



TITUS KAPHAR
THE VESPER PROJECT

Titus Kaphar: Reconstructive Histories

The Cincinnati neighborhood known as “Over-The-Rhine” (in short, OTR) is considered one of the largest, most enduring historic neighborhoods in the country – enshrined on the National Register of Historic Places for its German heritage and storied collection of 19th century Italianate architecture. However, in the months, years and decades leading up to 2001, OTR had also become known for crippling crime rates, poverty, unemployment and – despite speculators buying up real estate in a state of physical and financial decay – a dearth of urban development. During that time the median income in this predominantly African-American district was less than half of the surrounding city, and more than a third of houses lay vacant – slowly crumbling as monuments to dysfunction and disrepair. In this simmering pool of social tensions, exacerbated by mounting incidents of racial profiling and police brutality, the shooting death of 19-year old Timothy Thomas by Cincinnati police was the spark that set off a maelstrom. The race riots of 2001 live ignominiously as the largest urban disturbance in the country since the 1992 riots in Los Angeles, producing over 5 million dollars worth of damage to the city and downtown businesses. The socio-cultural blight and deep scars in race relations may have cost even more. Yet almost 15 years later, this trauma is regarded by many as the turning point to a new history of both reform and reformation. The fracture will never be forgotten (and accelerating gentrification has led to its own series of complications) but the wounds, patches and repairs to OTR’s present-day architecture speak as much to what was lost as to that which was found. In many ways it took a crisis to fully recognize the pathology that was festering, to interrupt the status quo, to reassert the voices of the marginalized and to cobble the pieces – old and new – into a tentative, but no less crucial compass rose.

The work of Titus Kaphar (b.1976 Kalamazoo, Michigan) lives provocatively at this intersection of architecture, race and intervention – gathering and reassembling shards, traces and partial truths into what he calls “reconstructive histories.” And while he acknowledges the past as the armature on which the present and future are built, Kaphar argues, “Most of the history that we have been taught is at best incomplete, and at worst fiction.” In efforts to simultaneously amplify and interrogate this condition he mines the manner in which archives are “written, recorded, distorted, exploited, re-imagined and understood.” More specifically, he reorganizes the composition and characters of colonial era paintings from the United States and Europe; rearranging their implicit narratives through a visceral array of slashes,

dips, subtractions and whitewashing. By obscuring existing figures, inserting new ones and exposing underlying structures, Kaphar pierces the normative impunity of history and its painterly rendition – creating what critic Michelle Carlson calls, “historiographic artifacts built from the physical residues and inadequacies of the past.” In the wake of spotless universal storylines he reasserts the fissures, gaps and imperfections that more accurately reflect how the past is made. Kaphar’s pronounced obstructions and manipulations thereby call attention to those that too often escape our notice, in seams smoothed over by framing, rhetoric and time. In so doing, in a frontier place somewhere between alchemy and archaeology, Kaphar evokes unwritten histories while suggesting alternatives. Within the ensuing stew of person-

al memories, racial questions and political suggestion, he explains, “My aim is to perform what I critique, to reveal something of what has been lost, and to investigate the power of a rewritten history.”

The unconscious mutation of fantasy into fact within one’s memory – better known as “confabulation” – underpins much of Kaphar’s recent life and work. This elusive, but unsettling fusion of personal and public history culminates in his most intense and involving work to date, *The Vesper Project*, which transports the visitor into a disrupted mental space mirroring the artist’s own bout of self-reckoning. Five years in the making, it was born in a state of extended disbelief as Kaphar translated misgivings of his memories into an evocative constellation of invented protagonists,



Titus Kaphar, *The Vesper Project* (detail), 2008-2013. Image courtesy of the Burger Collection, Hong Kong and Friedman Benda, New York.



shared genealogies, pseudo-artifacts and autobiography. To soften psychological traumas, it has been shown that children often insert emotional smokescreens and surrogates into their most painful recollections. In 2008 Kaphar realized he was doing much the same in his adult life, populating personal crises and painted canvases with fictions of a revered aunt who guided him through other troubled times. His ensuing mental audit becomes manifest in and through the multigenerational saga of the Vesper family – a 19th century household of mixed heritage who “pass” as white in colonial New England until racial secrets and social misdeeds lead to a downward spiral that reverberates into the present day. At this point Kaphar submits his brush to the story of his muse, explaining, “This subconscious creation of narrative mirrored moments when I would lose myself in the act of making, driven by conversations with the characters in my paintings. I chose to allow myself to follow these characters who I might otherwise have tried to lead.” In concert with Benjamin Vesper, the youngest descendant said to be squatting in a 19th century house after a psychotic episode and hospital escape, Kaphar pursues the fugitive notion of truth amidst the illusory shadows of hallucination, hegemony and that which we call “History.” And it is in the architectural fragments of a house purportedly ravaged by the Civil War, amidst roughshod floors, ramshackle furniture, flickering lamps and timeworn documents that we find Kaphar – weaving paintings, sculptures and traces of himself into the splayed intestines of a shared construction. Pressed together like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that never quite fit, the jagged clusters of *The Vesper Project* collect without ever coalescing – whispering stories laced with both hope and hesitation. For it is here, in the ruins of violence, persecution and the painful turns of a mind in distress, that writer Priscilla Frank presciently observes, “rebirth in the residue.”



Top: Titus Kaphar, 2014. Image courtesy of the Artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Bottom: Titus Kaphar, *Behind the Myth of Benevolence*, 2014. Image courtesy of the Artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Such is the case in Kaphar’s most recent



series titled *The Jerome Project*, which marries personal travails with art history, escalating racial issues and ongoing research into the criminal justice system. When he was commissioned in 2014 to paint the “portrait” of the protestors in Ferguson, Missouri for *TIME* Magazine Kaphar outlined how “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.” Many of these feelings and frustrations were equally present in 2011 when Kaphar set about searching for his estranged father’s prison records, looking to find the lineage of a man who abandoned him at an early age. He discovered close to a hundred men who shared his father’s exact name, all of whom had their mugshots posted publicly on the Internet. Kaphar gathered these images and began painting them as devotional portraits – drawing upon

the knowledge that his father had been named after St. Jerome to adorn each background with gold leaf reminiscent of Renaissance era church painting. Yet in



Top: Titus Kaphar, *The Vesper Project* (detail), 2008-2013. Image courtesy of the Burger Collection, Hong Kong and Friedman Benda, New York.

Bottom: Titus Kaphar, *Jerome II*, 2014. Image courtesy of the Artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.



contrast to men glorified for their persecution and martyrdom, Kaphar highlights a perverse iteration of this process in the present day by obscuring each Jerome's face (to varying degrees) by dipping the paintings in tar. By using a material historically employed to both cover wounds and inflict torture and humiliation he speaks to the duality of a prison system that simultaneously promises rehabilitation and punishment, as well as a shame that lingers long after the sentence is served.

The works are not meant to romanticize criminal acts, nor do they lobby for innocence or guilt; instead *The Jerome Project* highlights the fallacy of framing these men with a view and understanding that will be forever partial. They are not men without fault or failing, but the all-consuming indictment of their lives by a single image belies the hypocrisy of a media environment where criminals are habitually consumed as celebrity fodder and television entertainment. Most of the world will only ever know Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Freddie Gray and countless other young men lost too soon as impressions projected onto absence; as collages

cobbled by lawyers and cable news reels; as a constellation of online photos, social media posts, family testimonials, surveillance video, and the rhetorical back-and-forth of talking heads on TV; as a series of segments that will never be whole. But perhaps that is the best we can ever hope for in the contingent, perpetually contested terrain that is collective memory.

In the continuation of *The Jerome Project* titled *Asphalt & Chalk* presently on display at the CAC, Kaphar congregates these partial views into composite portraits. Pointedly referencing chalk body outlines and their sobering shorthand of lives lost, he layers images of the Jeromes upon one another, as well as the aforementioned victims of a rush to judgment. In so doing, Kaphar returns some semblance of voice back to these men who live in, and as, silence – becoming messenger to the stories they tell inside his head. Speaking to the imagined dialogue that guided his hand through the *Vesper* and *Jerome Projects*, Kaphar elaborates, “It is quite common to feel that your characters are dictating the story and that you are a scribe.” As the tales accumulate their faces become aggregates of the many and the fodder for agency – connecting with his larger efforts that Carlson calls, “a nod to collective histories yet to be discovered, or a reconciliation for those that never will.” And it is here that all that which is incomplete and unfinished moves from an end to a beginning.

– SM 2015

Above: Titus Kaphar, *The Jerome Project (Asphalt and Chalk)*, Michael Brown, Sean Bell, Amadou Diallo, Trayvon Martin. Image courtesy of the Artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Opposite page: Titus Kaphar, *The Vesper Project (detail)*, 2008-2013. Image courtesy of the Burger Collection, Hong Kong and Friedman Benda, New York.



TITUS KAPHAR

The Vesper Project

May 15 - October 11, 2015

Curated by Steven Matijcio

Generously supported by 1919
Investment Counsel and ArtsWave
Corporate Partner: U.S. Bank

Titus Kaphar was born in 1976 in Kalamazoo, Michigan and currently lives between New York and Connecticut. His work is often inspired by the history of art. He cuts, bends, sculpts and mixes the work of Renaissance and Colonial era painters, creating formal games and new tales between fiction and quotation. Kaphar received an MFA from the Yale School of Art and is the distinguished recipient of a Gwendolyn Knight and Jacob Lawrence Fellowship. His work has been included in solo and group exhibitions at the Savannah College of Art and Design, Savannah, GA, the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY and the Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, WA. Kaphar's work is included in the collections of the New Britain Museum of American Art, New Britain, CT, the Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, WA, and the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY. In late 2014, *TIME* Magazine commissioned Kaphar to create an artwork in response to protests in Ferguson, Missouri for their Person of the Year issue. In 2015 he received a highly sought-after Creative Capital Award to further extend his most recent body of work, *The Jerome Project*. *The Vesper Project* is the artist's most ambitious installation to date, and will tour through 2016 to a number of venues including the Katzen Arts Center at American University, Washington, DC, the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts (PAFA), Philadelphia, PA, and the Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, AL. He is represented by the Jack Shainman Gallery in New York.

Cover: Titus Kaphar, *The Vesper Project* (detail), 2008-2013.
Image courtesy of the Burger Collection, Hong Kong and
Friedman Benda, New York.

contemporaryartscenter.org