

Seattle Art Museum Honors Titus Kaphar

by Ramon Shiloh

By provocatively rearranging subject matter on canvas, Titus Kaphar is a young man who is reshaping traditional art with an unpredictable twist. Tapped as the Seattle Art Museum's inaugural Gwendolyn Knight and Jacob Lawrence fellowship recipient, Kaphar was recently awarded \$10,000 and the honor of being the first solo exhibitor in the newly created gallery. His contemporary artwork was showcased April 3 through September 6, 2009.

This honor will be awarded bi-annually to a Black artist who has been producing work for less than 10 years in order to help further the artist's development. Sandra Jackson-Dumont, who serves as the SAM's Adjunct Curator for the Modern and Contemporary art department, says she is truly touched by this nod to Kaphar. "What's powerful about Titus is he's smart and a great artist. What we're most proud of is that we can do this for him. What an incredible gesture and legacy it is for artists to give the gift of resources to help another artist manifest their vision. We can create an opportunity for him to leverage this moment so that he can continue doing what he's been called to do."

Kaphar laughs when asked about how he feels being the recipient of this new fellowship. "When I got the phone call, I was shocked. Sandra told me the news and I didn't believe her at first, yet I was grinning ear to ear. I couldn't believe it! It wasn't something I had applied for. I didn't even know the fellowship existed. I think that's why I'm even more honored by it, because it wasn't my pursuit. Somebody saw something in my work and thought it was valuable enough to honor. That's amazing."

Creating a New Historical Perspective

Kaphar's creations on canvas are historically bold, providing an untold alternate ending to the stories typically written in the books. His works are an amalgamation of key historical and contemporary figures and moments that have been portrayed in European and American portraits from the 18th and 19th centuries.

He describes his work as "the first sentence in a longer story that the viewer completes." By cutting and retooling the images, he is able to change the original meaning. For example, in one of his featured pieces, *Conversation Between Paintings*, Kaphar examines the relationship between a painting of a White soldier and a Black child off to the side, who looks on adoringly, with that of a Black soldier who stands alone. [Video: Titus Kaphar discusses his upcoming exhibit at the Seattle Art Museum](#)

Historically, the portraits reveal a time where obligatory images were set to influence Anglo prestige by sharing intellectual and moral rule. Kaphar says that in all his studies, he has never found a painting that features a Black child with a Black soldier in this way.

“I wanted to take the little boy out from the painting because I wanted to see how I would perceive that character in a different setting and if it would change the relationship between the two figures,” Kaphar explains.

The captured relationship is striking. The new image gives the impression of mentorship and counsel rather than master and servant. Kaphar adds that even though the painting is from the past, it still speaks to the social issues many people face today.

Kaphar reminds viewers that paintings are an evolution of sensations that still carries an impact on the emotional consciousness. Identifying the layers of Kaphar’s work offers an understanding of looking at a subject matter from every angle and then initiating an altered response.

“What happens is the historical content of a particular painting is just a way of shrouding contemporary content. Part of this project was taking those paintings that were presented to me as the most important and reevaluating them, changing the context, mixing things up and presenting what I find in them,” he says.

Kaphar is a man destined to reshape the definition of art. “I am trying to create stuff that excites me. Every time I walk into the studio, I want to feel surprised. When I started painting, I had the naïve belief that painting can change the world. In my heart, I still truly believe that. I mean, if you can make something that would have such an impact on someone, which compels them to be the solution to things, the world will change for the better.”

Titus Accidentally Discovers His Artistic Potential

Born in Kalamazoo, Michigan, in 1976, Kaphar admits he was a terrible student. “My G.P.A. in high school literally started with a decimal point. I failed most classes. It wasn’t until the end of my junior year to the beginning of my senior year that I realized if I didn’t get my act together, I was going to be at school again.”

Thanks to rigorous morning and evening classes, Kaphar just made it through the graduating process. After high school, he took solace in playing music in Northern California’s Bay Area with his brother and best friend, opening for such notable bands as Incubus, Papa Roach and P.O.P., to name just a few.

“We were doing some awesome gigs and then I met this woman, who all of a sudden started asking me about school and what I thought about my future,” Kaphar recalls. Ultimately, his love interest became his hand in marriage and Kaphar found himself seriously questioning his future.

Reluctant to get back into the world of academics, Kaphar nevertheless found himself enrolled at DeAnza College in Cupertino, California, located 45 miles south of San Francisco. “I was really nervous, because I’ve known myself as an

academic failure,” he says. “Since I had always dabbled in art here and there, I decided that I should take an art history class.”

From that moment on, Kaphar was hooked. Not only did he enjoy what was representative of the class he was taking, but for the first time in his life, he earned a B. “For someone who left high school with an embarrassing GPA, I was perplexed. But, it pushed me to follow my heart and try other courses I felt I could achieve,” Kaphar says proudly.

He enrolled in art and history courses side by side with his general requirements. When he had enough credits, Kaphar transferred to San Jose State University, where he began a rigorous cycle of proper art classes that would define his observations and develop his painting technique.

Kaphar earned a Bachelor in Fine Arts in painting and a minor in African American Studies from San Jose State University. His confidence high, he went on to earn a Masters in Fine Arts in painting from Yale University in 2006. The following year, he became an artist-in-residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem. Kaphar is a versatile artist who has earned rave reviews at every showing. He has premiered exhibitions at the Yale University Art Gallery, Savannah College of Art and Design, Provisions Library in Washington, D.C., Anno Domini Gallery in San Jose and the San Jose State University Gallery. After he received the Lawrence Fellowship, Kaphar was tapped for Cuba’s Havana Biennial.

“I never expect to be in the same company with the name Jacob Lawrence and Gwendolyn Knight. I mean, when I was first painting, he was one of the subjects I studied,” Kaphar recalls. “I mean, who else was painting people who look like me? He was painting people from the Harlem Renaissance, which I studied first. So, to have it come full circle in that way is pretty amazing.”

“This is what I love doing and it never occurred to me to stop doing it,” Kaphar adds. “It has never felt more right.”

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