

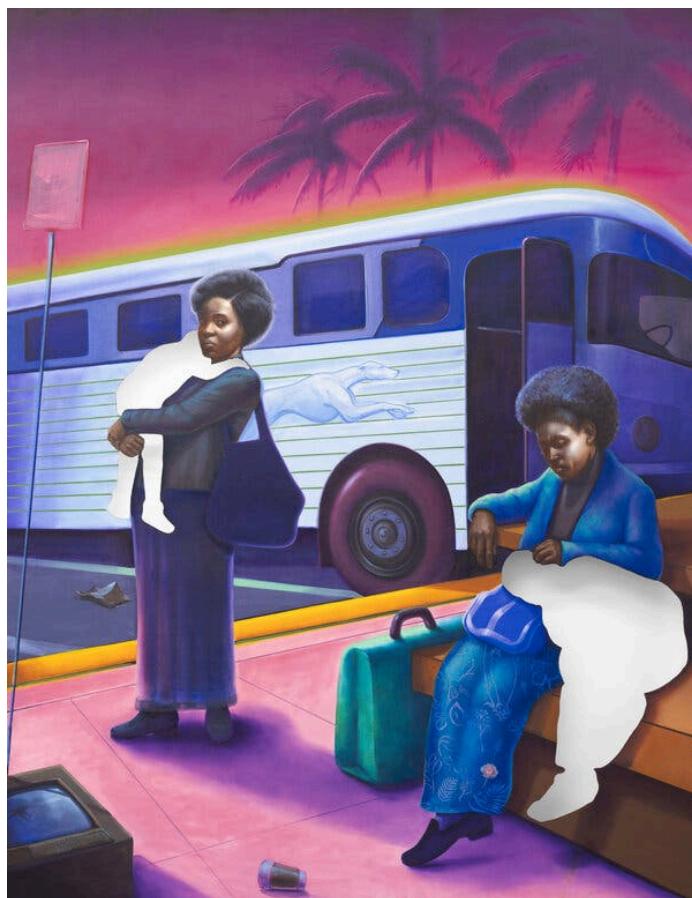
GAGOSIAN

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Parenting While Black: Titus Kaphar's Starkly Powerful Works

A painter's new show ventures away from the past, toward contemporary traumas in Black lives.

Roberta Smith

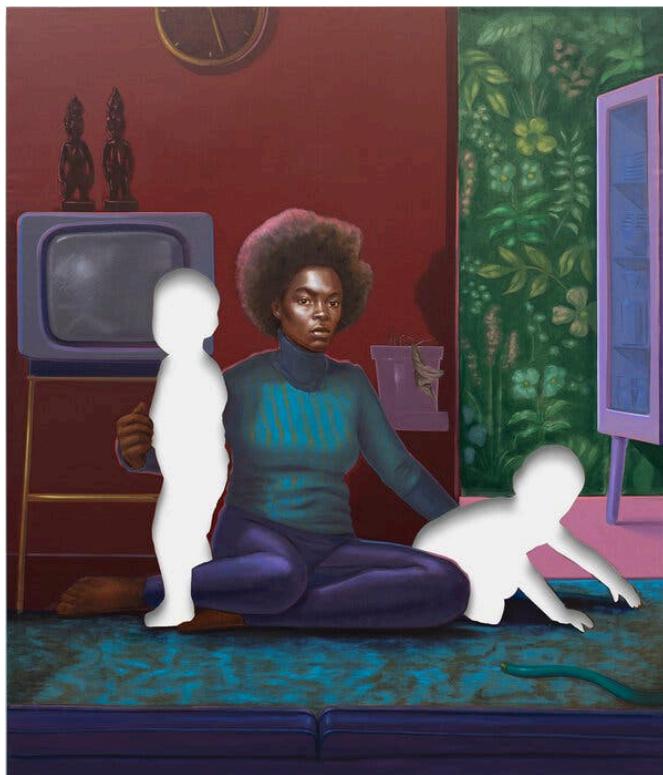


Titus Kaphar's "The distance between what we have and what we want," 2019, is in a show of new works, "From a Tropical Space," at Gagosian. © Titus Kaphar and the Hudgins Family, via Gagosian

Titus Kaphar's paintings have always been blunt in confronting both the paucity of Black figures in traditional Western art and the tragic inequities of Black life in the United States. Mr. Kaphar accomplishes this by being a skilled realist painter adept at violating his medium in startling ways to make his points, whether by tearing or cutting his canvases, or covering parts of his images with tar or whitewash. His paintings are conceptual objects freighted with historical or present-day references that require little explanation. They verge on didactic except for the visual richness and emotional directness with which they examine their entwined subjects.

With his show of 11 new paintings, Mr. Kaphar becomes the latest successful Black artist to have been taken up by a blue-chip gallery — Gagosian — acting on instincts at once admirable and calculating. And like other artists in similar situations — Mark Bradford, Kehinde Wiley and Theaster Gates — Mr. Kaphar has made a determined effort to give back. In 2018, he founded, with the entrepreneur Jason Price and the sculptor Jonathan Brand, a New-Haven nonprofit incubator called NXTHVN to train emerging artists and curators of color.

Mr. Kaphar's aesthetic efforts walk along an unusually fine line between art and activism. Among his best-known works (not in this show) is "Behind the Myth of Benevolence" (2014), in which a careful, flipped replica of Gilbert's Stuart's portrait of Thomas Jefferson has been partly removed from its stretcher and hangs to one side, like a drawn-back curtain. Behind this, solidly attached to the stretcher, is a second canvas and another layer of the great man's personal history: an intimate portrayal of a beautiful young Black woman. Her image refers to Sally Hemings, an enslaved woman of mixed race who belonged to Jefferson, and whose six children were in all likelihood fathered by him.



"Twins" (2020) imbues a vintage television set and a garden hose with historical meaning. © Titus Kaphar and Gagosian

Mr. Kaphar's "Jerome Project" — an ongoing series — consists of small portraits of incarcerated Black men (based on their mug shots), painted on gold leaf, like icons and then dipped in thick tar, up to their chins or lips or even their foreheads. The works stand as visceral symbols of oppression and obliteration.

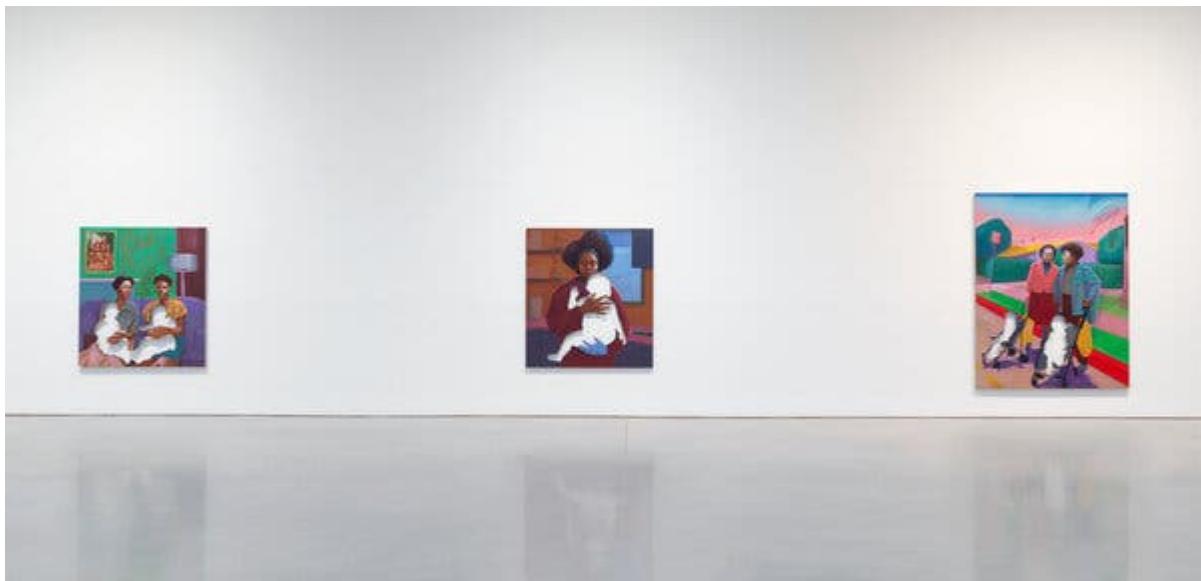
The paintings in "From a Tropical Space" at Gagosian's West 21st Street gallery are as starkly forceful as ever. But they venture much closer to quotidian life, as if to update us on the crushing anxiety that has always been part of parenting while Black in America. The artist starts by making paintings of appropriate photographs of mothers with their children, usually in scenes

of domestic calm. Then he simply cuts out the images of the children, leaving the mothers holding empty silhouettes through which the walls they hang on are disconcertingly visible.

The contrast of the painted canvas and the sudden gaps has a definite jolt that intensifies as you recognize what has been lost. With their amped up palette of dark pastels and everyday settings, they succeed as paintings to a greater degree than before. And they don't let us off the hook by dwelling on the past.

The series' (and exhibition's) title conjures sub-Saharan Africa, from which the ancestors of many American Blacks were torn. One work — "Analogous Colors" — appeared on the cover of Time magazine's June 15 issue, which reported on the killing of George Floyd. (After all, there is no time limit on losing a child.) The expression on the mother's face here is an unusually complex mixture of tenderness and worry. Several of them look out at us with some degree of wariness, as in one titled "The distance between what we have and what we want."

The alluring deep pinks, lavenders and blues have a tropical mien, as do occasional, palm trees and the lush foliate patterns that regularly appear as wall paper, drapes and backsplashes or, in "Aftermath," on the roof of a house upended by some kind of natural disaster, possibly a tornado. The painting titled "From a Tropical Space" evokes the vibrant hues of a well-known variant of the Pan-African flag in its green grass, red curb and the yellow plastic bags of two mothers, chatting in the street, with strollers that once held their toddlers.



Installation view, from left, "Not My Burden," "Analogous Colors" and "From a Tropical Space." © Gagosian

But there is a foreboding, slightly overcast quality to these scenes and carefully placed details add to it and sometimes create a modern iconography. Among these details: a blue rubber glove redolent of coronavirus precautions worn by the mother in "Analogous Colors." A garden hose looks innocuous in the chaotic garage of "Aftermath," but it also snakes into other paintings, like the family room in "Twins," the next painting on the gallery's wall. In this scene, it hints at the Garden of Eden, but more strongly evokes the fire hoses directed at protesters during civil rights era, while the vintage television set (with an African sculpture on it) indicates how such violence became known nationwide at the time. That things may not turn out well is signaled by a dead potted plant sitting on a small shelf.

In “Not My Burden,” two mothers hold their babies, while displayed on the wall behind them is an old sepia photograph of a large white family and their Black servant, who stands at the edge of the frame. (The scene was the basis of an earlier painting by Mr. Kaphar.) Her expression is grim; perhaps she is thinking about the needs of her own children at home.

Despite the comfy interiors and appealing colors, these are haunted paintings. They depict a condition known to African-Americans ever since they began arriving on these shores, when a mother’s primary fear was of her children being sold away from her.

And they hint at loss and desolation that may yet come, but whose possibility is oppressive. Even if they never arrive, they will still have extracted too great a cost.