

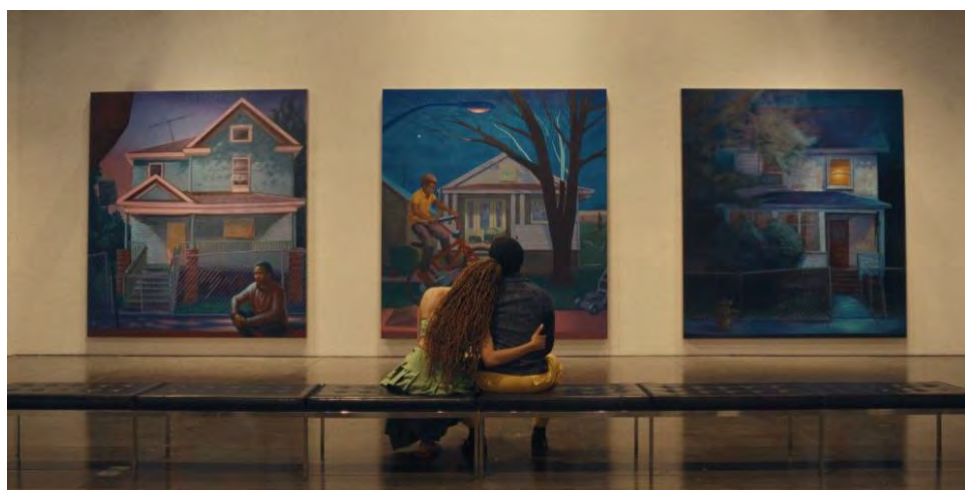
GAGOSIAN

ARTFORUM

TITUS KAPHAR

On his feature film debut and exhibition, "Exhibiting Forgiveness"

Ekow Eshun



Titus Kaphar, Exhibiting Forgiveness, 2024, color, sound, 117 minutes. Aisha (Andra Day), Tarrell (André Holland).

Titus Kaphar creates artworks that explore questions of Black presence and absence, visibility and erasure—big social and political themes he navigates through the specificity of personal experience. *Exhibiting Forgiveness*, his powerful feature-film debut, showing first at his Gagosian Beverly Hills exhibition of the same name before debuting nationwide in October, is inspired by his fraught relationship with his father. Addressing family trauma, generational healing, and the power of forgiveness, the film follows an artist, Tarrell, played by André Holland, attempting to overcome the pain of his past through painting. He is on track to career success when he is derailed by an unexpected visit from his estranged father, a recovering addict desperate to reconcile with his son.

For Kaphar, who wrote, directed, and produced the film, the processes of artmaking and filmmaking were intertwined. A suite of his large-scale paintings, which he created as he was writing the script, play an integral part in the film. Kaphar worked with Holland in the studio for three months, training him to paint so that the actor could convincingly play the role of an artist. Tarrell is shown at work in his studio throughout the film, and the resulting paintings—the same ones originally created by Kaphar—play a key role in marking the emotional pain of his childhood years.



Titus Kaphar, So vulnerable, 2023, oil on canvas, 120 × 108".

THE FILM IS VERY MUCH based on my life. It is not a line-for-line autobiography, but it is most definitely the truth of my experience. In fact, it started off as a documentary. I was going to Kalamazoo, Michigan, with my wife and kids to see my grandmother, and when we got to her house, my father was sitting on the doorstep. I hadn't seen him in about fifteen years at that time. My kids were very young, and my wife had never met him in person, so I felt like it wasn't the right time or context to introduce him. So we walk into the house. I tell him that I really don't want to talk right now, and that he should go. He followed us in anyway, and my grandmother insisted that I speak to him. In my family, when your grandmother says something, you do it; it's not really a question.

So for me, that moment was about determining how to be respectful to my grandmother, without having to have a conversation with this man. I had a camera on me at the time and, pretty arbitrarily, I said, "Well, if you want to talk to me, then let me film you, because there's a lot that you have to account for." My suspicion was that he was going to say no, and I was going to be done with the situation. But to my surprise, he said, "Yes, come to my house." I thought that I'd be at his house for fifteen minutes, but I ended up filming him for three days. And I realized that at some point I would need to explain to my children the complexity of my relationship with my father.



Titus Kaphar, Exhibiting Forgiveness, 2024, color, sound, 117 minutes. Tarrell (André Holland), La'Ron (John Earl Jelks).

In order to do that, I started writing down some of my memories. And the memories brought back images. And then, as I was writing, I started painting. The more I would write, the more images would come. And I just started digging in that way. I would wake up at five o'clock in the morning and write until it was time to take my kids to school. I had this app on my phone that allowed me to listen to what I'd written. I would go to the studio and listen while I was making the paintings. That was my practice for about five months. The majority of the paintings were complete before the film was even begun.

I didn't approach this film any differently than I approach my painting practice. The way I sit and look at a painting as I'm trying to find my way through it is the same way I sit and look at a scene. I often find myself in a painting, where I've spent months working on it, and over time, I come to understand what story the painting wants to tell. I might realize a figure needs to be removed, or some element needs to be added. In that way, I find that both painting and filmmaking are acts of exploration and storytelling.



Titus Kaphar, Some things can't be worked out on canvas, 2023, oil on canvas, 120 × 108".

Derek Cianfrance, one of my producers on the film, told me the most important thing you can do as a director is choose actors that you love, that you trust, and give them space to do what they need to do. It was also important to me to find an actor who could embody all the intensity, the rage, and Tarrell's internal conflict in a way that felt honest and true.

Ultimately, this is a film about hope. It's about an artist who uses his practice as a tool to move him and his family closer to healing. To tell that story, there are necessarily moments of tragedy and moments of trauma. But it is in no way trauma porn. In editing the film, there were certain things that I removed so that it wouldn't read that way. Because sometimes the trauma can be a distraction from what actually heals us. The pain of the story is only there so that it helps us understand how to get to the healing. It's not about overdramatizing suffering.

People's responses to this film have made me realize I'm not alone in my experience. We've had lots of people, after seeing it, spend time with me and be very open. The film seems to enable people to make space for their own emotions. That's the thing that's really exciting about it. Your willingness to be vulnerable creates the opportunity for other people to enter and share that space of vulnerability. You get real very, very quickly.



Titus Kaphar, Exhibiting Forgiveness, 2024, color, sound, 117 minutes. Tarrell (André Holland).

A dear friend of mine, Bridget R. Cooks, wrote a book called *Exhibiting Blackness* that has been an inspiration for a lot of the work that I've made over the years. What I liked about the title *Exhibiting Forgiveness* was its ambiguity—the fact that you can think of it in multiple ways. As we've shown the film, we've come to realize that every viewer has a different opinion on whether forgiveness was actually given and received. And I love that. It is not perfectly clear. It is purposefully open, and hopefully it leads to important discussions.