





# Titus Kaphar

***Titus Kaphar: Painting Undone***

Savannah College of Art and Design

March 3 – April 23, 2008

Red Gallery

201 E. Broughton St.

Savannah, GA 31401

[www.scadexhibitions.com](http://www.scadexhibitions.com)



**O**n behalf of the exhibitions department at the Savannah College of Art and Design, it is my pleasure to introduce emerging artist Titus Kaphar's first postgraduate solo exhibition, *Titus Kaphar: Painting Undone*. This exhibition of existing and newly created paintings is guest curated by New York-based independent curator Isolde Brielmaier, Ph.D., with assistance provided by SCAD curator Erin Dziedzic.

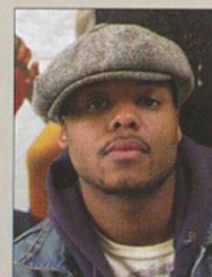
Kaphar earned a B.F.A. from San Jose State University in 2001 and an M.F.A. from Yale in 2006. His participation in the 2006-07 Studio Museum in Harlem artist-in-residence program and the accompanying exhibition titled *Midnight's Daydream* garnered critical acclaim. In her review of the exhibition in the Aug. 11, 2007, issue of The New York Times, Martha Schwendener characterizes Kaphar as a "classicist: taking as his starting point European and American portrait paintings from the 18th- and 19th- centuries, he makes oil-on-canvas copies and reconfigures them in strategic ways." Indeed, Kaphar's works challenge the traditional capacity, or role, that portrait paintings have occupied in provocative ways. His work reconfigures the status and conventional relationship between the patron and the painter. Kaphar's cutting, sculpting and reshaping of his paintings also enacts a parallel investigation into the content of the source paintings which recalls artistic strategies

such as appropriation and recontextualization; these methods have been used by artists such as Fred Wilson, Carrie Mae Weems, Yinka Shonibare, MBE, and Johannes Phokela, among others. However, Kaphar's practice breaks new ground through his innovative transformation of painting and offers a contemporary twist on earlier revisionary approaches to historical referents in an effort to redress issues of class, power and race.

By exhibiting Kaphar's work in the Red Gallery and inviting the artist to interact with multiple departments at the college, SCAD opens up and encourages dialogue across numerous disciplines.

Kaphar's practice complements and expands the mission of the exhibitions department of the Savannah College of Art and Design. The exhibitions department is committed to showcasing artistic diversity, innovation and originality and offers programming that provides an educational forum for current trends in contemporary art.

**Laurie Ann Farrell**  
Executive Director of Exhibitions





Titus Kaphar

# Titus Kaphar:

Painting Undone

By Isolde Brielmaier, Ph.D.



Is it painting, a sculpture or both, and why? This is a question that artist Titus Kaphar hopes his audience will consider freely when visiting his first postgraduate solo exhibition, *Titus Kaphar: Painting Undone*. For this show, Kaphar moves off the wall and beyond the surface of the canvas, using his actual paintings as his medium. In the process, he creates work that is sculptural in nature but very much exploratory in purpose. Kaphar is not focused on defining what painting is—he is well aware of this long-standing art historical query. Instead, in this particular presentation, Kaphar desires to question and respond to his own process and the resulting aesthetic and conceptual details they reveal. He would like his viewers to feel free to do the same. For him, creating a painting is just one aspect of his practice. What really “makes” each work complete, he explains, is the act of taking it apart. “It is in the process of un-doing each painting, of stepping outside the traditional confines and beyond the surface of each piece, that I find the essence of each work. This is where I explore my art and the sense of myself as an artist.”<sup>1</sup>



# concept and composition

Kaphar's investigative practice is multilayered in both concept and composition. At the core of much of his work are his quotations of canonical 18th- and 19th-century European and American works by John Singleton Copley, William Blake and Eugène Delacroix, among others, which Kaphar marks by his interventions in the construction of dominant historical narratives and in the defining characteristics of painting as a genre. Within this context, Kaphar draws on the acts of insertion, of literally erasing original elements and injecting new forms into these works, as well as the meticulous reworking and appropriation of well-known historical figures and stories. Kaphar feels, however, it is essential to note that his works are re-inventions which use specific historical paintings and their narratives as found objects or raw material from which to draw inspiration and urge continuous reconsideration on the part of his viewers. He is not fully invested in the viewer recognizing or knowing the original work. As a means of challenging the dominant art historical canon and encouraging his audience to access his work, Kaphar seeks only to provide a general anchor. He allows viewers to engage his art and develop their own meanings and ideas based not upon a perceived distortion of the past or an unknown history, but rather upon their experience and readings of his work in the present.

At times, Kaphar selects work that features black and white figures positioned in close proximity to one another on the picture plane. He removes and alters—by cutting out, peeling off or covering up—the white figures in each work, so that the black individuals remain or stand out against the original pictorial environment, a space in which historically, the African-American or black figure has been downplayed, muted and obscured. In *Conversation Between Paintings #1: Descending From a Cross to be Nourished at the Breast of Our Mother* (2006-07), Kaphar presents two separately produced paintings “in conversation,”





which he intentionally butts up against each other. This particular work emerged out of a broader discussion between Kaphar and other artists on the ways in which an artist's work is installed by a curator and the dialogue that emerges from such presentations. On the right is a generic "founding father" image (Kaphar created a figure that combines characteristics of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and others) and on the left is an image of a partially topless black woman seated in three-quarter profile. In the painting on the right, Kaphar has cut out the male image from the center of the canvas, leaving only a trace of the figure's outline and the cross-shaped wood framing visible. The removed figure, in turn, is seen falling into the lap of the black woman featured at left. This seemingly loaded gesture is intended to evoke multiple meanings that Kaphar feels may be generated through a range of possible conversations among his viewers, depending upon who is doing the looking. Here, one may sense a reference to the historical role of black women as pillars of society who may be seen as providing backbone nourishment to the nation from its infancy to the present. The alleged illicit relationship between Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings may also come to mind, as does the underscoring of the delicate and carefully constructed platforms and narratives of power occupied by white male historical figures throughout time. Perhaps the male figure has simply thrown himself at the woman after hanging on the wall next to her for what seemed like an eternity in some grand museum hall. The story, in essence, appears open-ended.

Similarly, in *Othello* (2005), Kaphar's practice of disruption or removal involves not cutting out but covering up and, by extension, partially erasing the bust of a young black man. The blurring of this figure makes one look closer in a quest for recognition and some sense of familiarity. We scan the surface of the image looking for a face—mouth, eyes, etc.—details that bring forth the figure's personhood and might imbue him, at least symbolically, with a sense of individuality, stature and significance. Kaphar's process of appropriation and borrowing of canonical works from European art history is a form of reclamation. His application of this genre's visual vocabulary and conventions







and individualized black subjects is intended, among other things, to establish the agency of black people within these specific historical contexts. It conveys their importance and firmly situates them within the field of power. It also challenges us, as viewers, to consider how history and images are formulated and constructed.

In other instances, Kaphar's disruptions within these traditional works extend far beyond the surface of his paintings. He transforms these works themselves into three-dimensional objects that extend his process of conceptual manipulations. They also become visual articulations of the ways in which the artist sees painting and his interest in pushing the perceived boundaries of the medium.

In one of his recent works, *Slippage* (2007), Kaphar has literally allowed or encouraged the actual slipping of his painting from the wall-mounted canvas frame onto a floor-based altar he has constructed. On the altar's surface, the work morphs into a stiff, twisted, tower-like sculpture that reveals only certain aspects of the image clearly. By intentionally making visible select details of the work, Kaphar restructures not only the figures and their poses, gestures and expressions, but actually represents the narrative of this historical painting as well as the actual work itself as a piece of sculpture.

Using the loaded substance of tar in *I still don't know how or why it ended like this, but it began when one of the older women called her blackness into question* (2007), Kaphar again reworks the faint image of a white female figure. In this instance, his manipulation of this work involves the addition of materials, such as the accumulation of tar, which resonates historically as a substance used to confine and denigrate African-Americans (through the act of tarring and feathering). It also connotes a sense of permanence and a messy, transformative process of construction and destruction.

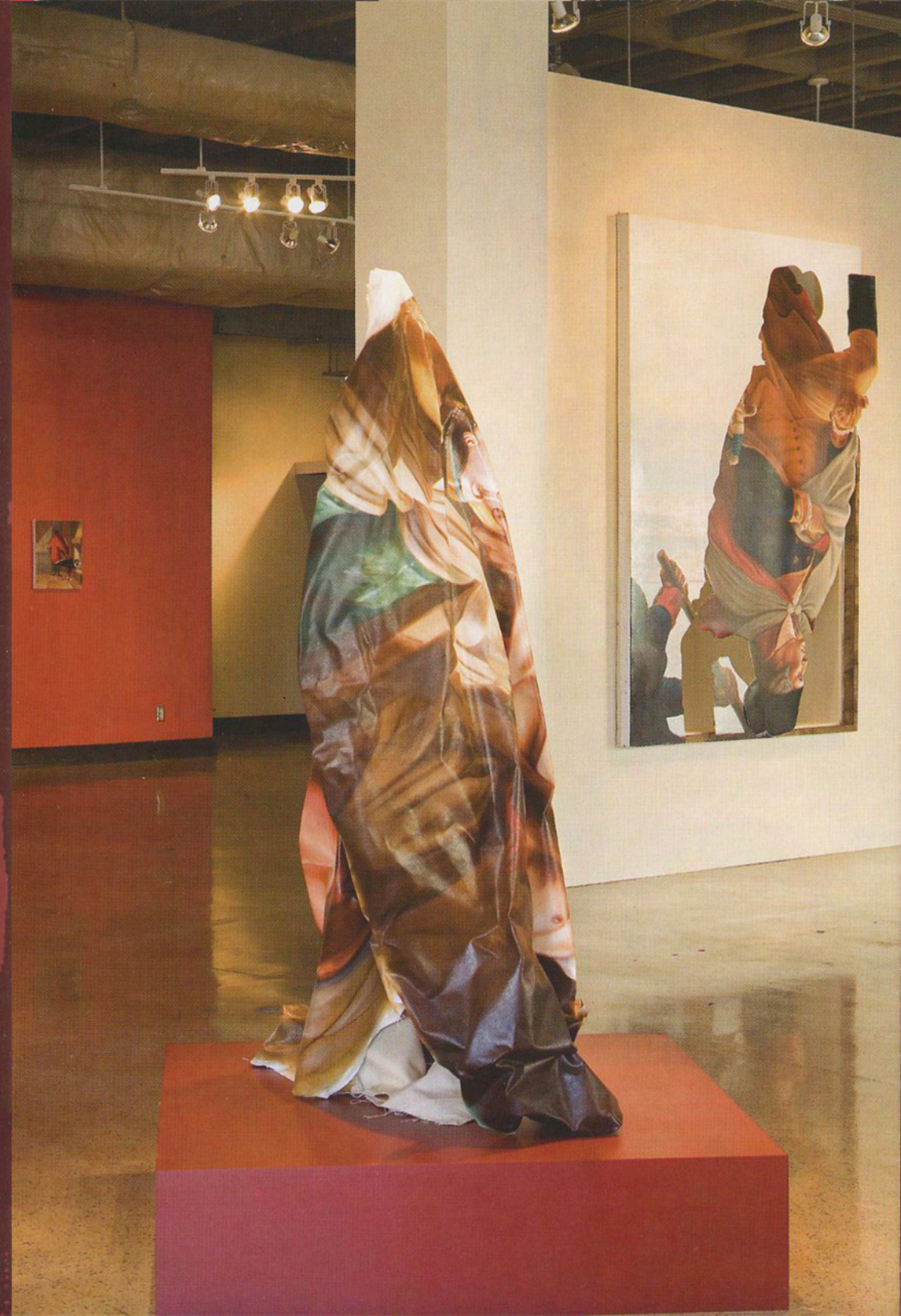






# un-doing

Kaphar's notion of "un-doing" painting has several meanings. It refers to his desire to think about and look at painting in a different way, to explore and question what it is and what it can be. It also points to his active process of digging through, cutting, opening up, adding to and pulling out elements within each piece, both literally and figuratively. Here, his excavation of specific elements—visual details and broader ideas—from historical works recalls, for Kaphar, the idea of an artifact. His sculptural forms are made whole and visible, through his actions and disturbances that are external to the actual creation process of each painting. They are modified and recovered and, by extension, so too are the figures, stories and ideas that comprise the subject matter of his medium. It is in this new approach to painting and in its very un-doing that Kaphar encourages us to move beyond the expected and into the new world that he creates. We come, perhaps with some uncertainty, but with a definite sense of intrigue to look at painting, history and our relationship to both from a range of different perspectives.









## Titus Kaphar curriculum vitae

### Born:

Kalamazoo, Mich., 1976  
Lives and works in New York City

### Education:

M.F.A., painting, Yale University, New Haven, Conn., 2006  
B.F.A., painting; minor: African-American studies, San Jose State University, San Jose, Calif., 2001

### Selected Solo Exhibitions:

**2008**

*Titus Kaphar: Painting Undone*, Red Gallery, Savannah College of Art and Design, Savannah, Ga.

**2005**

Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn.

**2004**

*Titus Kaphar*, Provisions Library, Washington, D.C.  
*Visual Quotations*, Anno Domini Gallery, San Jose, Calif.

**2000**

*The House That Crack Built*, San Jose State University, Gallery 2, San Jose, Calif.

### Selected Group Exhibitions:

**2007**

*Blur*, Arndt & Partner Gallery, Berlin, Germany  
*Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, Von Lintel Gallery, New York, N.Y.  
*Midnight's Daydream*, The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, N.Y.  
*My Love Is a 187*, The Luggage Store Gallery, San Francisco, Calif.  
*Salon Nouveau*, Galerie Engholm Engelhorn, Vienna, Austria

**2006**

*Lag-time Lineup*, Mumbo Jumbo Gallery, Harlem, N.Y.  
*Materiality*, Kravets Wehby Gallery, New York, N.Y.  
*The Armory Show*, Fredericks & Freiser Gallery, New York, N.Y.  
*School Days*, Jack Tilton Gallery, New York, N.Y.

**2004**

*Edges*, Euphrat Museum of Art, Cupertino, Calif.

**2002**

*Studio 110, Re-Presenting Ourselves*, San Jose Museum of Art, San Jose, Calif.

**2001**

*The African-American Spirit in Contemporary Art*, Mexican Heritage Plaza, San Jose, Calif.  
San Jose State University, Africana Center, San Jose, Calif.

**2000**

*Black Artists: Creations*, San Francisco African American Historical and Cultural Society, Fort Mason Center, San Francisco, Calif.  
Lockheed Martin, Sunnyvale, Calif.

### Publications / Media

"Three Contemporaries, Each With a Different Way to View the Past," The New York Times, Aug. 11, 2007  
"The Art of Cut-and-Paste," Yale Bulletin and Calendar, Dec 16, 2005  
"From the Margins of Art History, a Painter's Minority Report," The Washington Post, April 11, 2004  
KPFA Radio Interview, Berkeley, Calif., and Washington, D.C., February/April 2004

### Recognition

**2006-07**

Artist in Residence, The Studio Museum in Harlem

**2004**

Belle Arts Foundation Grantee

**2001**

California Arts Council Grantee



# SCAD acknowledgements

The Savannah College of Art and Design would like to gratefully acknowledge the following individuals for their contribution and assistance to *Titus Kaphar: Painting Undone*.

## Titus Kaphar

**Isolde Brielmaier, Ph.D., Guest Curator**

**Jerry L. Thompson**

## Savannah College of Art and Design Exhibitions

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## Titus Kaphar: *Painting Undone*

- *I still don't know how it ended like this, but it began when one of the older women called her blackness into question* (study), 2007. Collection of the Artist. Photograph by Jerry L. Thompson.
- *Othello*, oil on canvas, 42" x 55", 2005. Private Collection. Photograph by Jerry L. Thompson.
- *George, George, George*, oil on canvas, 66" x 96", 2007. Collection of the Artist. Photograph by Jerry L. Thompson.
- *Slippage*, oil on canvas, 50" x 30" x 87"; altarpiece: 50" x 30" x 20", 2007. Collection of the Artist. Photograph by Jerry L. Thompson.
- *Conversation Between Paintings #1: Descending From a Cross to be Nourished at the Breast of Our Mother*, oil on cut canvas, left canvas: 48" x 36", right canvas: 60" x 36", 2006-07. Collection of Hudgins Family, New York. Photograph by Dennis Burnett, SCAD Photography.
- Titus Kaphar at work in his studio. Photograph by Jerry L. Thompson.
- *My failure, not hers*, oil and tar on canvas, 36" x 48", 2008. Collection of the Artist. Photograph by Dennis Burnett, SCAD Photography.
- Installation view of *Shroud*, crumpled oil painting, 74" x irregular diameter, 2007. Collection of Sam Schwartz (foreground); *George, George, George*, oil on canvas, 66" x 96", 2007. Collection of the Artist (right); *Kindling*, oil on cut canvas, 16" x 20", 2008. Collection of the Artist (background). Photograph by Dennis Burnett, SCAD Photography.
- (Illustrated in studio view, p. 12): *I still don't know how or why it ended like this, but it began when one of the older women called her blackness into question*, #1, tank: 60" x 44" x 12", base: 12" x 58" x 40", 2007. Collection of Ninah and Michael Lynne. Photograph by Jerry L. Thompson.

# About SCAD

Named one of Kaplan's "25 cutting-edge schools with an eye toward the future," the Savannah College of Art and Design is a private, nonprofit, accredited institution with locations in Atlanta and Savannah, Ga., and in Lacoste, France. Undergraduate and graduate degree programs also are offered online through SCAD-eLearning. The college offers Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Fine Arts, Master of Architecture, Master of Arts, Master of Arts in Teaching, Master of Fine Arts, and Master of Urban Design degrees. For more information about the college, visit [www.scad.edu](http://www.scad.edu), e-mail [admission@scad.edu](mailto:admission@scad.edu), call 800.869.7223 or 912.525.5100 in Savannah, or call 877.722.3285 or 404.253.2700 in Atlanta.