

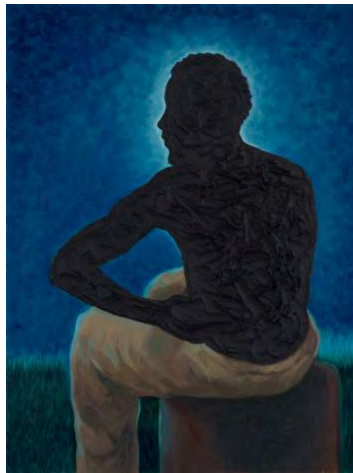
GAGOSIAN



Titus Kaphar, American artist: "I want to focus on moments of resistance, of freedom"

An encounter with the artist whose powerful exhibition at the Gagosian gallery shakes up American history, from the contradictions of George Washington to the censorship of Donald Trump.

Clémentine Mercier



"Scourged" by Titus Kaphar (2025). (Chris Gardner)

History is a fierce battleground. So is art, especially in the Trump era. Shown for the first time in Paris, after being targeted by [the revisionist censorship of the Trump administration](#), the American Titus Kaphar made a name for himself by revealing systemic violence in the United States and challenging national heroic figures. In his powerful exhibition at the Gagosian gallery, his canvases tell the stories of escaped or tortured slaves, his ingenious paintings with retractable panels reveal taboo stories – the murder of a

master by Celia, a raped slave, a love between Irish Nell, a white woman, and Charles, a black slave... In the lineage of African American artists who seize the national narrative to reinterpret it (Robert Colescott, Kara Walker...), using techniques such as bleaching, blackening, and paintings with secret panels, Titus Kaphar explores America's undigested stories to "*create a counter-narrative within the narrative itself, and invite us to pick up the thread of a collective memory,*" writes art historian [Hélène Valance](#) .

In Paris, Titus Kaphar is primarily showcasing his newest sculptures. These are massive Black men, seated or asleep, fascinating, almost alive, as if they have just emerged from the charred wood in which they were carved. The artist, born in 1976 and based in New Haven, Connecticut, discusses the impact of Trump's rise to power on his work. His words are rare at a time when so many remain silent.

The title of your exhibition is a reference to James Baldwin. What links do you see between his time and ours?

James Baldwin is a kind of patron saint to me. In **The Fire Next Time**, he writes to his young nephew about how to survive in a world marked by segregation and racism. Baldwin also highlighted the beauty and strength of Black people. It was in France that he became a great artist, by gaining perspective on the context in which he was born. The first time I read him, at university, I wasn't drawn to him. It wasn't until I became a painter that he touched me deeply. Baldwin was completely disillusioned by what was happening in the United States. Today, we are living through a similar period; we are even experiencing a more acute division than during the Civil War. It's tragic. Ultimately, my work deals with the abysmal gap between our rhetoric and our actions, between the fine words of the Constitution and the way we treat our citizens on the street. Right now, in the United States, the public freedom to protest is being repressed.

You evoke the fractured America of today, but your works speak of history. Why?

History is what draws me to the canvas, what makes me want to explore. To understand how a tree is nourished, you have to go down to its roots. This exhibition deals with the origins of the break with the American presidency. And for me, everything is linked to George Washington's first American presidency, to what was happening in the United States on the eve of the Civil War. If we want to talk about the birth of our nation, we must first acknowledge that this land was conquered as part of a genocidal act. Indigenous peoples lost their lives; that must be part of the narrative. We cannot simply tell a happy story that makes us feel good about ourselves.

Trump believes such a narrative is distorted and ideologically motivated. He wants to sweep slavery under the rug. What are your thoughts on that?

I need to be careful with my answers right now, and I want to be precise. This is not the time to be impulsive. Trump's tweet [*which criticized museums and their "terrible view of slavery," their "horrible" way of looking at history*] was specifically aimed at an exhibition I participated in, an extraordinary exhibition organized by the Smithsonian American Art Museum in 2025 [*"The Shape of Power" examined the role of sculpture in the construction of the concept of race in the United States from the 19th century to the present day*].

What has changed for you during his second term?

I entered 2025 thinking I didn't want to think about the elections. I just wanted to create works about joy, so I took up sculpting. A Cuban friend brought me some huge logs, chisels, and a hammer and said, "*You have to get started!*" So I sculpted, and each hammer blow, each chisel stroke, felt like remembering something, not learning how to do it. It felt like I was bringing something ancient out of myself. And while I was concentrating on this joy, I was getting texts saying, "*The administration is tweeting about your exhibit. They're calling it unpatriotic. It's too woke.*" But I was still focused on joy, immersing myself in the sculpture... Then, we received emails from the government informing us that NXTHVN, the non-profit organization we had created to support young Black and mixed-race artists, was no longer fulfilling its mission and that, consequently, the funding would stop. Some of the artists participating in the program I launched are Nigerian. They received letters from the government telling them that if they left, they would never be able to return to the country. Despite all my efforts to resist this situation, it caught up with me.

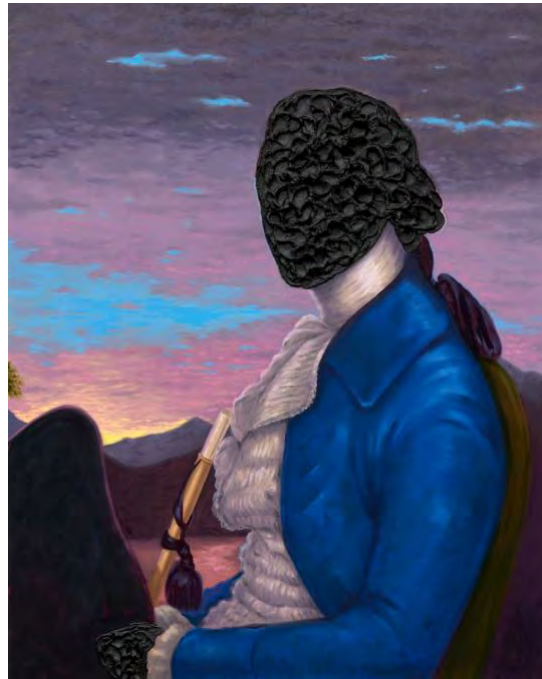
How can one resist?

The reason I'm in France today is precisely to show this painting based on *Scourged Back* [*a photograph of a Black man named Gordon, whose back was covered in whipping scars, and which was censored by the Trump administration*]. Until now, I had avoided this image because so many artists had already addressed it. But as soon as the administration announced its intention to remove this type of image from national websites because "*it only serves as a reminder of how terrible slavery was, how depressing it is,*" I had to confront it. Its removal is a blatant attempt to erase history.

Why cover it with tar?

In the United States, a common insult was to call Black people "tar babies." So I worked a lot with tar or asphalt. At first, I thought about its negative connotations, but gradually, I began to see beauty in it and to appreciate the substance, in the same spirit of resilience as the "Black is beautiful" movement. Tar is magnificent; it's viscous, dark, reflective. What fascinated me was the possibility of representing Gordon's back scars in relief, integrating them into our space, making them even more tangible. As if they needed

to resurface and materialize at a time when some members of the administration were trying to erase them.



“Kinfolk, Breath Is My Precious Inheritance (Harry Washington)” by Titus Kaphar, 2025.

By also concealing Harry Washington's face, you paradoxically reveal his incredible destiny...

I want to focus on those moments of resistance, of freedom. Harry Washington and Ona Judge were slaves on George Washington's plantation while he was leading the Revolutionary War. In a speech, George Washington expresses his concern about being treated like a slave when he himself owns 300! He is unable to understand their desire for freedom while he is fighting [against the British] for his own! One of the last things he does is go to find his escaped slaves from the plantation before one of the final battles. And he doesn't understand their distress at being captive again. Ona eventually escaped; she died a free woman in Canada, like so many other Black people. This obsession with George Washington comes from my grandmother.

Does this story of a powerful woman inspire you?

I come from a line of very strong women—my mother, my grandmother, my aunts. Their strength helped the family survive. I know all their stories, and I paint some of them. My mother was 14 when she became

pregnant with me, 15 when I was born. My father was 16; they were just children. My father was a troubled man, about whom I made a film, *Exhibiting Forgiveness*, in 2024.



“Kinfolk, Breath Is My Precious Inheritance (Elisabeth Keckley)” by Titus Kaphar, 2025. (Chris Gardner)

What did your grandmother tell you?

She told us that our ancestors had been slaves at Mount Vernon, on George Washington's plantation. I didn't want to believe her because my family lived in Mississippi—and before that, in Africa—and Mount Vernon is in Virginia. So I started doing research, consulting George Washington's slave records, looking for my family's names, and I found some of them. What shook me was that there were 330 people whose lives had been stolen to serve our first president. We all know the story of George Washington's greatness, that of an exceptional human being... Yet there's a duality. We've woven this contradiction into the very heart of our nation, and it's very difficult for us to acknowledge it.

This is not the version of the Founding Fathers that Trump wants to defend, is it?

I completely disagree with his perspective. If we tell the story of the Founding Fathers as perfect beings, it means we don't know ourselves as a nation. But I'm not interested in demonizing them either. They were

human beings with flaws. John Adams and John Quincy Adams didn't own slaves. Washington, Jefferson, and Monroe did. How is it possible to talk about justice and liberty one day and the next beat Black people and claim they belong to us? That's the gap between rhetoric and practice that I'm highlighting.



"Celia: Embers, Bone, and Ash," by Titus Kaphar (2025). (Owen Conway/Courtesy the artist and Gagosian Gallery)

How do you envision the 250th anniversary of the independence of the United States in July?

This exhibition is my way of participating. I want the artwork to engage with the truth. But not to preach. Ultimately, it all stems from my desire to understand better, and let me do that, explore these secrets. There's the story we tell, and then there's everything hidden behind it. These secrets are important too.

Titus Kaphar's "The Fire This Time" at the Gagosian Gallery (75008) until March 7.