

## GAGOSIAN

# HYPERALLERGIC

**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.*

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

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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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*



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



*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*