

## Cut and paste

**Posted:** March 15, 2008 - 10:30pm

By Allison Hersh

Artist Titus Kaphar isn't afraid to cut and paste his way through art history. In fact, this rising star of the New York art scene uses distinctly post-modern strategies to reconsider pre-modern works of art and, ultimately, to rethink hierarchies of power based on race, class and gender.



"Othello," Titus Kaphar, oil on canvas, 2005. Private Collection.



"Kindling," Titus Kaphar, oil on cut canvas, 2008.



"Shroud," Titus Kaphar, crumpled oil painting, 2007. Collection of Sam Schwartz.

In "Painting Undone," a solo exhibit currently on display at the Savannah College of Art and Design's Red Gallery, Kaphar quotes canonical works of art by 18th- and 19th-century artists ranging from American portraitist John Singleton Copely to French romantic painter Eugene Delacroix.

He creates facsimiles of familiar works of art, strategically erasing select details and carefully inserting new elements to offer a fresh interpretation of the work at hand.

"It is in the process of undoing each painting - of stepping outside the traditional confines and beyond the surface of each piece - that I find the essence of each work," Kaphar said. "This is where I explore my art and the sense of myself as an artist."

By manipulating historical paintings - often through acts of physical violence - he attempts to rewrite art history, questioning the nature of power and racial disparity. In a thought-provoking exhibit featuring eight transgressive new works, this talented artist brings latent subtexts regarding race and power into the foreground of his paintings, forcing the viewer to confront these issues head-on.

"For this exhibition, Kaphar moves off the wall and beyond the surface of the canvas, using his actual paintings as his medium," said guest curator Isolde Brielmaier, Ph.D. "In the process, he creates works that are sculptural in nature but very much exploratory in their purpose."

Interestingly, he uses black tar and white paint to suggest twin extremes of racial prejudice in "Painting Undone." For example, the mixed media portrait, "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," mounts a horizontal sliver of a traditional oil portrait of a woman of mixed ethnicity upon a steel base which has been coated with black tar, a reference to a historic punishment for runaway slaves and a reference to blackness.

Likewise, "Othello" features a handsome portrait of a young African-American man, painted in exquisite detail, whose body has been symbolically obscured by rushed, sloppy whitewash brush strokes. In both works, extremes of whiteness and blackness dominate, erasing more nuanced details.

Kaphar often cuts out select figures in his compositions, allowing them to fall forward like paper dolls, emphasizing the artifice of painting itself as well as the flimsy foundation of white male power throughout history. At the same time, he encourages unexpected cross-pollinations between disparate works of art.

His "Conversations Between Paintings #1" features two vintage portraits pushed together, one featuring a bare-breasted African woman, the other focusing upon an aristocratic 18th-century man. Kaphar "liberates" the male figure by cutting him out of his portrait and laying his body across the maternal, chocolate-skinned female. This painting can be read as a historic reference to Thomas Jefferson's scandalous affair with Sally Hemmings or, on another level, as a more symbolic reference to the ways in which individual works of art take on new meaning through innovative juxtapositions.

Kaphar's playful experimentations with the genre of oil painting reach their apex in "Shroud," a classically-inspired canvas that appears to have been ripped from its frame, crumpled and then frozen into stiff folds, lending it a sculptural presence. Here, he questions the fundamental two-dimensional strictures of painting, encouraging his compositions to break out of their frames and to occupy three dimensions.

Originally from Kalamazoo, Mich., Kaphar earned a B.F.A. in painting from San Jose State University and an M.F.A. in painting at Yale University before being named an Artist in Residence at the prestigious Studio Museum in Harlem in 2006. In recent years, his work has been featured in The New York Times and in the Washington Post. Although he has exhibited his work in New York, Vienna and Berlin, "Painting Undone" serves as his first post-graduate solo exhibition.

"I am experimenting with transgressive interventions on paintings," he explained, "as a means of undermining hierarchical roles of the past and imposing on them contemporary narratives."