

Midnight's Daydream
"Artists-in-Residence 2006-07"
Christine Y. Kim
2007
Pg. 2-6, 15



Introduction
Artists-in-Residence 2006–07
Midnight's Daydream
 by Christine Y. Kim

In literary references from fairy tales, such as Cinderella, and poems, such as Edgar Allan Poe's *The Raven*, to the atomic era's Doomsday Clock, the witching hour of midnight is a time of reckoning. Though menacing narratives and poetic metaphors have been constructed around it, midnight is merely an arbitrary artifact of the measure of time, a recurring moment of darkness dictated by a clock. At midnight, "the mind has a passive sensibility, but no active strength," wrote Nathaniel Hawthorne in 1851 implying that the mind's nocturnal rituals are irrepressible, but the ability to activate them is indubitably flaccid.¹ But, paradoxically, it is within this tacit state of reflection, as exemplified by the work of Titus Kaphar, Wardell Milan II and Demetrius Oliver, that true fantasies are created, fulfilling Hawthorne's description of midnight as a mirror, "imparting vividness to all ideas, without the power of selection or controlling them." The art of this year's artists in residence, presented in *Midnight's Daydream*, imagines what might happen if midnight itself were to have a daydream, to embrace its own passive state and move into a semiconscious one, suspended between the present reality and the madness of sleeping and dreaming.

In this daydream, the art museum becomes a playground for works of art "in dialogue." They mutate and defy painterly conventions, as captured in Kaphar's diptychs from the series *Conversations between paintings* (2006–present). For Kaphar, painting is but the first step in the ultimate reconfiguration of a canvas, which can be cut, sutured, over-painted or reduced to sculptural refuse—a reenactment of modernist gestures on pre-modern conventions. If midnight had a dream life, perhaps it could imagine mash-ups of itself, collages of singular events meeting in one locale. Consider how a stylish man looks toward a Renaissance depiction of Christ, descending from the cross and carried by contemporary black apostles, in Milan's fantasy tableau *Mount Calvary: Go Tell It On The Mountain* (2007). In Milan's collages—whether they employ photographs or drawings of pugilists—time, popular culture and even the body are evacuated of linear logic, yet still cohere in some inexplicable but legible order, just as in a dream or memory. With a virtual body, midnight could travel through time and space using Oliver's star charts as a guide. For Oliver, the literal becomes poetic and transcendent as, in *Almanac* (2006–07) or *Harmonic Spheres* (2007), animal fur or reflections of human appendages off the shiny surfaces of tea kettles resemble other planets and invented worlds. Each of this year's artists in residence offers a vision of the contemporary in which time and actions are malleable, and all statements begin with "what if...?"

This annual summer exhibition features works of art by three emerging artists who have been awarded year-long studios and stipends at The Studio Museum in Harlem. The Artists-in-Residence Program represents one of the founding initiatives of the Museum from its inception in 1968. Past participants in the program include Chakaia Booker, David Hammons, Kerry James Marshall, Wangechi Mutu, Nadine Robinson, Nari Ward and Kehinde Wiley. Each summer brings the promise of new talent and vitality through the unveiling of new work in this exhibition, and 2007 adds yet another exhibition to this legacy.

The Artists-in-Residence Program and exhibition are funded, in part, by: New York State Council on the Arts, a state agency; Nimoy Foundation; Elaine Dannheisser Foundation; The Greenwall Foundation; Helena Rubinstein Foundation; Jerome Foundation; Dedalus Foundation; Milton & Sally Avery Arts Foundation; and an endowment funded by the Jacob and Gwendolyn Lawrence Trust and the Andrea Frank Foundation.

1. Nathaniel Hawthorne, "The Haunted Mind," *Twice-Told Tales* (1851; New York: Modern Library, 2001)



Residents from left to right: Titus Kaphar, Demetrius Oliver and Wardell Milan II

Opposite: Titus Kaphar, *White underneath* 7–16, 2006–07 (detail)

Titus Kaphar
by Sarah Lewis

This essay by Sarah Lewis appears as minutes from a fictional museum's acquisition meeting.

* * *

CONFIDENTIAL

The Cosmopolitan Museum
July 18, 2007
Minutes of the Acquisition Meeting—Contemporary Art
Department

Present: A lot of trustees
Not Present: Just a few trustees
Chair called the meeting to order at 5pm.

*

Chief Curator's report
Proposed Acquisition

Titus Kaphar (American, b. 1976)
Conversation between paintings #3: Descent, 2007
Oil on canvas (cut)
Left: 60 x 48 inches (152.4 x 121.9 cm)
Right: 60 x 48 inches (152.4 x 121.9 cm)
Overall: 60 x 113 inches (152.4 x 243.8 cm)

Provenance: The artist
Biography of the artist and significance of the work:

* * *

The chief curator began her presentation by proposing **Titus Kaphar's** painting, *Conversation between paintings #3: Descent* (2007), as the first to enter The Cosmopolitan Museum's new contemporary art department, which was established after the trustees' recent decision to expand the Museum's collection to include work from the recent past. Previously, the institution collected only old master paintings from cosmopolitan cities. In its current incarnation, the collection reflects the histories of cities that were at one time the centers of former colonial empires and still remain centers of culture, commerce and politics. The chief curator argued that through strategic alterations of



Titus Kaphar, *Unsure footing; unfolding the myth of power*, 2007

classical portraits—a traditional style consistent with the Museum's current holdings—Kaphar's work is a precise exemplar of both the Museum's historic commitment and new focus.

Kaphar is known for his critical engagement with European and American portrait paintings from the eighteenth to twentieth centuries, through which he creates images of racialized narratives discussed but rarely shown. After assiduous research, he began his foundational body of work, the 2004 *Visual Quotations* series. Kaphar reproduced paintings by artists such as Edouard



Titus Kaphar, *Conversation between paintings #3: Descent*, 2007



Manet and William Blake on dry-erase whiteboard cut to the same size as the original works, and isolated and excised African and African-American figures from the images. In choosing whiteboard instead of canvas, Kaphar demonstrates the instructive potential of this exercise. The blank background suggests the need for societal convalescence after a historically meager visual diet of black subjects and the unconscionable ills that prompted it.

Through Kaphar's strategy of formal manipulation and precise positioning, *Conversation between paintings #3: Descent* transforms two eighteenth-century portraits into a work of Social Realism. By highlighting the formal echoes between his portraits, based on Anne-Louis Girodet de Roussy-Tricou's *Jean-Baptiste Belley* (1797) and Sir John Baptiste de Medina's *James Drummond, 2nd titular Duke of Perth* (1700), Kaphar creates a dialogue between the figures, and between the viewer and the work, by driving a wedge between what we see and what we expect.

Kaphar's visual conversations are the result of protracted meditations—he spends much time partner-

ing works and contemplating "what they might be saying" to each other. He then selects one such fictive engagement and illustrates it as if it were a scene in a silent film.¹ In the work proposed for acquisition, his chosen scene is a confrontation demonstrated through a rarely seen mimicry. Kaphar rotates Belley's portrait on the vertical axis so that this Senegalese-born former slave—who represented the island of Saint-Domingue at the 1793 Convention in France—becomes a doppelgänger of Drummond. Belley's pose, a relaxed lean with a propped elbow, is reflective of his high social station, and his ease in clothing typical of the French aristocracy, and is an uncanny double of Drummond's pose, with his hand on his armor-clad hip. As if to reinforce this mirroring, Kaphar removes Belley's permissive, upward-directed gaze from the original painting. In the updated version, he seems to look directly across the work to Drummond, a gaze emphasized by Belley's leaning on the marble bust of the Abbé Raynal, a prominent eighteenth-century philosopher and abolitionist who died a year before the painting



Titus Kaphar, *White underneath 7-16*, 2006-07 (detail)

was completed. Yet Kaphar also crops out the white bust, which was critically discussed as an element that provided legitimacy to Belley's status when Roussy-Trioson painted the dignitary. "It was collateral damage," Kaphar says, "to make the work less about him leaning on the bust and more about him being his own individual."²

Kaphar intends his work to be general commentary on the tradition of portraiture; he wants us to "see those two paintings in relationship to other paintings like them ... to show us how rare the painting is."³ To do this, he creates a conversation not just between two adult men, but one that includes the young black man originally at Drummond's side. Kaphar places the youth next to Belley, gazing up at him, but a space separates them. This space is filled with landscape, suggesting the long time it will take for this pairing to appear in formal paintings.

Kaphar creates his work through elision and considered removal. In another work in this series, *Conversation between paintings #1: Descending from a cross to be nourished at the breast of our mother* (2006-07), he re-creates, manipulates and pairs Marie-Guillemine Benoist's *Portrait of a Negress* (1800) and George Romney's *Vice-Admiral George Darby* (c. 1720-27). Darby, an eighteenth-century officer in the British Royal Navy who could be mistaken for one of America's founding fathers, is cut out of his canvas and appears to be falling into Benoist's woman's arms. Exposed stretcher bars form a perfect cross in the silhouette-space left by Darby, as if to suggest a reverence for patriarchy of a particular hue. His removal from the cross problematizes any assumption that the narrative created specifically references Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings. The diptych instead allows for ambiguity of identity and transforms this combination into an American history painting lived but only recently acknowledged.

If, as it has been said, painting begins with a shadow, Kaphar has reinvigorated contemporary painting through his contoured omissions. By creating figurative fictions, he finds sharp critical excisions of histories not fully recorded. Though Kaphar is still in the initial stages of his career, the chief curator maintained that, given the artist's exhaustive investigations, he promises to chart an inexorable creative vector, while offering new readings of what has come before him.

Born in Kalamazoo, Michigan, in 1976, Kaphar received his BFA at San Jose State University in 2001 and his MFA from Yale University School of Art in 2006.

The committee unanimously approved the purchase of this piece.

Notes

1. Titus Kaphar, telephone conversation with author, June 10, 2007.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.

Sarah Lewis is a writer, curator, visiting professor at Yale University School of Art and Ph.D. candidate in the history of art at Yale University. Prior to that, she was a curatorial assistant at The Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Tate Modern in London. She received her BA from Harvard College.



Titus Kaphar



Titus Kaphar, *Conversation between paintings #2: The meeting: We was jus talkin*, 2007

Front cover: Wardell Milan II, *Day Dreaming. I dream of you beneath the flowers, for a couple of hours. Such a beautiful day*, 2007

Back cover: Demetrius Oliver, *Midnight*, 2007

Operation of The Studio Museum in Harlem is supported, in part, with public funds provided by The New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, Council Member Inez E. Dickens, 9th C.D., Speaker Christine Quinn, the New York City Council, Assemblyman Keith L.T. Wright, 70th A.D. and New York State Council on the Arts, a state agency.



Designed by Makiko Ushiba Katch
 Copyedited by Samir S. Patel
 Artists' portrait by Ray Llanos
 Photography of artwork by Adam Reich
 Printed by Cosmos Communications, Inc.
 Produced by Naomi Beckwith
 ©2007 The Studio Museum in Harlem