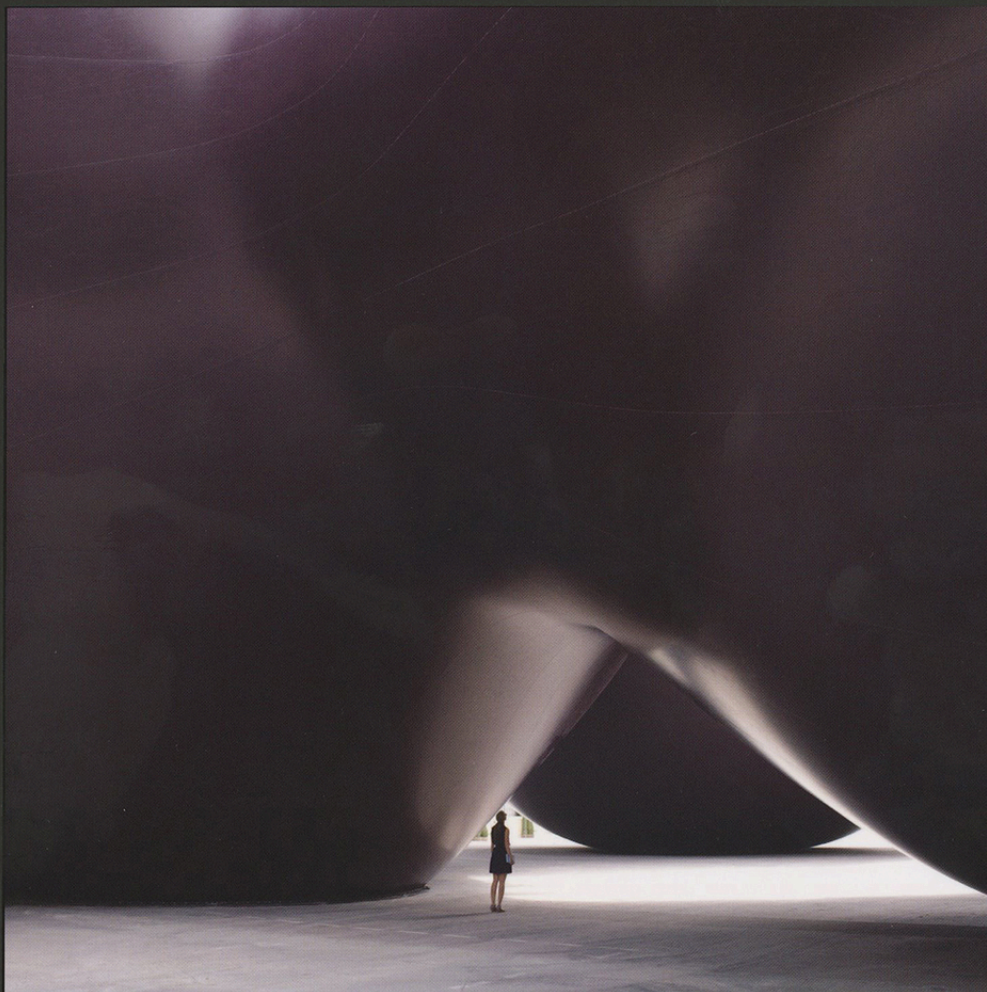


# whitewall

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THE FASHION ISSUE

RICK OWENS, ANISH KAPOOR, RODARTE, AMFAR - TWO x TWO

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## ARTIST TO WATCH

# TITUS KAPHAR

BY KATY DONOGHUE

Titus Kaphar's paintings and sculptures at first appear to be a general commentary on the depiction of African Americans (or lack thereof) in 19th- and 20th-century art. His paintings that reference historical black figures like W.E.B. Du Bois seem to substantiate that notion. But his paintings are far more personal than that, given a powerful voice by his constant obscuring of his subjects: cutting out the silhouette in the canvas, covering a face with strips of fabric, veiling a woman, whitewashing a man, and so on. While we talked with Kaphar during the installation of his recent solo show at Friedman Benda in New York, "Classical Disruption" (February 17–April 2, 2011), it became clear how incredibly personal each work is, how infused with his own biography his paintings become. Kaphar speaks about the characters he depicts and their narratives as if they were real, ghosts or memories that speak to — and sometimes haunt — him in the studio until they feel complete. Here, Kaphar reveals a few of the stories behind his most recent work.

**WHITEWALL:** *Was there a work you started with for this exhibition?*

**TITUS KAPHAR:** I actually started with her [the woman in *As if I Were Her Own* (2011)]. A narrative is the most important part of the project for me. So with this piece in particular, I was really surprised at the intensity of her gaze. I had this idea that she was supposed to be in a relationship with this man, and so I painted

a picture of a man. There was supposed to be a relationship between them, so I sat them by each other. It became clear to me that that was not the conversation that must be happening. I was really frustrated. So I just sat them in the studio and I just looked at them, and looked at them, and I realized that the thing that she was looking at wasn't a man, it was a longing for a child. It surprised me because I didn't really know what to do with that. Then this painting of a little girl [*This Place Never Felt Like Home* (2011)] woke me up one night.

**WW:** *Is that how a lot of your imagery comes to you?*

**TK:** Sometimes they come in full pictures, like a little girl sitting on a couch, a landscape painting in the background. I woke up the next morning and I started working on it, but I still didn't know that it was supposed to go directly with *As if I Were Her Own*. But then the conversation started happening. It really feels like writing fiction, like waiting for the characters to speak to you, as opposed to putting words in the characters' mouths. The irony for me is that the narratives always come back to nonfiction narratives, like things that have happened in my life.

**WW:** *Do these works relate to your life?*

**TK:** I was adopted when I was 15, so this is actually very similar to my personal story. I didn't

catch that until after the painting was completely finished.

**WW:** *You've cut the little girl from *This Place Never Felt Like Home* and placed her on the lap of the woman in *As if I Were Her Own*. Do you ever find it difficult to complete a painting and then take a knife to it? Does it ever feel like you're defacing your work?*

**TK:** Some paintings are a little bit harder than others. Some paintings make me a little more nervous. These characters begin to feel real to me. If I'm not feeling that, then I just wait. Like, *You Will Never Be the Favorite Son* [2011], this one was very hard [a portrait of a woman with her face nearly erased]. I was working on it and waiting for it to say something and it wasn't. [I thought], I'm going to do a whitewash painting and remove this figure, because I had done that before. I did that, and that was wrong, too. So I had to repaint the face again. The gallery came to the studio and I told them not to look at it, that it was a failure. So when they picked up the work for the show, there was nothing left in the studio except for her. I felt like I could hear her. Once I started following the narrative, it became this very painful, familiar parenting narrative to me. I named it *You Will Never Be the Favorite Son*, and that's why it took so long to actually get to it. In a strange way the woman in this painting is me, and that was a big leap for me. She really feels like she's disappearing.

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Opposite page, left to right:

Titus Kaphar  
*The Preacher's Wife*  
2010  
Oil and enamel on canvas  
60 x 48 inches

Courtesy of Friedman Benda, New York

Titus Kaphar  
*Eve*  
2010  
Oil on canvas and polymer  
50 x 60 x 34 inches

Courtesy of Friedman Benda, New York

Titus Kaphar  
*As if I Were Her Own*  
2011  
Oil on cut canvas on panel  
60 x 48 inches

Courtesy of Friedman Benda, New York

Above:

Titus Kaphar  
*Without Site*  
2010  
Oil on canvas on panel  
84 x 54.5 x 4 inches

Courtesy of Friedman Benda, New York