



School of Art graduate student Titus Kaphar is seen cutting out figures from his painting "New Revolution."

## The art of cut-and-paste

Titus Kaphar, a graduate student at the School of Art, turned the Yale University Art Gallery into a personal studio of sorts while working on his M.F.A. thesis project.

In a kind of pre-digital life-size version of Photoshop™, Kaphar copies historical masterpieces or details from them, repopulates them with new portraits, often of himself, and then literally, with an Exacto™-knife, cuts out the figures he has created, and re-places them on a new blank canvas. Making this multi-stage art form even more complicated is the predilection of the artist to work directly in front of the original painting that inspired him.

On Dec. 5, Kaphar set up his 8' x 10' painting "New Revolution" in front of John Trumbull's panoramic depiction of "The Battle of Bunker Hill" (1786), which hangs in the Yale Art Gallery.

The original paintings that Kaphar chooses for his own works are among those few from the early period of American history to depict African Americans. Almost always the sole black person in a group portrait and other paintings of the 18th and 19th centuries is lower than the white people in the picture and off to a side, observes Kaphar, who has immersed himself in the study of the subject.



Titus Kaphar's painting "New Revolution" in its original form.

"The visual marginalization of black people in painting reflects racial relationships and hierarchy historically in American society," he says.

In "The Battle of Bunker Hill," for example, the densely populated composition includes one black figure peering over the shoulder of a tall white man in a dark hat.

By refiguring a visually marginalized black person in a historic painting into a portrait of himself or a contemporary and transposing the figure from the periphery of historic events to the center of a new canvas, Kaphar says, "I'm taking something pre-existing and reconstructing it. It's a way of revisiting history," he adds.

After cutting out the figures in his "New Revolution" while working at the gallery, Kaphar returned to his studio, where he will hand sew the removed figures onto a blank canvas of similar size. The cut painting and the reconfigured painting will be shown as a diptych throughout the life of the piece. Because the complex process is integral to the final work, Kaphar had it videotaped and that tape too will become part of the final installation.