

GAGOSIAN



How *Exhibiting Forgiveness* Explores the Limits of Religion and Absolution

Robert Daniels



André Holland and John Earl Jelks in Exhibiting Forgiveness Courtesy of Roadside Attractions

In 2016, [Titus Kaphar](#) made *The Jerome Project*, a short documentary in which he confronted how his father’s abuse and drug use harmed his childhood. But upon completing it, he discovered that he had only scratched the surface. “When I finished the project, what was clear to me is that it did a good job of telling us where we were, but not how we got there,” says Kaphar.

So he turned to fiction. In his new film *Exhibiting Forgiveness*, which premiered at the [Sundance Film Festival](#) in January and hits theaters October 18, Kaphar casts André Holland as Tarrell, a [celebrated American painter](#) (as Kaphar is) whose life is unmoored by the re-emergence of his abusive father La’Ron

(John Earl Jelks) and the fragile health of his mother Joyce ([Aunjanue Ellis-Taylor](#)). La’Ron and Joyce’s religious beliefs create the expectation that Tarrell will grant easy absolution to La’Ron, thrusting Tarrell into a chaotic battle between his religious values and the long-standing hurt he still carries. The film breaks from a long tradition in Black cinema of relying on religion, and the forgiveness it demands, as an all-healing balm. Instead, it offers a raw and realistic portrayal of what it looks like to process childhood trauma well into adulthood. And it allowed Kaphar himself to dig deeper. “Allowing fiction to play a part in *Exhibiting Forgiveness* allowed me to go into my father's head in a way that a documentary wouldn't allow me to do.”

Kaphar’s art has often provided space to revisit the past. *The Jerome Project* was born out of a search in prison records for information about his father. In that process, he not only discovered mugshots of 97 other incarcerated Black men who share his father’s first and last name, he also interviewed them and painted Renaissance and Byzantine religious-inspired portraits of them on gold-leaf backgrounds dipped in tar. His other works further reclaim history through white-washed portraits of [Black Civil War soldiers](#), collages that place Black people’s faces in confrontation with slave-holding white figures, and devotional scenes that refigure Black people into Biblical text.

Exhibiting Forgiveness is a culmination of the deep hurt and conflicting feelings that have inspired his work. “A friend of mine said after seeing the film, ‘You've been painting this movie your entire life,’” says Kaphar. His close partner in the movie’s conception is Holland, an actor whose inviting gaze and coy smile has powered [Barry Jenkins’ *Moonlight*](#), [Ava DuVernay’s *Selma*](#), and [Steven Soderbergh’s *High Flying Bird*](#). Watching the desperate heartache and frank ruminations that carve Tarrell’s ups and downs, you get the sense that only together could Kaphar and Holland have arrived at such an honest portrayal of religion’s limits for processing generational trauma.



André Holland in Exhibiting Forgiveness Courtesy of Roadside Attractions

Holland and Kaphar began to develop their bond months before the latter said “action.” In a bid for realism, the director invited his star to his studio in New Haven, Conn. to learn how to paint. During that

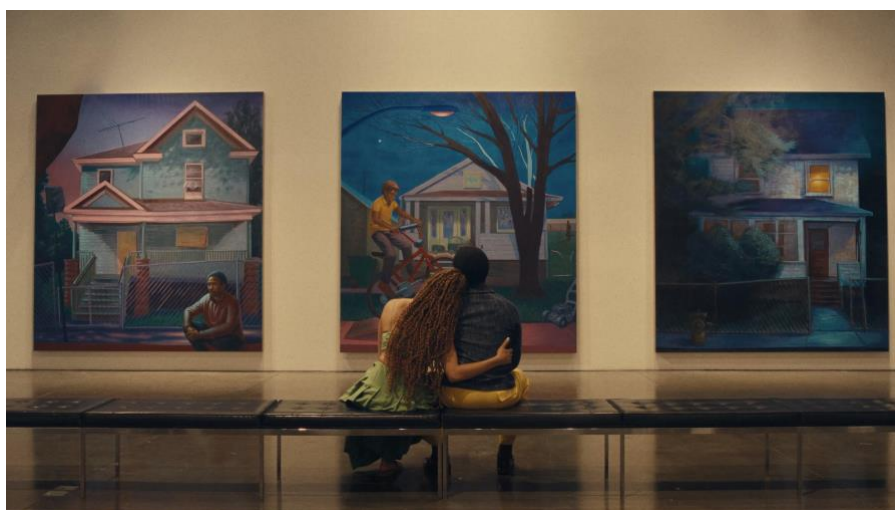
period, the pair also learned about each other. “We have very different relationships to our fathers, but we still profoundly connected with each other about our fathers,” Holland explains during our Zoom conversation ahead of the movie’s theatrical release.

“André commitment to his practice is profound and pretty much the only reason why this film could work,” explains Kaphar. “You need to have somebody who's willing to go all the way. It's not for the faint of heart.” Holland: “This territory that we are trafficking in was obviously pretty heavy. We made a silent pact to take care of each other throughout the journey, to continually check in with each other to make sure that we were OK.”

Those months together also instilled trust between actor and director. *Exhibiting Forgiveness* is a film packed with intense breakdowns and triggering confrontations. Tarrell is afflicted by post-traumatic nightmares of his father’s violent drug addiction. When he thinks back on the abuse his father doled out on him and his mother, Tarrell is afflicted by post-traumatic nightmares of his father’s violent addiction and fits of rage. In one heartbreaking scene, La’Ron forces a teenage Tarrell to continue mowing a white woman’s lawn even after seeing Tarrell’s foot be impaled by a nail. Those nightmares have caused Tarrell to feel a debilitating angst that he’ll repeat his father’s mistakes with own young son.

Digging up such personal pain understandably took an emotional toll on Kaphar. “Watching André go through what I went through broke me,” he recalls. “He made me feel the emotions that I had been suppressing.”

Holland channeled his personal struggles too. The actor’s own father was facing cancer when he first received Kaphar’s script. Holland recorded conversations with his dad that later informed his approach to Tarrell. John Earl Jelks, who plays La’Ron, similarly conjured his relationship with his own dad. The set therefore became a “space for all of our dads to be there with us and to be in communion with all of those spirits,” says Holland.



Andra Day and André Holland Courtesy of Roadside Attractions

That spirituality exists in every frame of Kaphar's film, especially in the act of painting. It's telling that the only place where Tarrell finds peace—apart from being with his young son and R&B singer wife Aisha ([Andra Day](#))—is in his studio. There, art is not only a meditation. It's also devotional.

Kaphar painted several works for the film, each in different stages of completion to give the impression of Holland actually crafting these pieces. These oils are inspired by Tarrell's on-screen memories, featuring neighborhood scenes of kids jumping fences and riding bikes, and portraits of other characters. The pieces do not feature the same scenes of radiant angels or images of Christ that typifies some of Kaphar's work. But he still believes that even the film's pieces—which are [being exhibited at the Gagosian Gallery](#) in Los Angeles until Nov. 2—are firmly rooted in his religious upbringing. “The people who love me most in the world are believers. The people who saved me are believers,” explains Kaphar. “Even though my spiritual journey looks a little different than, say, my grandmother and my mom's spiritual journey, my values are rooted in what those women taught me.”

Perhaps it's the intentional blending of craft and the divine that makes *Exhibiting Forgiveness* such a clear-eyed critique of absolution's finite capacity for closure. Because unlike films like *The Green Mile*, *The Color Purple*, *Soul Food*, the *Best Man* series, *Kingdom Come*, and more, which often hasten [forgiveness](#) to speed toward neat resolutions, *Exhibiting Forgiveness* doesn't suppose the problems between Tarrell and La'Ron can be waved away by a magic wand. And unlike many of those films, its avoidance of forgiveness as a simple fix in turn avoids shifting the responsibility of the sin away from the sinner to the victim.

In one evocative scene, Tarrell's mother, Joyce sits with her son on a park bench, pleading with him to forgive La'Ron. She even quotes the Bible—Matthew 6:14-15: “For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.” Tarrell responds with a biblical story himself, that of God testing Abraham's faith by demanding he kill his only son Isaac. Tarrell uses the scripture to demonstrate how God's word can neither be taken wholesale nor be used to mend all wounds.

With roots in Alabama's Southern Black church, Holland found the charged scene difficult to approach. “I have, I'll say, a deeply ingrained reverence for the biblical. And by that, I mean, the idea of saying a cuss word in the same sentence as a Bible verse for me was grounds to get me sent straight to hell,” he explains with a chuckle. “So I was nervous about that.”

Before he even began filming *Exhibiting Forgiveness*, however, Holland was already reflecting on religion. He is presently studying for his Masters in Religion and Public Life at Harvard Divinity School. Since beginning his studies, he's thought about the origins of religion, how we define it, and the ways several doctrines have changed. “Religion's been used in a variety of different ways throughout history. It's been used to inspire folks to do great things, and it's also been used to justify some pretty horrific things as well. It's both. I was bound up in that struggle as we were on set. I could not decouple those two things,” says Holland.



Holland and Ellis-Taylor as son and mother Courtesy of Roadside Attractions

For Tarrell’s father, religion is used as a pathway back to his son. The film is smartly slippery on whether La’Ron’s transformation—whereby he sobers up and tries to make amends for his past—is totally genuine. Often in conversations with Tarrell, La’Ron, like Joyce, wields the Bible to demand absolution. But he never takes responsibility for his physical abuse of Tarrell and Joyce or his drug habit. He positions them as character-building obstacles. Because La’Ron doesn’t provide adequate grounds for reconciliation, ultimately, Tarrell is left to do much of the emotional work of moving on. It’s a one-sided, inward turn that sets up a final meeting between father and son that doesn’t necessarily end in catharsis but ambiguity: Does Tarrell forgive his father?

The fresh result of the film’s conclusion is to refrain from granting the viewer or the character a neat ending. Kaphar hopes to inspire viewers to inspect the toxic relationships they’ve carried on for the wrong reasons. “The way that I was taught forgiveness was to turn the other cheek and forgive at all costs. I’ve done that often to my detriment,” explained Holland. “I think that one of the things I learned in the process of doing this film that I’m continuing to learn is forgiveness with boundaries.”

And yet, the trick Kaphar manages to pull off is never making La’Ron wholly unlikable. Kaphar crafts the on-screen father as flawed but not evil. That nuance is the result of decades worth of introspection which have led to an uncommon honesty and vulnerability that courses throughout *Exhibiting Forgiveness*. It also allowed Kaphar to come to a life-altering conclusion while making the film.

“My father’s been struggling for most of my life, and I needed to be honest about that,” explains Kaphar. “I can say this now: I still love him. More importantly now, after the process of making this film, I realize that my father is not the villain of my narrative.”