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Painter challenges history with Seattle Art Museum exhibit

By Jerry Large
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Titus Kaphar gives history a chance to live in the present.

He's a young painter who had turned his passion for history into a body of work that asks contemporary questions of historically significant paintings, mostly from the 18th and 19th centuries.

The question he asked George Washington drew me to a showing of Kaphar's work, which opened at the Seattle Art Museum Friday and runs through Sept. 6.

Kaspar copied part of that famous painting of George Washington crossing the Delaware, just showing Washington and two dark hands on an oar. He made it big, then he cut Washington out and turned him upside down, making the painting look like a giant playing card.

Washington gambled with the lives of an entire people by not trying to end slavery.

He called the painting "George, George, George." Kaphar told me it's meant to be said in exasperation. He knows the complex situation Washington faced and the turmoil that shows up in Washington's diaries, but still.

Kaspar said Washington's writings show he "clearly understood that this is a sin, that it is unjust, that it is evil," but he did nothing about it.

Those two black hands on the oars start to look like fists.

Some of the seeds for work in this exhibit were planted by Kaphar's reading of Henry Wiencek's excellent history, "An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves and the Creation of America."

I'd just picked up a copy when I heard about the exhibit and I wanted to find out who this painter was.

Kaphar is 32, he's married, has two young sons and lives in New York.

He's a recent graduate of Yale's Master of Fine Art program, but that's not an achievement most would have expected early on.

His mother was 15 when she gave birth to him in Kalamazoo, Mich. They moved around.



JIM BATES / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Titus Kaphar's exhibit at the Seattle Art Museum opened Friday and runs through Sept. 6. The painter's work challenges the past.

In California, they were befriended by a Haitian-American family, and when his mother decided to move back to Michigan, he pleaded to stay with the Haitian family.

That made all the difference in his life. He was about 14 and had already been getting into trouble. His GPA starting high school was point zero something. He figured academics wasn't for him.

But his new dad "made me feel like I could do anything. If I said I wanted to ride my bike to the moon, he'd say, 'OK, son. What do we have to do to make that happen?'"

He learned to think, to make reasoned arguments. "It changed me as a person."

Kaphar said he was always drawing, and by the time he decided he wanted to be a painter, he believed anything was possible if you thought it through and worked at it.

Yale rejected his first two applications. He worked harder and got better.

Along the way, he gave himself a new name. When he was about to get married he wanted a name he could proudly give to children he would have. The space for father's name on his birth certificate said unknown, and that bothered him.

He and his wife are devout Christians, so they looked for a name in the Bible, where they found Kaphar: atonement, to be reconciled to God.

His work challenges the past but also sometimes reconciles past and present, and sometimes it fills in the places historical works of art left unknown.

At Yale, he was repeatedly told here are works of great value, so he studies them and brings to the fore stories that have sat in the shadows all these years. It's fitting that he is the first person awarded SAM's Gwendolyn Knight and Jacob Lawrence Fellowship.

The fellowship, which includes a \$10,000 award, is intended to nurture black artists who've demonstrated excellence early in their careers. Knight and Lawrence, one of America's most celebrated 20th century artists, made their home in Seattle.

They both cared about history. Lawrence's migration series explored the great movement of African Americans from south to north early in the 20th century and wove that story into the fabric of American art.

Their work and Kaphar's challenge us to make history whole.

Jerry Large's column appears Monday and Thursday. Reach him at 206-464-3346 or jlarge@seattletimes.com.

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