closely related to the subject matter in his painting for *TIME*, he responded:

I say all that because when I've told people about that being my experience, what I hear is "But Titus, you have a degree from Yale, you're a successful artist." And I have to say over and over again, that's not the first time that's happened to me, and it has nothing to do with any of those things. Part of me is frustrated, but part of me also feels this is an opportunity to share what's going on outside of the circle that people experience. I hope that I have people in my circle that are telling me about circumstances that I haven't experienced. Whatever the alternative is to what I am, I want to hear about.

See more images of Titus Kaphar's work below.



INTERNATIONAL EDITION

THE ART NEWSPAPER

Police killings prompt a resurgence in political art Artists are fighting back after the controversial deaths of Eric Garner and Michael Brown

Rachel Corbett. News, Issue 264, January 2015
Published online: 18 December 2014

Artists were among the earliest activists in the protests that erupted across the US in December over the grand jury decisions not to indict either of the policemen responsible for the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, two unarmed black men. Some see the response as a renewed willingness to embrace political art after a long period of cynicism, while others suggest that it could be the crystallisation of a new movement.

“So often I wonder if anyone cares what I’m doing,” says the artist Hank Willis Thomas. But when South Africa’s Goodman Gallery displayed his sculpture *Raise Up*, 2014, at Art Basel in Miami Beach in December, the response was “intense” and “emotional”, he says. Fairgoers posted hundreds of pictures of the work—a bronze sculpture of men lined up with their hands in the air, turning an image of subjugation into one of protest—on social media. “It is rare, when you make art with a social impact in mind, that it resonates so much with what people are dealing with in the streets. I live for those moments, but they are few and far between,” Thomas says.

Also on show in Miami, with Petzel gallery, was the artist Robert Longo’s 10ft-long photorealistic drawing of police dressed in military gear in Ferguson, Missouri, where the shooting of 18-year-old Michael Brown in August 2014 sparked months of race riots. The artist says in a statement that he intended to “evoke the tradition of epic historical battlefield paintings”.

In New York, where Eric Garner died during an encounter with the police in July, Time commissioned the artist Titus Kaphar to paint the “Ferguson Protesters”, who were shortlisted for the magazine’s “Person of the Year” cover.

Missouri has been ground zero for much of the artistic response. The Missouri History Museum has started to conserve several works of street art that were painted on boarded-up buildings in St Louis and neighbouring Ferguson during the protests, including the now famous painting of a white arm and a black arm with hands clasped in the shape of the city’s Gateway Arch.

History being made

“It’s a rare event to be on the ground when history is in the making,” says Chris Gordon, the museum’s director of library and collections. “This was a way for people to express themselves, to beautify and to take part in the healing process.” The museum may show the works in a forthcoming civil rights show.

Meanwhile, the St Louis-based Alliance of Black Art Galleries gathered work from more than 100 artists for “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot: Artists Respond”, which closes this month at venues throughout St Louis County. The exhibition was “extremely well received”, says Freida Wheaton, its curator, who hopes to secure a sponsor so the show can travel.

The stirrings of a movement may have been under way long before the unrest in Ferguson and New York. Almost three years ago, the shooting in Florida of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed black 17-year-old, sparked similar outrage—particularly after neighbourhood-watch volunteer George Zimmerman was acquitted of second-degree murder and manslaughter in 2013. Next month, the Hammer Museum at the University of California, Los Angeles, will revisit the case in a conversation between the civil rights lawyers Carl Douglas and Lisa Bloom, who published *Suspicion Nation*, a book about Martin, this year.

Community concerns

The New York-based artist Dread Scott launched his versions of police “Wanted” posters this summer, before Garner’s death. He posted sketches of young black men, under the heading “fits description”, on the streets of Harlem as a response to concerns voiced in the community that “black youth and men are criminalised and hassled by the police”, he says.

Scott points to photographs from the civil rights era, including Bill Hudson’s 1963 image of police dogs attacking black demonstrators in Birmingham, Alabama, and the artist Roy DeCarava’s *Five Men*, 1964, as examples of the power images can have as part of social movements. But he has reservations. “While there is widespread and joyous activism right now, it is a very recent occurrence,” he says.

Artist Titus Kaphar Talks Memory And Madness In His Latest Installation, 'The Vesper Project'

February 17, 2013

By Priscilla Frank



Titus Kaphar's newest installation, "The Vesper Project," revolves around confabulation, a fantasy masquerading as a memory or factual account.

Kaphar experienced the sensation of mistaking myth for memory when recalling a time with his aunt that never occurred. The bizarre experience inspired the artist, who often works with the disruptive forces of history, embarked on a five year art project exploring the overlap between true and fabricated narratives. The story revolves around the Vesper family, which Kaphar describes as "a 19th century family who are able to 'pass' as a white family in New England although their mixed heritage makes them 'Negro' in the eyes of the law."

After years of crafting a narrative of living memories that were not his own, Kaphar discovered an abandoned 19th century house that was saturated with the presence of his characters. For his exhibition at Friedman Benda, Kaphar brings the fragmented house inside the gallery space, building a lying time capsule filled with old photographs, uprooted floorboards and inexplicable presences.

We spoke to Kaphar to learn more about his incredibly ambitious undertaking. To learn about the specifics of the tale, watch video footage of the house and read documentation from the Vesper family, visit The Vesper Project's website.



HP: How did "The Vesper Project" begin?

TK: I was in the studio making a portrait of my aunt, as if she was in a completely other time period. As I was making a portrait of her I got this weird feeling. As I was combing through my memories of her I realized my memories of her *weren't real*. They were fiction. I didn't believe it at first, so I called my family to find out and they confirmed that she was not, in fact, where I remembered her. It occurred to me that, for some reason, my brain had decided to insert her into periods in my life when I needed extra support. That left me reeling; it left me frightened. It made me feel as if I couldn't trust my own memory. I felt like I was losing my mind.

When I'm working on a portrait of someone, there is often an internal monologue, a narrative I hear. Usually, the better the portrait is, the more I hear that monologue. Because I just had that experience with the portrait of my aunt, it made me frightened to tell people about it. I honestly felt like I was losing my mind. I talked to someone at a mental health facility and he says *tell me your story*. I didn't know this, but he was writing down what I was saying. A couple of weeks later, he came back to me and he showed what he had written based on my words. It was so much more elaborate than I had remembered, and became even more real.



HP: So the story is not made of your memories, it's more of a narrative about your work?

TK: It wasn't really either. Writers speak about hearing voices that drive a narrative a lot, but visual artists not so much. Ben and I went back and forth, telling stories, over the course of four or five years. It became very real for me. I had been nervous about telling people where I felt like these stories were coming from. I began to talk about them as though they were real -- I was living with these characters. The more that I did that, the more I felt like I wanted to see every aspect of their lives. I began to search for where I thought they might live. I found a house and ended up installing it as sculpture in the gallery.

The house is not really a space, per se. It is a psychological space -- a man slipping from his lineage, his family, into a schizophrenic break. You are able to experience his mental slippage.



HP: Does the narrative come to an end?

The more the paintings emerge, the more the narrative evolves... as I continue to paint from that well, I think the story will continue to produce more. I don't see these characters going away for me.

HP: What challenges arose in using a 19th century house as part of your medium?

TK: There are many challenges-- it is an undertaking that I've never done before. There were the obvious challenges that occur with any sort of architectural feat and, for those, I got a lot of help. Yet the challenges were compelling. The challenges, in some ways, directed the construction. For example, you take the floor out of a hundred-year-old house and you try to reinstall it into a different setting, and you going to realize those boards are not going to lay flat. As a result you get this floor that creeps and moves and has a *presence* -- that was something i was not willing to fight with. It was something I felt like added to the project.

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/02/17/titus-kaphar-on-the-vesper-project-friedman-benda_n_2679287.html

HP: The Vesper Project has been referred to as a "haunted house." Would you use that term?

TK: No, I think its terrible. I think it's awful. Once you put something out in the world, you no longer have control over reactions, descriptions or anything like that. That being said, i think it's a hard thing to describe, the difference between something that is "haunted" and something that has a *presence* about it. One is a way we talk about movies and fear that is supposed to frighten you. This is not about that at all. But i do feel that there is a *presence* and that is the result of using materials that people lived with. Loved. And taking those as raw materials to rebuild the sculpture. That living, that love, is somehow still in those materials. When someone says "haunted" -- no, I would lean toward having a *presence*.

HP: Did you look into the history of the previous house owners?

I attempted to, but it had changed owners so many times. It was hard to find any sort of clear narrative. For me, what made the house the right house was that I felt like I could feel my characters presence in that house. Once the house, which in fact, as I said, is the head space of one particular character, was constructed, I began to play. I had someone read the text that I had previously constructed and it felt like the voices would have inhabited that space. On my website there is a little film where you can feel the voices.

HP: How much did this project consume other aspects of your life? Were you ever worried it had gone too far?

TK: When I went to talk to the friend at the mental health facility, he assured me that I was not sick. That's what encouraged me to keep pursuing this and not freak out. Honestly, as an artist, I was producing work and didn't want argue too much because I was really excited about the work I was making. I became fascinated with the human brain, what it chooses to do with or without our permission. I started reading way too much Oliver Sachs. I started to get really interested in this idea of confabulation, which seems so similar to the creative process itself. For me this particular situation wasn't so hard.

Titus Kaphar's "The Vesper Project" will show at Freidman Benda Gallery in New York from February 28 until April 6, 2013.

Art in America

History in the Making: Titus Kaphar Cuts up to Rebuild

May 20, 2009

by Michele Carlson



History has a certain way of being selfish—the past is often understood through its inequities and linear narratives, static lines marching forward that are capped by dates, deaths, and wars -- by way of the winners and occasionally, the losers. Personal and collective trauma can be difficult, if not impossible to articulate, as many are left out (sometimes, on purpose). When those who have lived through history are gone and the voices of their retelling have long faded past fables and cautionary tales, how will those lessons be recounted? Will they fall into the vast fissures of histories lost? In "History in the Making," on view at the Seattle Art Museum, artist Titus Kaphar's sculptural paintings challenge canonical representations of history and memory by collapsing past into present.

Kaphar first pillages, then recreates paintings from the art historical canon: Copley, Eakins, Delacroix. With the deliberateness of a surgeon coupled with a slightly maniacal urgency, Kaphar first paints the canvases, before erasing, slicing, cutting, whiting-out, and shredding them before rearranging the pieces into new works. Sometimes he even dips the paintings in tar. The open areas in the canvas become active absences that are jarringly suggestive

of alternative narratives. Stretcher bars are exposed. The gallery wall, seen through the holes in the canvas, becomes part of the work. The structures that are typically "invisible" underneath, behind, or inside of the canvas lay bare, as if to suggest that exposing the blood and guts is necessary in order to build something new.

And rebuild he does: Kaphar performs what he critiques. It is not a new idea to combine two-dimensional surfaces with three-dimensional relief, or to engage in the materiality and physicality of paint and canvas; painters have long turned paintings into objects. Yet, Kaphar's practice is more than a modernist revision or a redux of the dichotomy between painter and painting. Instead, he creates new historiographic artifacts built from the physical residues and inadequacies of the past. There is a sense these works are a deeply personal response to imagined memories turned into unrecognizable histories long ago. Perhaps they are a nod to collective histories yet to be discovered, or a reconciliation for those that never will.

Mother's Solution... is one in a series of three paintings based on a fictional narrative about a light-skinned African American couple and their four children. One daughter's skin is so fair that she could pass as a white person. Unsure of how to navigate the extreme racism for seemingly mixed-raced children, the daughter is sent away. It is the "mother's solution." The story, though fictional, could have easily been taken from 18th or 19th century American history (though most likely not the histories one learns in school). This disparity forms Kaphar's point: Which stories are told? Why are they told, and how? He continues on to physically cut the image of the daughter out of the large portrait of the four children posing together; she remains present only in the haunting silhouette made by her cut-out absence. Flanking this portrait are two paintings, one of the mother and the other of the father. Each has piles of shredded canvas attached to and spilling off what are literally both the face of the painting and the faces of the parents who are, in effect, gagging on the absence of their missing daughter sent away and removed from this familial history because of the sociopolitical and racial ills of the times. The missing daughter -- from both the fictional family and the physical painting -- is symbolic of those who are habitually absent from, or written out of grand historical narratives.

Kaphar confronts the way history is represented. Yet, he does more than just expose historical imbalances or racial inequities. "History in the Making" does not just ask for more accurate or "truthful" constructions of history. It is the acknowledgement that history often fails, but within that failure there is agency to rebuild, refigure, or remake. He creates a space that offers room for histories to be the tangled, overlapping, and contradictorily ripped canvases they often are. The success of the exhibition lies in that it does not suggest resolution, as much as reclamation. Kaphar's work is a call to boldly face and dismantle the past for the sake of new beginnings, even if those beginnings are born of conflicting times. It is in this moment, between history and memory, that one may choose to rearticulate the past, reinvest, or possibly to reinvent meaning.

["History in the Making" remains on view at the Seattle Art Museum through September 6, 2009. Right: Titus Kaphar, Mother's Solution, 2009, oil on canvas, 106 x 78 in (269.2 x 198.1 cm); Left: Titus Kaphar All We Know of Our Father, 2008, oil on cut canvas, 48 x 36 in (121.9 x 91.4 cm); all images courtesy of Roberts & Tilton, Culver City, CA.]

Most ambitious work to date by artist Titus Kaphar, 'The Vesper Project', opens at Friedman Benda



The Vesper Project. Courtesy of Friedman Benda. Photo: Luke Hanscom.

NEW YORK, NY.- Friedman Benda announces Titus Kaphar's 'The Vesper Project'. The exhibition is a massive sculptural statement—an encompassing installation, in which Kaphar's own work is seamlessly woven into the walls of a 19th-century American house.

The culmination of an intense five-year engagement with the lost storylines of the Vesper family, the project was “birthed in a state of extended disbelief,” according to Kaphar. As the artist's muses, the members of the Vesper family and their histories are intertwined with Kaphar's autobiographical details, and layered with wide-based cultural triggers of identity and truth in the context of historical accounting.

In 'The Vesper Project', period architecture, gilt frames, a vintage typewriter, a neglected wardrobe, and old photographs act as seemingly recognizable elements, but by employing every tool of his trade, Kaphar insinuates doubt and transports the viewer into a disrupted mental state. As the house fractures, so does the viewer's experience. In so doing, Kaphar compresses times, conflates the continuum of history and postulates new powerful realities.

With many of Kaphar's interventions present in the installation including slashing, silhouetting, and whitewashing, this singular work is a complex map of overlapping timetables and collective genealogies. By obliterating the distance between the viewer and the work, 'The Vesper Project' is comprehensive, experiential, and it is the artist's most ambitious expression to date.

Titus Kaphar graduated with a Master of Fine Arts degree from Yale University. In 2006, he served as the Artist in Residence at The Studio Museum, Harlem. In 2009, he received the inaugural Gwendolyn Knight and Jacob Lawrence Prize from the Seattle Museum of Art for his exhibition *History in the Making*. His work has been displayed recently in Berlin, Los Angeles, and Tel Aviv and is currently on view at the Savannah College of Design. This will be his second exhibition at Friedman Benda, after 2011's *Classical Disruption*.