

GAGOSIAN

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An Artist Rises, and Brings a Generation With Him

In a struggling neighborhood with a vibrant history, Titus Kaphar found a home for himself. Now he's creating a center there to nurture emerging artists.

Patricia Leigh Brown



The artist Titus Kaphar in his New Haven studio with new paintings. Left, portrait of Reginald Dwayne Betts, his collaborator on the “Redaction” project now at MoMA PS1. The studio is three blocks from NXTHVN, an art space he founded with Jonathan Brand and Jason Price. © Sasha Arutyunova for The New York Times

Like many town-and-gown cities, New Haven is a community of parallel narratives. There is the storied Elm City of Yale University, a place of carillon bell towers, leaded glass windows and lush quadrangles behind iron gates.

But the artist Titus Kaphar wants to shift the narrative to a part of the city little known to outsiders, a once-thriving historic African-American neighborhood called Dixwell where he and his family have lived for more than a decade.

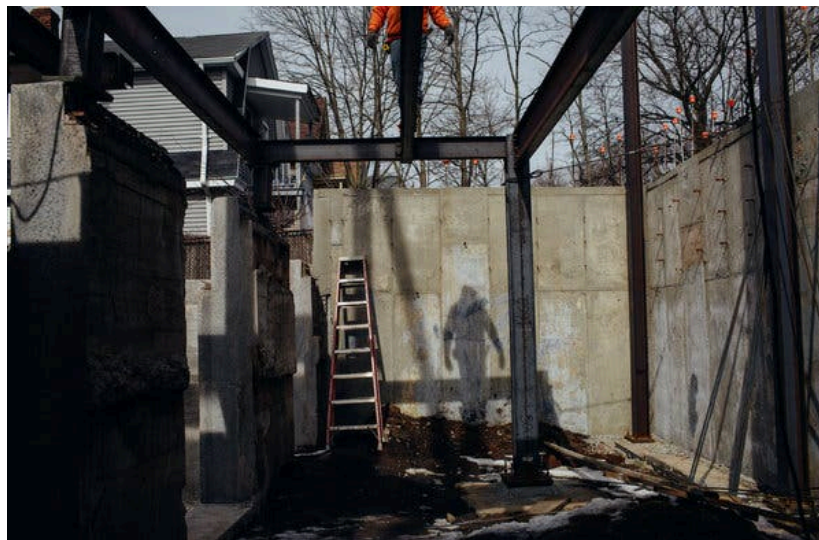
Mr. Kaphar, 42, has a profound connection to the forgotten, from the slaves owned by the founding fathers to the ubiquity of African-Americans in the criminal justice system, including his own father. The recipient of a recent MacArthur “genius” award, the artist is challenging racism in a body of strong work that has entered the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Brooklyn Museum and the Yale University Art Gallery, and was recently featured at the National Portrait Gallery. Mr. Kaphar is known for appropriating images from American and European art in order to subvert them, cutting them into his canvases to pull back

the velvet curtain of history. He wields materials like tar, wire, gold leaf and nails to unearth the past's inconvenient truths, and to shine a restorative light on those residing in the shadows.

In Dixwell, a neighborhood buffeted by need in the shadows of Yale, he is rewriting the script with NXTHVN (for "Next Haven"), a \$12 million nonprofit arts incubator and fellowship program he founded to nurture rising talents. The enterprise is housed in two once-moribund factory buildings that are being reimagined by the architect Deborah Berke, dean of the Yale School of Architecture.



A rendering of NXTHVN (for Next Haven). Former factory buildings have been reimagined as a cultural center. The project is designed by Deborah Berke Partners, the firm founded by Deborah Berke, dean of the Yale School of Architecture. © Deborah Berke Partners



The construction site of NXTHVN, where a second building is being renovated for an art space. © Sasha Arutyunova for The New York Times

He envisions the project as a beacon for graduates hellbent on getting out of Dodge for New York (Mr. Kapfar, a 2006 Yale School of Art graduate, "drank the Kool-Aid" himself). "New Haven has some of the most esteemed artists in the world," he said. "Yet as a city, we've done very little to say, 'Why don't you stay here?'"

The first half, studios for seven artist-fellows, is up and running in a former ice cream factory filled with natural light. The second building, where lab equipment was manufactured, is under renovation and NXTHVN hard hats are everywhere. The complex will unfold in phases and include a cafe run by a local nonprofit, a combined co-working and gallery space, a theater and a three-story addition with skylights and loft-like apartments for visiting artists-in-residence.

Financing for the 40,000-square-foot project has come from the state (\$3 million) and the city (\$1 million for facade improvements), with several million dollars from private foundations and philanthropies. Collectors of the artist's work have helped subsidize the fellowship program.

Long a cultural hub for black residents, with a jazz club where Miles Davis and other luminaries played, the neighborhood was devastated by urban renewal and the 2006 closing of the Winchester Repeating Arms Factory up the street, which once employed 26,000 people. "I think sometimes folks feel like we, as poor people, don't know the difference," Mr. Kaphar said of bringing distinctive arts and architecture to the neighborhood. "So we'll get the leftovers — the backpack someone already discarded, the building that the city couldn't find any other use for."

The idea of an internationally competitive fellowship was inspired by Mr. Kaphar's residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem, a program founded in 1968 by William T. Williams, an artist he reveres. The seven artist-fellows at NXTHVN were chosen from 166 applicants. They are being steeped in art business nitty-gritty, from negotiating with galleries to public speaking.

"The art world is full of secrets," said Vaughn Spann, who graduated in 2018 with a master's degree in fine arts from Yale. "Titus is unlocking the vault."

Talented young people from local high schools serve as paid apprentices, learning how to sand and apply gesso to panels, or edit images online.



Seven art fellows from around the country are working at NXTHVN. © Sasha Arutyunova for The New York Times



Felipe Baeza, left, here with Mr. Kaphar, right, received a studio fellowship at NXTHVN. “New Haven has some of the most esteemed artists in the world,” Mr. Kaphar said. “Yet as a city, we’ve done very little to say, ‘Why don’t you stay here?’” © Sasha Arutyunova for The New York Times. Left, Vaughn Spann, 26, a Newark-based artist and veteran of gallery shows, is a NXTHVN fellow who is mentoring an apprentice from a local high school. The painting is from Mr. Spann’s “Dalmatians” series. © Sasha Arutyunova for The New York Times

Historically, artists have learned their craft by apprenticing with masters, Mr. Kaphar noted. “Diego Velázquez never went to graduate school,” he added.

Velázquez also never gave a major TED Talk — as Mr. Kaphar has notably done, demonstrating how artists convey wealth and privilege by taking a copy of a Frans Hals portrait of a 16th-century aristocratic family and whitewashing the main figures to shift the gaze to a black servant in the background. The painting will be the subject of “One: Titus Kaphar,” an exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum starting June 21.

In his 2018 painting, “Seeing Through Time,” perched on two paint cans at NXTHVN (it is now on view at Mass MoCA, the Berkshires museum),

Mr. Kaphar layered European characters onto a canvas, then peeled them back, creating space for a black girl, dressed in velvet and pearls, to emerge alongside a powerful contemporary woman. The girl breaks through layers of paint, and with it, the patriarchal and monoracial currents in the Western canon.

“For 400 years, the little girl on the side was always there,” he said of the art-historical device. “But you were never supposed to contemplate her personhood — her wants, needs and desires.”



At a TED conference, Mr. Kaphar demonstrated how artists convey wealth and privilege: He white-washed aristocratic figures in a copy of a portrait by Frans Hals to shift the viewers' attention to a servant. © Ryan Lash/TED

Mr. Kaphar did not discover art until his mid-20s, when he was trying to impress a young woman named Julianne, now his wife. He registered for an art survey class at a junior college in California and was outraged when the professor announced that they would be skipping over the “black people in art” section.

As a graduate student he looked hard at paintings and sculpture in the Yale University Art Gallery. Fittingly, his own work now hangs there: “Shadows of Liberty” (2016) is a portrait of George Washington in which his torso and face are obscured by nailed canvas strips, each inscribed with the names of slaves Washington owned in a given year.

In “Yet Another Fight for Remembrance” (2015), commissioned by Time magazine after Ferguson, Mo., young black protesters, their hands raised in a don’t-shoot stance, are caught in aggressive strokes of white paint, suggesting attempts to silence their voices. The humanity of their gaze is visible above the fray. The work “stops you flat,” Murray Whyte wrote in The Boston Globe. “This is rough stuff, yet it’s plied with seductive grace.”

IN MANY WAYS, NXTHVN represents Mr. Kaphar’s own “seeing through time,” reaching back into his own personal history to give promising young people a gift he never had. His father was in and out of prison for most of Mr. Kaphar’s childhood. In Kalamazoo, Mich., where he was born, the family earned extra cash in the neighborhood by carting metal barrels of burned trash to the dump.

For years he bounced among various family members, at one point living in a basement. At age 15, he left his father’s house for good after witnessing a violent incident in which the older man hit his girlfriend, who struck a mirror. Young Titus picked glass out of the woman’s back — and didn’t speak to his father again for 20 years.



Mr. Kaphar's "Shadows of Liberty," 2016, oil and rusted nails on canvas. ©Titus Kaphar; Yale University Art Gallery. Mr. Kaphar's "Yet Another Fight for Remembrance," oil on canvas, 2014. ©Titus Kaphar

“There is a way in which my life is a trope,” he observed the other day. “‘Poor black boy from bad neighborhood becomes famous artist.’ As with all tropes, it lacks specificity.”

In San Jose, Calif., where his mother — who now has a master’s degree in counseling — lived briefly, he connected with a stable, close-knit family, a widower and his three sons, who became an anchoring force. He wound up living with them during his high school years. Later, the man, whom Mr. Kaphar calls “my dad,” Mars Severe, told him “I saw something in you.”

“Senseless generosity got me here where I am,” Mr. Kaphar said.

The Jerome Project, perhaps his best-known work, was inspired by glimmers of reconciliation with his estranged father, Jerome, who was remorseful when Mr. Kaphar encountered him at a family gathering. He researched his father’s incarceration record online and was stunned to find “99 other men with the exact same name — all of them trapped in the criminal justice system and all of them black,” he said.



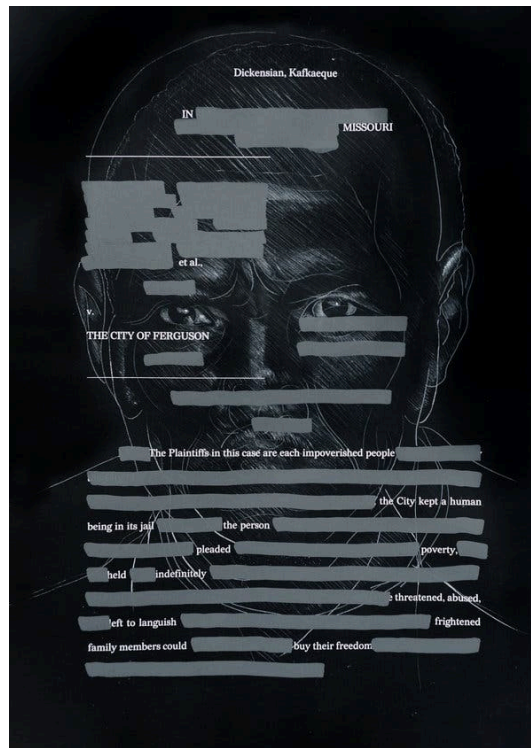
“Jerome I,” 2014, oil, gold leaf and tar on wood panel, is part of the Jerome Project, inspired by a reconciliation with the artist's father. © Titus Kaphar

Working from mug shots, the artist painted a series of devotional portraits of 65 Jeromes in Byzantine-style gold leaf, partly submerging each in tar based on the amount of time each Jerome spent in prison. The paintings, shown at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2014, express the suffocation of life behind bars — and the resilience necessary to survive. When his father saw the paintings, he was able to connect some revelatory dots between his own employment challenges and his criminal past. The rapprochement between father and son continues to unfold.

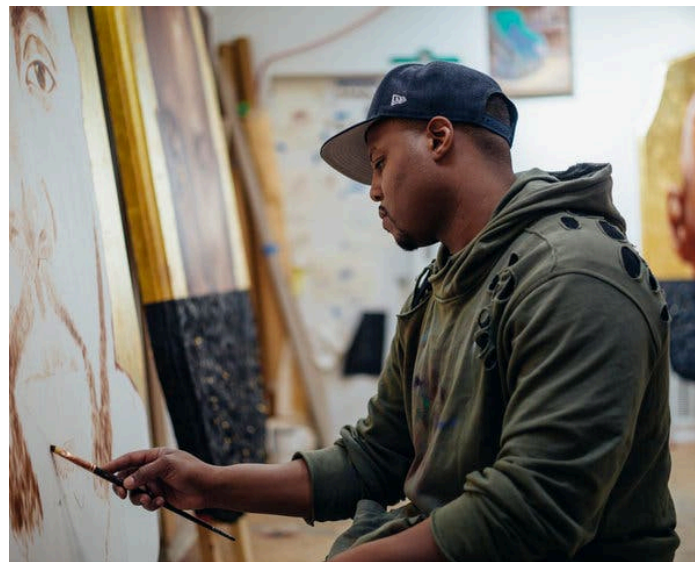
“Redaction,” Mr. Kaphar’s collaboration with the poet, lawyer and writer Reginald Dwayne Betts at MoMA PS1 through May 5, casts a critical and artistic eye on the human fallout of the cash bail system, in which poor defendants who have yet to be tried or convicted remain in jail.

“We’re redacting to reveal,” said Mr. Betts, who was tried as an adult for carjacking at age 16 and imprisoned. (He has since gotten his J.D. degree at Yale Law School and is pursuing a Ph.D. there.) Mr. Kaphar’s piercing etched portraits, intentionally blurred to obscure identities, appear behind hand-redacted poetry drawn from legal complaints filed by the nonprofit Civil Rights Corps, with the dark redacted lines resembling prison bars. The parting image is a large Jerome Project painting of Mr. Betts featuring flecks of gold-leaf shimmering in the tar.

“Titus’s work elicits a strong response,” said Sarah Suzuki, the curator. “He works from a place that’s very personal. But he also asks other people to connect their own experiences to it.”



Mr. Kaphar and Mr. Betts, "Untitled (from the "Redaction")," 2019, from a show at MoMa PS 1. Mr. Kaphar's etched portraits appear behind hand-redacted legal complaints filed by the Civil Rights Corps. The redacted lines resemble prison bars. © via Titus Kaphar Studio



Mr. Kaphar in his New Haven studio. © Sasha Arutyunova for The New York Times

In New Haven, the artist's unassuming backyard studio stands out for a maraschino cherry-red 1956 GMC pickup in the driveway. Moving here after two years in New York provided the breathing room to take risks like "The Vesper Project," a five-year effort that involved constructing a house in various states of decay to reflect a fictional character's mental meltdown.

Mr. Kaphar and his wife live about three blocks from NXTHVN with their sons, Savion, now 12, and Daven, 10; they selected the neighborhood “so the kids would be able to see reflections of themselves,” he said.

A blitzkrieg tour of some of the artist’s favorite haunts started with gelato by an artisanal confectioner, followed by a chaser of barbecued pork ribs. He is on a first-name basis with the guards at the Yale University Art Gallery, who “spend far more time with the paintings than the curators,” he said. The city (pop. 130,000) is intimate enough that kindred spirits bump into each other. Mr. Kaphar and Jason Price, a private equity professional who became NXTHVN’s co-founder, met when their boys requested a play date. He first encountered Mr. Betts at a dinner party where they argued about a book by Ta-Nehisi Coates.

The artist has established personal relationships with collectors who have since donated to the NXTHVN cause. “It’s very unusual for a collector to look beyond his or her own nose,” said Jock Reynolds, the recently retired longtime director of the Yale University Art Gallery, who has known Mr. Kaphar since he was a graduate student and is now on the art incubator’s board.

“He doesn’t openly solicit,” said Barbara Shuster, a New York philanthropist and collector. “Because of his personality and his earnestness,” she added, “you hear about what he’s creating and want to be a part of it.”

Mr. Kaphar and his team are well aware of the tripwire of gentrification. But they also know the negative effects of disinvestment in the Dixwell neighborhood, where the buildings sat vacant for years after being used as a depot for illegal counterfeit goods. They are currently owned by Mr. Kaphar and two friends, who originally intended a far more modest arrangement in which raw space would be leased to artists in the area. The group, which includes the sculptor Jonathan Brand, plans to transfer ownership to the nonprofit.

The plan to build NXTHVN in phases instead of a grand ribbon-cutting “is a gracious way to connect with the community,” Ms. Berke said. Her design opens the cafe, co-working and gallery space to the street, and apprentices will give tours of rotating exhibitions.

“New Haven has a rich African-American history, with a lot of economic depression,” said the poet Elizabeth Alexander, president of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the former chair of African-American studies at Yale. “Reactivating that history and legacy with art is very significant.”



Mr. Kaphar on the construction site of NXTHVN, which he founded with a team. "Because of his personality and his earnestness," said Barbara Shuster, a patron, "you hear what he's creating and want to be a part of it." © Sasha Arutyunova for The New York Times

THE PROJECT JOINS a number of urban artist-driven initiatives around the country, most notably Rick Lowe's pioneering Project Row Houses, which has transformed 39 structures within a five-block area of Houston's Third Ward. Mr. Lowe inspired the renowned artists Theaster Gates, whose Rebuild Foundation has bought and refurbished dozens of buildings on Chicago's South Side, and Mark Bradford, whose 20,000-square-foot Art + Practice campus in Leimert Park, Los Angeles, houses an education and employment program for foster youth, including paid internships in its contemporary art programs.

For most people starting an undertaking of this nature would be more than a full-time job. With forthcoming exhibitions Mr. Kaphar is trying to balance unfettered time in his studio with the caffeinated boost he gets from the young apprentices and fellows, for whom he is mentor, cheerleader, and critic in chief.

He would like young people from the neighborhood to "experience a Deborah Berke piece of architecture" and start thinking about space and light and the potential of art to transport someone over the threshold of difficult circumstances, as it did for him. "What I'm suggesting is that there is space for excellence and quality in our community — and I think we deserve it," he said.

Most mornings, you can find him at the local boxing club, Elephant in the Room, where his approach to the punching bag reflects his point of view. He tends to improvise his jabs. "It looks wrong but it works," his coach, Solomon Maye, said. "Titus sees something, and then sees beyond what he sees."