

## NEWSLETTER

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### THEORY/CONVERSATIONS

The Burger Collection continues its Theory/Conversations series that is part of the research conducted within the multi-regional exhibition project entitled *Quadrilogy*. The conversations with artists, art historians and theorists seek to illuminate some of the artistic practices in the collection and to articulate some of the urgent questions in the present context of a multiregional art system.

The latest conversation with American artist Titus Kaphar is now available online. The artist talks about his recent body of work and reflects upon how history and subjectivity apply to the construction and conservation of memory. He also recounts some of his earlier performances and their relation to painting and sculpture.

#### *Remembering Things Differently*

A Conversation between Titus Kaphar and Daniel Kurjaković

American artist Titus Kaphar is based in New Haven, Connecticut. The conversation between the artist and Daniel Kurjaković, head of program of the Burger Collection, and Linda Jensen, curatorial assistant, took place in the studio in New Haven, Connecticut. The conversation revolved around recent works, its engagement with notions of memory and history, the place of performance within his practice and the recent exploration within other media. For more information please visit: <http://www.tituskaphar.com>

**Daniel Kurjaković:** So, let's start with this sculpture [*Preservation of Family Fictions*, 2011]. Its spatial logic is interesting. The sculpture looks as if it could disintegrate; there is this sense of instability about it.

**Titus Kaphar:** That was the challenge here, trying to figure out whether I wanted to capture one moment—an action—or someone preserving the moment, which is now central to the piece. I kept having dreams about the image of a tree falling, breaking a window, and crashing into a painting. These dreams seem to be about how natural disasters act on paintings. I had them several times over the last couple of years. It was this strange thing that I couldn't shake off. I knew that it was going to be the kind of thing that I wouldn't understand until I made it. After making the work, the dream made a lot more sense. Once the piece was finished I sat in front of it and "understood" that it is about preserving destructive events within one's memory. It is about how we have these bad or destructive things happen to us or other people. We think that it's pain; we think that it's something that we're trying to push away, but in fact there is something about that pain or that destructive event that we try to preserve within ourselves. The piece went from destruction, the action of the event, to trying to ensure that the whole thing sticks together in a purposely-awkward way. This piece expresses my work process pretty well: first I think I know what's happening, but then I have to sit with the work for a while before I feel something is actually said to me.

**DK:** Talking about movement, actual or dreamt, I want to ask you whether you have stopped doing performances. I am curious to know more about the function of performance in your work.

**TK:** No, I didn't really stop. I stopped doing them publicly for a while. And the reason for this is not really a good reason: at my last performance there were some technical difficulties. I had an exhibition at a gallery and

for the performance I was supposed to come in and not say anything with headphones on and a jacket, and to start cutting the canvas of one of my paintings. I don't know what happened, but somebody in the gallery thought that I wanted them to cut the painting for me. And so when I walked into the gallery the painting was already pre-cut. I found myself in the middle of a performance trying to figure out what was going on, trying not to destroy the entire atmosphere. And not only did they pre-cut the painting, they also cut it in a way that did not allow me to follow the contour of the drawing. To make a long story short, I left feeling extremely frustrated about the situation and put a stop to all public performances of this kind for a while. Some of the performances and some of the things that have happened in my pieces are meant to be observed, while others are not because they involve more struggles. For example with the "wrapped" painting: this is a lot of just sitting with a needle and thread and stitching and stitching. It would be a performance about endurance because it takes a long time to do all this stitching.

**DK:** If you are engaged with the object and there is a visible process of interaction, it of course entails a different way of reading the work compared to a work in which the process is contained.

**TK:** The reading of the paintings is what actually made the performances become public. I had done a couple of exhibitions and people kept talking about the so-called "violence" that was present in my pieces. This really bothered me because I didn't think of these cuttings as violent. I thought of them as surgical. At some stage I wanted to enable the viewer to observe the process behind the cutting in order for them to understand that it is a rather slow, meticulous and methodical process. It has very little to do with "violence." I can understand the implication of violence as it relates to the greater history of painting. I can understand someone coming to that conclusion, but I wanted to do the performances publicly so that people could see it was not about someone in a studio getting really upset and just taking a painting and going crazy with it. At this point, the process of, say, crumpling a painting or cutting a painting is not very different from the process of making the painting itself. Even when it comes to the painting behind you [Memory Fails, 2011], I cut things out, take a step back, I look, compose, return again, I crumple it up a little bit, I look back and I re-compose. There is this same back-and-forth technique that happens when I make the painting with the paintbrush. It's not a different state, but really continuous.

**DK:** Allow me to return to Preservation of Family Fictions for a moment. You mentioned the recurring dream. Earlier you spoke of the dream as a personal experience, but then you proceeded with a more generalized interpretation of the dream. Why?

**TK:** At times the work becomes a shroud for private memories. I often hide behind these histories as a way to express very personal things, making it possible for these personal things to become public. Otherwise they can be too painful and I feel too vulnerable to say the things that need to be said. I'm pulling myself out so that I can actually get to the truth behind me. If it's about me then I get stuck staring at myself and the truth never gets said.

**DK:** That's rather interesting: at what stage did painting become this shield from or for autobiography? Also, when did you start using nineteenth century references as "protective" surface or pretext?

**TK:** When I first began, everything was autobiographical. I later found it too emotional to bring up these things, because unfortunately the things that brought me to make pieces were always some sort of psychological trauma in my life or personal history. I spent a lot of time making these paintings trying to purge myself of all these things, which was great in terms of a process. But as soon as that private process becomes public and you start explaining these things you realize, "I don't really know you that well. Why am I telling you this? This is not something I want to say publicly." At that point I decided I needed to have multiple layers of conversation about a work. There always has to be the possibility of the public conversation about the work. Then, on a second level the sort of inner circle. Then finally the third level with stuff you just keep to yourself. Nobody knows about it and if people have parsed it out it's because they spent time with it, they searched and they deserve it. Concerning the second part of your question: during school, I had this nineteenth century art

history class and—I'm trying to make a really long story short—the professor decided to skip over a particular section in the book. That particular section was about black people and painting. It was a very broad attempt in a very small number of pages to explain the presence of black people across the entire history of nineteenth century art. I looked at the book before the class started, and I thought it looked like a really boring class except for that particular section. I started getting interested, wondering how the professor would deal with this section. Now, when we finally got to that particular section she decided to skip over this text! I asked: "Are we not going to do this section?" And she said, "No, we don't have time."

So, I said, "I don't think that's a good enough reason. I think it's an important thing, you've basically given me an abbreviated history." As she didn't do anything, I went to the dean, who responded saying, "I can't force her to teach anything." I was appalled. I felt powerless. I didn't know what to do! For the performance I took that particular art history book in this really small gallery space, sitting at a desk with one light on. I was turning pages and ripping out every page in the book except for that section. It was a long performance. By the end of the performance I realized I was getting really upset and emotional. I didn't know what to do with all of this internal energy and frustration. The gallery space at the university had no windows or light. Sitting at the desk, I picked up the book, and out of complete anger and surprise to myself, I took the book, put it against the wall and I hit it. The book went right through the wall, and all this light rushed into the gallery. (It used to be a schoolroom and was covered with extra walls.) And that was the end of it. It was in fact the very first performance.

**DK:** Why was that specific section in the art history book interesting?

**TK:** I had always been drawn to this part of history. Now that I have a better grasp of art history as a whole, I understand why I was drawn to it in terms of aesthetics: it had to do with naturalism, with artists like Caravaggio who painted people very naturalistically, and who, for example, brought prostitutes into the studio to paint. And that is what I was really drawn to: The idea that you could see the individual through the painting itself. That was magical to me. Now I just go wherever, any historical period, really. Whether it's from the 1500/1600s, Velásquez or Caravaggio, or whether it's the 1860s, a landscape painting, or something else... It's just bouncing around at this point.

**DK:** So has your relationship to the "realistic code" changed over time? In the beginning you seem to have been interested in the type of exposure or representation of the individual in nineteenth century painting. Even if it can be psychologically attractive or philosophically valid, in the end it's just one pictorial code among many.

**TK:** I think the reason I have stayed with it a little bit in terms of representation is because I like narratives. I want the work to draw out a story and that became the easiest way to do it. I was taking representational images and letting them go other places. I felt this was a very effective way of doing it. The other thing that I liked was making the people in the paintings say things that they never had the opportunity to say, making these paintings do things that they never had the opportunity to do. And I say "opportunity" because I think that in some cases with my work I am drawing out stories that actually exist and are there, but again, the opportunity wasn't made for that narrative to be articulated. I feel that I actually am pulling out stories that were actually there.

**DK:** Very generally, did performance, painting and sculpture come about around the same time? Or was it really performance that led to painting and sculpture?

**TK:** Actually, the figurative sculptures, like *Doubt* and *Mary* [definite title: *My Inarticulate Everything*, 2010] came from the performances. What has happened with these particular pieces is that I've moved from being the active individual to then sort of replacing myself with these figures of sculptures. The thing that I like about the whole aspect of performance is that it shows that I'm interested in all aspects of art. There is no particular period in the history of art that I'm more or less interested in. When I think a lot about light and colors then I'm looking at impressionism. If I am thinking a lot about drama and war and battle then I'm

looking at something from the Baroque period. Once I get past the question of the image or of the narrative I usually get to the point where I am looking at modernism in terms of a period that turned things upside down. Rauschenberg is also a huge influence on my work, particularly his early work and its feeling of freedom. He's already done the craziest things that can possibly be done in terms of sticking things on painting.

I feel that I can experiment with any period, from contemporary to Renaissance, and feel a sense of "this still fits." For example, I started working with tar, and very quickly the material evolved in front of my eyes. I realized that I was limiting the material, what it could mean and symbolize, due to some ideas that were stuck in my head. But as soon as I let the material do what I felt it did naturally, it became magical. So particularly with this painting right here [*Memory Fails*, 2011], it's kind of a theme right now and I guess I didn't really realize it, but now I am realizing it. The piece *Memory Fails* is very much about memory. It really is about the way that we remember things differently than the way they actually happened. When you go back into a moment, you go back into a place in life and you peel it back, and you realize it is not at all what you thought it was. You remember this and this happening, but realize none of it actually happened and that it was all constructed. For me, in a lot of ways memory is extremely important, but in other ways it's a wretched thing. You can't really, personally, depend on it for truth always; you can depend on it for other things. Maybe you can depend on it for truth, but you can't really depend on it for facts, I guess that's better.

Anyway, there are a lot of uses of tar. Tar has been used in a lot of artwork for a really long time. But the reason I was drawn to it was because I was thinking about martyrdom. You know as painters everything that we do is illusion, we make illusions, and there is no space there. It's the age-long debate about sculpture and painting, and which is the greatest one. I wanted to figure out a way to actually martyr painting, not to make a painting about martyrdom. I started thinking about different ways that they tortured people in the South, and so tar was one of them. So the first thing that I did was that I submerged the painting in tar, as if the painting were being punished for its actions, and once I did that, I actually spilled some tar on the floor in the process.

My studio mate at the time, Wardell Milan, had been trying to force me to make drawings. And I don't really like drawing with the pencil. I like to draw, but I don't like drawing with a pencil. And he said, "Titus, you should try to draw with the tar and see what happens!" and I was like "Yeah, whatever." And he literally stapled the piece of paper onto my studio wall. And I came in the next day and I was like, "Good grief, Wardell." And I just started drawing on it with the paintbrush and the tar, and I realized this stuff was amazing. It went from this deep jet-black to this gold hue. And so the material itself made other work. I wasn't forcing something to happen. The more I worked with the material the more different things came as a result of it. And so now it's just another one of the materials that I deal with.

**DK:** Yes, you sampled it into your method of working. Talking about sampling, it is maybe one of the more fundamental things your method is about; sampling known and available techniques that sometimes are symbolically charged like tar, but also sampling certain periods and styles, which is interesting in terms of the references to history and historical painting. One wonders if the references to a very specific history that art criticism is continuously citing in relation to your work, is really as essential as one thinks at first sight. The process of sampling seems almost more important than the references and their blunt political instrumentalization. As if it were about a funkier side of things.

**TK:** I think that is absolutely right on! That is exactly my thinking in the work. It is more like music and sampling. It is the same way when a DJ takes a record out of the crate: They may take a classical piece and then they take Nas or they take some other piece and they mix it together and then they say, "Here, this is this new thing, deal with it in a new way!" Of course you can't ever get rid of the original source, but that original source means something different when it's placed with this other thing. So sampling is a perfect model for my approach.

*This conversation was held on January 14, 2011 in New Haven, Connecticut.*