

## ART

# Remnants of a Fractured Family

BY KELLY CROW

**FIVE YEARS AGO**, artist Titus Kaphar began painting a portrait of his aunt and wound up wondering if he was losing his mind. Now, the elaborate installation that followed his existential crisis, "The Vesper Project," is set to go on view Feb. 28 at New York's Friedman Benda Gallery. This room-filling installation, which uses the remnants of a 19th-century house to tell the multigenerational saga of a family Mr. Kaphar invented called the Vespers, is shaping up to be the most ambitious work of the artist's career.

Mr. Kaphar, who is 37 and based in New Haven, Conn., is no stranger to complexity. Over the past seven years he has built a reputation for painting—and then crumpling, slicing or whitewashing—elaborate portraits of 19th-century-style men in powdered wigs and Napoleonic postures. He has also folded or scrunched up portraits of women in prim buns and high collars in a way that hints at some internal turmoil—a happiness fracture that rarely features in the polished works of, say, Colonial-era portraitist John Singleton Copley or Gilded Age great John Singer Sargent.

Rather than put his subjects on a pedestal or within a gilt frame, Mr. Kaphar often traces around their silhouettes with a knife so that their forms dangle or drop like oversize paper dolls onto the floor—a move that undercuts the prestige of their original depiction. Other examples skewer art history for perpetuating racial stereotypes or glossing over America's complicated racial history.

Museums in Seattle and Georgia have devoted solo shows to Mr. Kaphar's art. Gallery officials said his works typically sell for between \$30,000 and \$80,000 apiece.

For his part, the artist said everything about his career felt like it was clicking along nicely until that portrait of his aunt nearly wrecked him. That's because he always revered his aunt for stepping into his troubled childhood and playing a guardian-angel role during violent moments—and yet one day as he casually painted her face, he realized she hadn't been physically nearby during most of these crises. He had inserted her into his darkest memories, a coping mechanism that made him question what else he had unrealistically believed about his past. Suddenly, his curiosity about America's collective visual history paled in comparison to the holes he sensed in his own family history.

Around the same time, he also began painting a series of faces that morphed into an altogether different family whose voices he felt like he could hear. "It terrified me that I might be going insane," he said.

That launched a series of conversations with a mental-health advocate and friend, Kwamena Blankson,



**DISORIENTED** Titus Kaphar's new installation, 'The Vesper Project,' opening in New York Feb. 28, uses materials salvaged from an abandoned home to convey the emotional disintegration of a fictional family.



who told him that children often insert emotional smokescreens into their most damaging memories to soften the psychological blow afterward. As for the voices, Mr. Kaphar was reminded that novelists create

characters from thin air whose presence feels genuine to them as they write. Somewhat reassured, Mr. Kaphar said he spent several years reading books on neurology and, with the help of Mr. Blankson, also fas-

hioning extensive back stories for this family he had invented.

His plot alone could rival a Toni Morrison novel. The patriarch, Abram Vesper, is the son of a former Brazilian slave who has built up a

small but flourishing shipping business in New England right after the end of the Civil War. He and his wife lose a son to tragedy but raise three daughters, and all of them are so fair-skinned they decide to position themselves in broader social circles as a white family—until they are found out and ruined, financially and otherwise.

Then, in a flash-forward more commonly used in Hollywood than the art world, the artist decided to plug himself into the family's current-day story line by inventing a mentally troubled man named Benjamin Vesper who writes Mr. Kaphar seeking help with his genealogy after seeing one of Mr. Kaphar's paintings in the Yale Art Gallery.

The entire tale is now subtly summed up in the fracturing house that Mr. Kaphar built in his studio using materials salvaged from an abandoned home in Connecticut. The house itself is meant to evoke the Vesper family home after the Civil War, but for audiences, the experience of walking through its rooms is also intended to exude the family's emotional disintegration—as well as Mr. Kaphar's concerns for the family as an outsider playing the role of enlisted genealogist.

Inside, yellowed newspaper clippings and clear plastic bags containing old photographs paper the walls of a living room with roughshod floors and ramshackle furniture. In the next room, the floors begin to splay into planks and walls appear to be erect only because they're tethered by crisscrossing ropes. Further out into the gallery, other sections of walls adorned with crumpled or whitewashed portraits of the Vesper family stand as though they had detached from the house and drifted.

Along with the house, Mr. Kaphar also created a series of ghostly photographs of the original, abandoned house and he and Mr. Blankson also wrote poems and journal entries in the guise of one of the Vesper sisters.

Marc Benda, the artist's dealer, said he never questioned Mr. Kaphar's sanity throughout the project, but he did sense that the artist had created an alter ego who couldn't be hemmed in. "He was like a freight train," Mr. Benda said. (He hopes to sell the installation as a single work of art for more than \$300,000.)

Now that the work is finished, the artist said he's been able to think more clearly about his past and everything else: "I decided that if I was going to freak out, I had to find some way to paint my way through it."



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