

Art in America

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History in the Making: Titus Kaphar Cuts up to Rebuild

by *michele carlson* 05/20/09

History has a certain way of being selfish-the past is often understood through its inequities and linear narratives, static lines marching forward that are capped by dates, deaths, and wars -- by way of the winners and occasionally, the losers. Personal and collective trauma can be difficult, if not impossible to articulate, as many are left out (sometimes, on purpose). When those who have lived through history are gone and the voices of their retelling have long faded past fables and cautionary tales, how will those lessons be recounted? Will they fall into the vast fissures of histories lost? In "History in the Making," on view at the Seattle Art Museum, artist Titus Kaphar's sculptural paintings challenge canonical representations of history and memory by collapsing past into present.

Kaphar first pillages, then recreates paintings from the art historical canon: Copley, Eakins, Delacroix. With the deliberateness of a surgeon coupled with a slightly maniacal urgency, Kaphar first paints the canvases, before erasing, slicing, cutting, whiting-out, and shredding them before rearranging the pieces into new works. Sometimes he even dips the paintings in tar. The open areas in the canvas become active absences that are jarringly suggestive of alternative narratives. Stretcher bars are exposed. The gallery wall, seen through the holes in the canvas, becomes part of the work. The structures that are typically "invisible" underneath, behind, or inside of the canvas lay bare, as if to suggest that exposing the blood and guts is necessary in order to build something new.

And rebuild he does: Kaphar performs what he critiques. It is not a new idea to combine two-dimensional surfaces with three-dimensional relief, or to engage in the materiality and physicality of paint and canvas; painters have long turned paintings into objects. Yet, Kaphar's practice is more than a modernist revision or a redux of the dichotomy between painter and painting. Instead, he creates new historiographic artifacts built from the physical residues and inadequacies of the past. There is a sense these works are a deeply personal response to imagined memories turned into unrecognizable histories long ago. Perhaps they are a nod to collective histories yet to be discovered, or a reconciliation for those that never will.



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Mother's Solution... is one in a series of three paintings based on a fictional narrative about a light-skinned African American couple and their four children. One daughter's skin is so fair that she could pass as a white person. Unsure of how to navigate the extreme racism for seemingly mixed-raced children, the daughter is sent away. It is the "mother's solution." The story, though fictional, could have easily been taken from 18th or 19th century American history (though most likely not the histories one learns in school). This disparity forms Kaphar's point: Which stories are told? Why are they told, and how? He continues on to physically cut the image of the daughter out of the large portrait of the four children posing together; she remains present only in the haunting silhouette made by her cut-out absence. Flanking this portrait are two paintings, one of the mother and the other of the father. Each has piles of shredded canvas attached to and spilling off what are literally both the face of the painting and the faces of the parents who are, in effect, gagging on the absence of their missing daughter sent away and removed from this familial history because of the sociopolitical and racial ills of the times. The missing daughter -- from both the fictional family and the physical painting -- is symbolic of those who are habitually absent from, or written out of grand historical narratives.

Kaphar confronts the way history is represented. Yet, he does more than just expose historical imbalances or racial inequities. "History in the Making" does not just ask for more accurate or "truthful" constructions of history. It is the acknowledgement that history often fails, but within that failure there is agency to rebuild, refigure, or remake. He creates a space that offers room for histories to be the tangled, overlapping, and contradictorily ripped canvases they often are. The success of the exhibition lies in that it does not suggest resolution, as much as reclamation. Kaphar's work is a call to boldly face and dismantle the past for the sake of new beginnings, even if those beginnings are born of conflicting times. It is in this moment, between history and memory, that one may choose to rearticulate the past, reinvest, or possibly to reinvent meaning.

["History in the Making" remains on view at the Seattle Art Museum through September 6, 2009. Right: Titus Kaphar, Mother's Solution, 2009, oil on canvas, 106 x 78 in (269.2 x 198.1 cm); Left: Titus Kaphar All We Know of Our Father, 2008, oil on cut canvas, 48 x 36 in (121.9 x 91.4 cm); all images courtesy of Roberts & Tilton, Culver City, CA.]