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‘It’s Not a Side Project, It’s Part of My Practice’: Artist Titus Kaphar Is Expanding His New Haven Nonprofit—With a Big Boost From Gagosian
The mega-gallery will provide financial backing and extensive programming for the New Haven art space that Kaphar started in 2015.

Nate Freeman



Founder of NXTHVN and artist Titus Kaphar Photo: John Dennis. Courtesy NXTHVN and Gagosian.

When Gagosian director Sam Orlofsky went to New Haven last year to visit the artist Titus Kaphar, the first stop wasn’t the artist’s studio, where he has established a practice of making large-scale paintings that engage with art history—paintings that have landed on the cover of *Time* magazine and earned him a MacArthur “Genius” grant. The first stop was NXTHVN, the nonprofit artist incubator (pronounced “Next Haven”) housed in former factory buildings in New Haven’s predominantly African American community of Dixwell that Kaphar co-founded in 2017.

“NXTHVN is my heart—it’s not a side project, it’s part of my practice,” Kaphar said by phone this weekend. “I was meeting with several galleries, and Sam got it immediately: We went to NXTHVN before we went to my studio.”

And now, a few months after Gagosian announced that Kaphar would be joining the mega-gallery’s roster, the artist and gallery have announced a series of initiatives for NXTHVN that mark a landmark commitment to the Kaphar’s nonprofit endeavor—and also a new level of community engagement for a gallery best known for blockbuster shows of blue-chip artists.

Gagosian will fully endow the NXTHVN apprenticeship program, which is currently in its second year, and currently includes six students from New Haven high schools that have predominantly African American and Latinx students. They work in paid apprenticeships where they shadow one of the NXTHVN studio fellows, absorbing every aspect of an artist's practice, working toward a future job in a creative field. Kaphar has aspirations to introduce the NXTHVN model in other cities, where Gagosian will continue to sponsor the program.



2020 NXTHVN high school apprentices. Photo: John Dennis. Courtesy NXTHVN and Gagosian.

In addition to endowing the apprentices, Gagosian will throw its weight behind a professional development program, where its top directors globally will go on virtual studio visits with the 2020 NXTHVN fellows, building on the nonprofit's extensive programming by offering a chance to chat with veterans of the gallery, who will touch on practical tips for the artists—including social media strategy and how to handle digital assets. There will also be a series of roundtable discussions with reps from various departments at the gallery: a talk about publishing and marketing; one about logistical operations such as installing a show and consigning works; and another about navigating art fairs and establishing a collector base.

Orlofsky, who was on the call with Kaphar, said that the different aspects of support for NXTHVN were in development for the past year, but required coming up with a new plan at the last minute once the pandemic caused global shutdowns. The gallery bootstrapped its artist spotlight program to help the many on the roster who are seeing their shows postponed, and Orlofsky said that the virtual studio visits and roundtables will provide that same kind of support, but for artists at the start of their careers.

“The artist fellows at NXTHVN have had their plans for the year severely compromised, so this feels like an opportunity to bridge the gap between what they would already be provided by NXTHVN and will continue until things go back to normal,” he said. “NXTHVN already has a program that doesn't need improving upon. We're here to provide a backup program in the meantime.”



2020 NXTHVN curatorial fellow Michelle Phuong Ting with her high school apprentice artwork. © Titus Kaphar. Photo: John Dennis. Courtesy NXTHVN and Gagosian.

Regardless of the shutdowns, Gagosian’s broad support of NXTHVN is the first time the gallery has gone full-borne into community engagement. When asked whether it has ever had a top-down partnership with a non-profit — one that involved more than a dozen of its top staff — Orlofsky took a long pause, and then said, “No — but we’ve never been in a relationship with someone like Titus before.”

“Awww look at *that!*” Kaphar said.

“Internally, at the gallery over the last 18 months we have ourselves recognized at the gallery a lack of diversity and inclusiveness and we’ve been feeling out ways to address that,” Orlofsky went on. “I visited Titus and saw that NXTHVN was already five steps ahead in terms of forming solutions to the problem.”

Orlofsky noted that he meant diversity on the gallery roster but also on its administrative side, where there’s even more of an institutional lack of people of color. The apprenticeship program aims to correct this imbalance by having teenagers work with artists in the same roles that Gagosian artist liaisons or dealers would work with artists, teaching them about the sorts of roles they could aspire to within the art world — implementing, as Orlofsky said, “structural change at a much earlier inflection point.”



NXTHVN's building located in the Dixwell neighborhood of New Haven, Connecticut. Photo: John Dennis. Courtesy NXTHVN and Gagosian.

“There’s much more of a problem on the administrative side of the art world than on the talent side—gallery rosters are more diverse than the gallery staff,” Orlofsky said. “That’s the reckoning that’s coming.”

“What Sam’s saying,” Kaphar went on, “in our community, the position of a gallery director, or curator, or marketing director — they are wholly unknown, they don’t know that’s a thing that exists in the world. So one of the things that Gagosian is doing is just coming in and saying, ‘This is a thing you can do.’”

The Gagosian NXTHVN collaboration begins this week. On Wednesday, a show will open in the gallery that’s just a part of the large campus in the Dixwell area of New Haven titled “Pleading Freedom,” which will feature new paintings by Kaphar as well as his “Redaction” series, which incorporate the poetry of Reginald Dwayne Betts. Gagosian is offering sales support.

But the gallery plans to stay involved well past 2020, and during that time, NXTHVN is set to expand significantly. It’s currently in the midst of an \$11 million construction plan at its 169 Henry Street headquarters in Dixwell, designed by Yale School of Architecture dean Deborah Burke. Eventually it will be an expansive space with dozens of studios, a shared workspace, a white cube gallery, a theater, and a cafe.

When I asked NXTHVN co-founder Jason Price, who Kaphar said was the resident business guru, about the logistics of expanding to other cities, Price said that “the design of the building is such that it is modular such that any component can work adjacent to projects in other cities,” but stressed that outside support is essential to achieving such an ambitious goal.

“When significant money flows in, we control how we put it to use, we create value for the artist curators, and find that considerable value accrues to the infrastructure and people in those low income neighborhoods,” Price said.

Kaphar elaborated on the subject, saying that “New Haven is like other cities in the country, it’s a classic deindustrialized town, it needs a lot to development in poor communities, the communities of colors.” He added that the next city could be St. Louis or Detroit.

Kaphar himself grew up in Michigan, attended San Diego State, and only got into the Yale school of art after getting rejected twice. Finally, once he was in, he had to play catchup against his better-connected colleagues. Then he bum-rushed Chelsea galleries to get a crash course in the New York art scene.

“I remember walking into Gagosian for the first time and thinking, ‘I can’t believe it, this place is incredible,’” Kaphar recalled. “Fast forward 15 years — this is going to require allies at every levels, and Gagosian is coming right at the right time.”