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Artist Titus Kaphar Is Creating a New Artistic Canon
Through work that confronts history and illuminates the Black experience, Kaphar is breaking the mold for art nonprofits at his organization, NXTHVN.

Tiana Reid



“In many ways I’m painting the mothers in my life, the Black women who have saved me yet again,” says Kaphar, pictured in his studio in New Haven, Connecticut, with three paintings from 2019, from left: MARIO SORRENTI FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

“I felt horrible,” says artist Titus Kaphar, describing his raw emotional state after one of his paintings appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine, accompanied by a highly personal text, less than two weeks after the death of George Floyd while in police custody. “I felt so unclothed.” Hundreds of thousands of people had taken to the streets to protest racist violence, and Kaphar was one of many Black people asked to do the painful work of explaining the Black experience.

Back in 2014, *Time* had published Kaphar’s painting *Yet Another Fight for Remembrance* which shows a group of Black men. They are portrayed in photorealist style with their arms raised, yet painted over in broad brushstrokes and disappearing into an abstract whiteness. The image marked the Ferguson, Missouri, protesters’ collective naming to the short list for *Time*’s Person of the Year. Now, Kaphar felt that *Time* would want another archetypal protest painting, another

representation in the genre of hands-up-don't-shoot, another image of Black figures being whitewashed.

Kaphar is known for creating aesthetic counter-narratives that blend the historical and the topical, but he felt fatigued, as he writes in *Time*, by “listlessly wad[ing] through another cycle of violence against Black people.” He explained to the magazine that his current body of work addressed Black mothers and sent a photograph of what he had been working on since early 2020, a large painting called *Analogous Colors*.



ART PROJECT Kaphar with members of his NXTHVN residency and training program. “Most institutions infantilize artists,” he says. PHOTO: MARIO SORRENTI FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

“I said, ‘Here’s the painting; here’s where I am right now,’ ” says Kaphar, who also sent his written piece. If *Time* didn’t want it, they didn’t want it, he thought, and maybe he’d be off the hook. There was a miscommunication with the magazine, he says. “And I was like, Yes, great, awesome. I don’t have to do this.” Where *Yet Another Fight for Remembrance* is energetic, *Analogous Colors* is elegiac: an imagined Black mother in the manner of a Madonna, tenderly holding a silhouette of a child. The child is missing, literally excised from the canvas. If you stuck your hand through the contours of the child’s cloud-like cheeks and tiny toes, you would seemingly touch the white walls of Kaphar’s studio.

Well, it turned out that *Time* did in fact want it. “I was like, Shit, that didn’t work out how I wanted it to work.” The painting was ultimately published alongside the poetic text he had written that begins: “I can not sell you this painting.”

“I have given up trying to describe the feeling of knowing that I can not be safe in the country of my birth.... A MacArthur won’t protect you. A Yale degree won’t protect you,” Kaphar writes, referring to his own 2018 MacArthur Foundation “genius” grant and 2006 Yale University M.F.A. “Black mothers understand despair,” his text continues. “I want to be sure that she is seen. I want to be certain that her story is told.... One Black mother’s loss WILL be memorialized....”

Despite the flood of emails this elicited, Kaphar didn't feel any better until he got a message from a Black woman who said her son had been murdered. "She wrote me this beautiful email and then everything was OK," he says. "I realized that the work was working and that there was something that she needed to say, [that] really in some ways was outside of me. And I needed to step back and let that happen."

Kaphar talks in clean, deft sentences with purpose and sensitivity. In interviews and photo shoots, he's often wearing paint-splattered clothes, as if to reassure his audience (or himself) that he is in fact an artist. He is also a performer, as in his 2017 TED Talk, when he completed a painting onstage. Calling it *Shifting the Gaze*, he whitewashed over his own painting, a near replica of a 17th-century portrait, *Family Group in a Landscape*, by Dutch artist Frans Hals, so that the audience's focus becomes the Black child at the center, thought by art historians to be an African servant or slave.

Kaphar's canvases, which do much to revise, edit and question the European and American art-historical canon, are masterfully painted, but he didn't pick up a paintbrush until his 20s. He had enrolled in junior college, prompted by his attempts to impress a woman—Julianne, now his wife and mother of his two sons. A native of Kalamazoo, Michigan, he went on to San José State University, where he took a drawing class and later started painting. He graduated with a B.F.A. in 2001, before attending art school at Yale. After he graduated, he and Julianne moved to New York, but soon settled back in New Haven, Connecticut, where Kaphar now has a studio and has expanded his practice to include sculpture, writing and film. (His wife is currently pursuing a master's degree in nutrition.) In 2013, he started sketching out plans for NXTHVN, a nonprofit arts organization and entrepreneurship incubator. This fall, Kaphar's first show of paintings with his new gallery, Gagolian, *From a Tropical Space*, opened in New York.

The latest series is less concerned with challenging accepted narratives of history and more with the question of Black women's work and creativity. Previous pieces conducted explicit conversations with canonical Western painters including William Blake and Édouard Manet, such as Kaphar's 2003 work *Visual Quotation, Manet*, which is a repainted solo portrait of the Black woman who appears in the background of Manet's famous 1863 painting *Olympia*. The latest group of works let go of the balance sheet of history, instead leaning towards Afro-futurism as envisioned by the likes of the late science-fiction writer Octavia E. Butler.

"It felt like it came from another place," Kaphar says of the inspiration for his newest pieces, which evoke an off-kilter, dystopian world and present a fallen but fierce landscape. Colors are thrillingly saturated: bubblegum-pink sidewalks, fuchsia skies and cutouts where children should be.

In *Analogous Colors*, that 2020 *Time* cover that is part of this new series, the use of negative space emphasizes other parts of the composition, namely, the mother — her soft mien, the sheen lighting up the left side of her face, the shades of black in her hand.

"There are at least three faces behind her face," Kaphar says. "I started the painting thinking I knew who she was, and I felt like she kept saying, This isn't me." The end result does not symbolize all Black mothers but rather illuminates the full inner life of this particular figure. "In many ways I'm painting the mothers in my life, the Black women who have saved me yet

again,” says Kaphar. When he was 15, he says he was living with his father when an altercation led him to leave home, eventually finding stability with a family in San Jose, California.



Absconded from the household of the President of the United States, 2016, which highlights George Washington's slave-ownership. © TITUS KAPHAR. PHOTO: CHRISTOPHER GARDENER. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GAGOSIAN. YALE UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY PERMANENT COLLECTION. *Seeing through time, 2018.* © TITUS KAPHAR. PHOTO: CHRISTOPHER GARDENER. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GAGOSIAN. *Thomas Jefferson shown in Behind the Myth of Benevolence, 2014.* © TITUS KAPHAR. PHOTO: JEREMY LAWSON. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GAGOSIAN

Kaphar's father became the subject of a 2014–15 exhibition titled *The Jerome Project* at the Studio Museum in Harlem. Kaphar says he used a search for the prison records of his father — the titular Jerome — as a jumping-off point for research into the prison-industrial complex. The result was dozens of portraits based on mug shots of Black men. These riff on religious iconography, set on gold-leaf backgrounds, and then dunked in chunky tar, obscuring their faces. The show's curator, Naima J. Keith, says Kaphar was grappling with the impact of incarceration long after a prisoner leaves an institution's walls.

Engagement with motherhood has a complex history in African-American thought, and the intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois, whom Kaphar painted a decade ago, provides just one example. In the seminal 1903 book *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois included an essay on losing his first-born child as an infant, "Of the Passing of the First-Born." Through his then-wife, Nina Gomer, whom he calls "the transfigured woman"—transformed by motherhood—he describes how he came to love his child only for his son to die before reaching 2 years old. He sees what it means to be a parent of a Black child in a racist America. "...In the chamber of death writhed the world's most piteous thing—a childless mother," Du Bois wrote. In Kaphar's 2010 portrait, *Father and Son*, Du Bois sits tall, surrounded by dark boiserie, an open book, an urn. One hand drapes over his crossed legs and the other tightly gropes a canvas bulging out of the painting, the ghost of his babe.

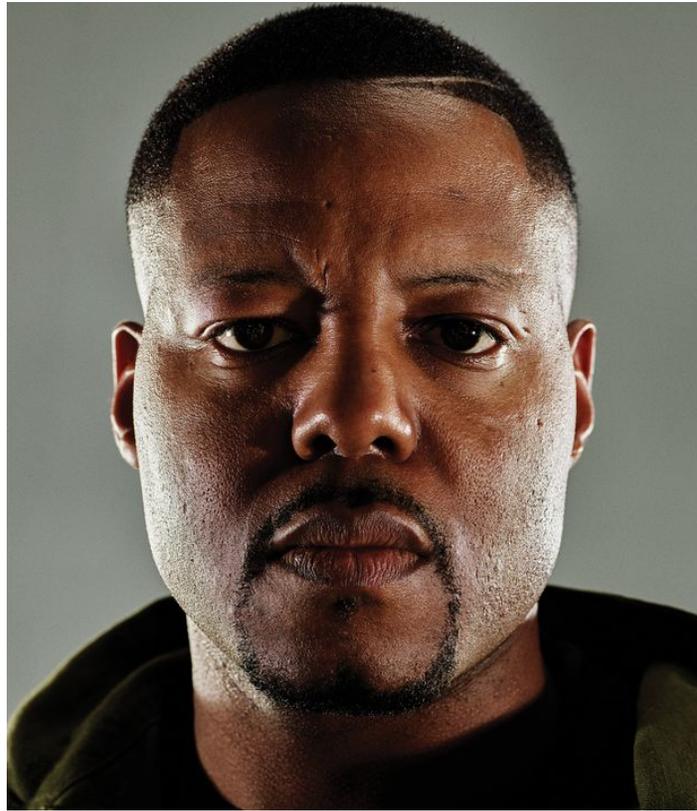


DIVINE INSPIRATION Kaphar, who often references art history, at work on a 2020 piece titled *Jesus noir* (Black Jesus), which is based on an 1820 painting by Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, *Jesus Returning the Keys to St. Peter*. The piece is part of a current exhibition of Kaphar's work at Gesù Church in Brussels, Belgium. PHOTO: MARIO SORRENTI FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

“I’m very cautious about not speaking for Black women,” says Kaphar, who says that for this new series, he consulted writer and poet Claudia Rankine, who also lives in New Haven. The two worked together in 2018 when an interdisciplinary collective she co-founded, the Racial Imaginary Institute, staged an exhibition at The Kitchen in New York City. Rankine visited his studio when Kaphar was at work on the beginnings of *From a Tropical Space*. “We discussed whether or not this was a continuation of works like *Space to Forget*, which he did in 2014, of a domestic worker with a child on her back,” says Rankine. “Those paintings really had to do with child care and Black people taking care of white [children].”

His new paintings of women and children leave that theme behind. “These children belong to these women. And that was a kind of revolutionary moment,” Rankine says of Kaphar’s conceptual departure, also citing the mothers of George Floyd, Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, Breonna Taylor, Sandra Bland. “It was a complete shift in the framework, and you began to see it in the expressions on the women’s faces.... We talked a lot about that, like, What is the dread? What is the loss?”

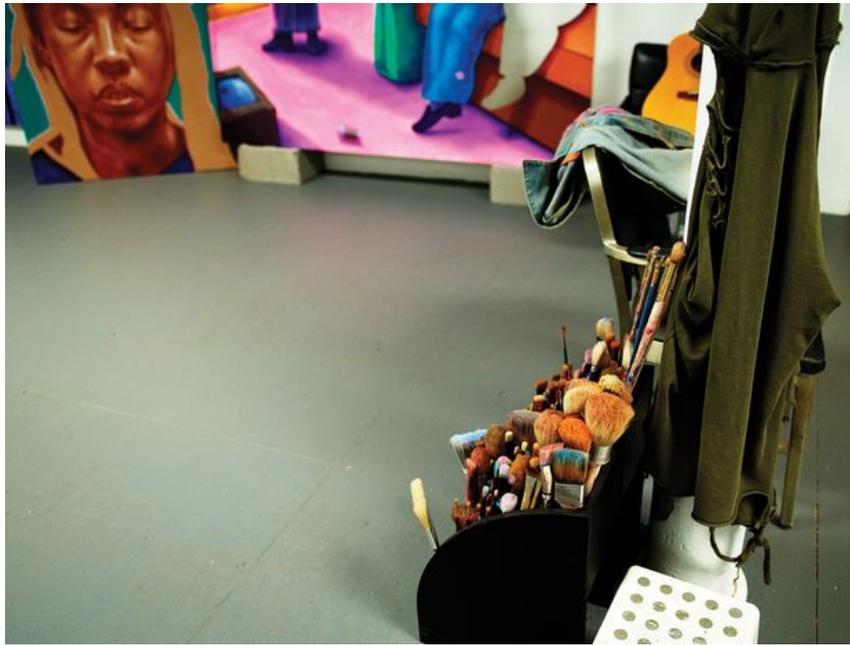
“As a Black woman, I felt a connection with [these women] as someone who was in a position to care for something that could be taken away,” she says. “And in an odd way, we’re sort of all the way back at the beginning again with slavery.”



CLOSE UP “Titus recognizes that his power in the art world extends beyond showing at a museum,” says curator Naima J. Keith. *PHOTO: MARIO SORRENTI FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE*

Kaphar is a magisterial handler of narrative, but for all his charismatic style, his paintings are by definition silent. This has driven him to find other avenues. “Titus recognizes that his power in the art world extends beyond showing at a museum,” says Keith, who is now vice president of education and public programs at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. It’s why he participates in projects such as one conceived of by his frequent collaborator, the poet and legal scholar Reginald Dwayne Betts, to create a bookshelf for the Million Book Project. It’s an initiative funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation that will distribute a library of 500 specially chosen books to 1,000 prisons across the fifty U.S. states and Puerto Rico. It’s also part of why he tackled an even more ambitious, multi-year project, co-founding NXTHVN with artist Jonathan Brand and private-equity investor Jason Price. NXTHVN is a multidisciplinary arts incubator that operates both a fellowship program for emerging artists and curators and a paid apprenticeship program for New Haven high school students, the latter endowed by Gagosian. Kaphar intends to replicate NXTHVN in other cities across the country, such as Detroit and St. Louis.

Located in the historically Black neighborhood of Dixwell, the 40,000-square-foot NXTHVN facility is a mile from Kaphar’s personal studio. “New Haven is his life,” Natalie Renee, Kaphar’s studio manager of five years, says of Kaphar’s relationship to the city. NXTHVN is just about a mile northwest of Yale University, but according to Kaphar, the two locations couldn’t be more different. “When the community sees Yale buildings, it tells them they are not supposed to go there,” he says.



BRUSH WORK Kaphar's range of tools at his studio. PHOTO: MARIO SORRENTI FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

“On one side of that hill it’s the faculty at Yale, it’s the intellectuals, the most renowned intellectuals in the country, and then on the other side of that hill is a part of the city that has not been invested in, in a serious way, in generations,” says Kaphar.

For him, the architecture is a crucial part of the story of both postindustrialism and community participation: NXTHVN comprises two converted factory buildings and a new addition, all designed by New York–based architecture firm Deborah Berke Partners, which also designed the Yale School of Art. (Berke is also the dean of the Yale School of Architecture.) Interior work, including graphics and furniture, was designed by Atelier Cho Thompson. The NXTHVN facility itself will be a place where art can be made and shown, including working studios, a small black-box theater, a 3-D-printing lab and other technical equipment, a cafe, a rooftop event space and a gallery. “It was critical to Titus that the project have visual expression of itself—that it speak to its community, that it speak to the artistic landscape at large about what he was doing,” explains Maitland Jones, a partner at Deborah Berke Partners.

“The new architecture also doesn’t have pull-down gates, doesn’t have big solid shutters. It’s big glass windows: We’re with you, we’re not afraid of you, we’re not armoring ourselves against you,” adds Berke. “What Titus is saying in terms of his programming, and we are helping him say in terms of the architecture, is, The curtain is wide open, come on in, see what we do.”

Most recently, NXTHVN fielded over 250 applications for seven studio slots. NXTHVN is not a retreat, Kaphar says, and artists are exposed to a curriculum that includes professional development, with visits from the usual curators, writers and collectors but also bookkeepers, lawyers and accountants.



FULL SPECTRUM “I’m very cautious about not speaking for Black women,” says Kaphar, who consulted poet Claudia Rankine for his latest series of works. Kaphar in his studio with recent paintings, all in his *Gagosian* show, from left: *Twins*; *Final chapter*; *Beneath an unforgiving sun*. PHOTO: MARIO SORRENTI FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

“Most institutions infantilize artists when it comes to talking about that stuff; they say, Let the big boys take care of it,” he says. “So what we find is situations where, particularly for artists of color, we labor to make the product, that product goes into the marketplace of which we have no control. It’s exhibited in places in which we have no control. It’s bought and sold based on prices of which we have no control. And to me that sounds too much like sharecropping to be acceptable. And so our position is you can think it’s gross for artists to have to consider the money. But I think it’s gross for artists to be taken advantage of. That to me is disgusting.”

With *NXTHVN*, Kaphar is enlarging his artistic practice to include a current and future community. He’s trying to make a space for Black and brown artists that he didn’t really have. And this is what his art does too: imagines futures and makes space for them.



PLEIN AIR Kaphar behind his studio, with a found sculpture. PHOTO: MARIO SORRENTI FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

The energy Kaphar puts into everything he does reveals a man ambivalent about his crafted persona—more frustrated, more angry, more anxious about spectacle and far less hopeful than he initially seems. “It’s not my responsibility to make you feel hopeful about the future,” he says, speaking to an imagined public. “I’m glad you’re doing your antiracist work, but that’s your work. I’m trying to figure out how to heal right now. I’m trying to figure out how to make sure my brothers are OK. I’m worried about my sisters. I’m trying to console my mother.”