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# ARTnews

## At the Peak Of Their Powers

**Civil War Art, Then & Now**  
**How van Gogh Became van Gogh**  
**Shirazeh Houshiary: Getting Metaphysical**



Morse, Trent. "Titus Kaphar: Friedman Benda," ARTnews. May 2013.

**FRIEDMAN BENDA** 515 W 26TH STREET NEW YORK NY 10001

**FRIEDMANBENDA.COM** TELEPHONE 212 239 8700 FAX 212 239 8760



## Christian Vincent

**Mike Weiss**

With an eerie palette of cold colors set off against small areas of heat, Christian Vincent portrays enigmatic landscapes populated by adolescents engaged in athletics or silent contemplation. A quality of moonlight is always present, even when the scenes are set during the day. Pale outlines often make forms seem to glow from within.

In *The Nature of Time* (2012), for example, two teens huddle together in the corner of a tree house, their skins lavender in the shade and cool pink in the light, as another youth gazes at them from below. A purple hill of pine trees rises in the background in front of lime-and-yellow fields, and a branch of phosphorescent red autumn leaves dangles from above. More spatially ambiguous, *The Space Between* (2012) is a portrait of a lethargic group of teenagers hanging out inside a circular tunnel. The line separating the murky purple-brown shadows from the icy blue highlights flattens the scene, making it resemble an image on a coin. The exhibition's most sensitive painting, however, was *Tiny Boxes* (2012), a back view of a young girl gazing out at a suburban town in front of a large pink mountain. Neatly reversing his colors, Vincent renders the real houses in meaty white brushstrokes over a deep indigo ground, while their reflections in the body of water below are painted in careful strokes of thinned gray-blue over white.

Vincent's debt to Balthus is evident in the frozen statuesque solidity of his



Christian Vincent, *Mid Summer*, 2012, oil on canvas, 100" x 140". Mike Weiss.

figures. The silhouetted personages painted by Will Barnet also come to mind, as do Augustus Vincent Tack's majestic dappled mountains. Vincent adeptly combines these disparate influences to create a mysterious world of his own.

—Elisabeth Kley

## 'Paintings of the Hudson River School'

**Questroyal Fine Art**

This impressive annual show pulled together many of the diverse strands of American landscape painting that fed into the Hudson River School. Thomas Cole, the inspirational father of the group, was a British émigré, and a number of the other artists in the school either were born across the Atlantic or spent time there. Those European roots were evident in many of the show's works.

Painted in a thick impasto of charred browns and ghostly whites, Cole's *Imaginary Landscape with Towering Outcrop* (ca. 1846–47) seems to have emerged from a Romantic soul's dark night, while the wonderful oil sketch *On the Mountaintop* (n.d.) combines the physical immediacy of J.M.W. Turner with the mysticism of William Blake.

The luminous *Shoreline with Basket and Boats* (1876) by Dutch émigré William Frederick de Haas builds on the traditions

of Dutch landscape painting to depict a classic American beach, light shimmering on the wet sand, clouds piling up on the horizon. *Evening Sail* (n.d.) by his brother Mauritz Frederik Hendrik de Haas is an atmospheric

harbor scene in browns, reminiscent of Whistler's London nocturnes. Thomas Moran, born in England and raised in Philadelphia, also drew inspiration from Turner, and his *Entrance to the Grand Canal, Venice* (1915) glows with the British master's azures and aquas.



Thomas Cole, *Imaginary Landscape with Towering Outcrop*, ca. 1846–47, oil on canvas, 18½" x 15". Questroyal Fine Art.

John Frederick Kensett was another second-generation Hudson River School artist who traveled to Europe to study painting; he was represented here by several works, including the airy *Beverly, Massachusetts* (1871), a view from gentle, green cliffs to the placid sea. New York-born George Inness began his career by studying Cole's work, and then fell under the spell of Corot and the Barbizon painters during a mid-century trip to Paris. Four fine examples of his resulting Tonalist work, including two American landscapes and two European scenes, emphasized how interwoven the art of both continents had become.

—Mona Molarsky

## Titus Kaphar

**Friedman Benda**

History—mutable, splintered, phantasmagoric, cruel—is at the core of Titus Kaphar's practice. Especially adept at imitating 18th- and 19th-century portraitists and history painters, Kaphar creates his own versions and then defaces the paintings by cutting or folding



and then partially covering them in cloth, newspaper, more paint, or tar. But paintings were only part of this show, called "The Vesper Project," which included a video, photographs, antique objects, handwritten documents, and large assemblages made from the remnants of a ramshackle 19th-century house in Connecticut. The result was an intensely complex narrative and a visual incarnation of the artist's psyche.

About five years ago, Kaphar experienced a kind of breakdown while painting a portrait of a beloved aunt. He realized that he'd been inserting her into traumatic childhood memories as a protector figure during events at which she couldn't possibly have been present. This revelation led him to concoct fictional memories as art. "The Vesper Project" tells the story of the Vespers, a light-skinned African American family who "passed" as white in Civil War-era New England. The tale advances to the present day, with the mentally unstable Ben Vesper attacking one of Kaphar's paintings at the Yale Art Gallery and squatting in the aforementioned Connecticut house.

The bulk of the exhibition consisted of rickety walls extracted from that home, with old furniture, tree branches, portrait busts, and warped paintings clinging to or bursting through the slats. There were even two room-size tableaux, complete with windows, wood floors, wainscoting, and a boarded-up fireplace in one room. Its walls are plastered in yellowed newsprint and sepia-tone photos of unknown persons—their faces blotted out. The second room is even worse for wear, with toppled chairs and a jagged crack running across the floorboards,



Titus Kaphar, *The Vesper Project*, 2012, mixed media, dimensions variable. Friedman Benda.

as if struck by a tornado. Heavy ropes seem to simultaneously bind and tear apart the structure.

All of the sculptures here became progressively tumultuous as we moved from the front to the rear of the gallery. It's as though we were witnessing the unraveling of Ben Vesper's mind. Or perhaps Kaphar's.

—Trent Morse

## Iona Rozeal Brown

Edward Tyler Nahem Fine Art  
Salon 94 Freemans

In this fascinating exhibition, Iona Rozeal Brown took over the visual conventions of Japanese ukiyo-e and subverted them for her own ends. Titled after the biblical song of Solomon, the five paintings on view at Edward Tyler Nahem each featured embracing pairs of hybrid men and women



Iona Rozeal Brown, *Pod 222: The Reunion (Song of Solomon 5:10-11)*, 2013, acrylic, marker, ink, krink, and graphite on wood panel, 60" x 96". Edward Tyler Nahem Fine Art.

with Asian eyes, African lips, and complexions half golden brown and half chilly pale blue. Darker skin ends before reaching black hair and icy ears, as if race were an illusory mask.

Sporting hairdos and accessories of pure street style and bling, Brown's figures take positions echoing Japanese erotic art in front of walls covered with multiple speakers. Her technique combines precision and looseness: careful

marker and pencil outlines join sometimes dripping areas of acrylic. In *Pod 222: The Reunion (Song of Solomon 5:10-11)*, 2013, for example, a couple embraces on a black fur rug: both people are dressed in white kimonos. The man's untied blue-and-purple sneaker features bright red laces, and a blue lion's paw is tattooed on his thigh. His dreadlocks are tied at the top of his head, incongruously echoing traditional Japanese male hairstyles. The woman's voluminous hair is encased in a huge blue headdress, huge gold earrings hanging from her ears, her arms tattooed with Chinese characters, and pearls twined around her outstretched leg.

Even wilder cultural blending was seen in the series of works hung downtown at Salon 94 Freemans. African American and Latino vogue dancers Benny and

Javier Ninja and Monstah Black are portrayed, enacting finely differentiated gender identities while mirroring the poses of traditional Kabuki female impersonators and Byzantine icon angels. *Live!* (2013) is an image of a goateed Hispanic man wearing an enormous pearl headdress. Pointing one gold-socked toe as he spreads a pair of cloudlike white wings, he's both spectacular and sublime.

—Elisabeth Kley