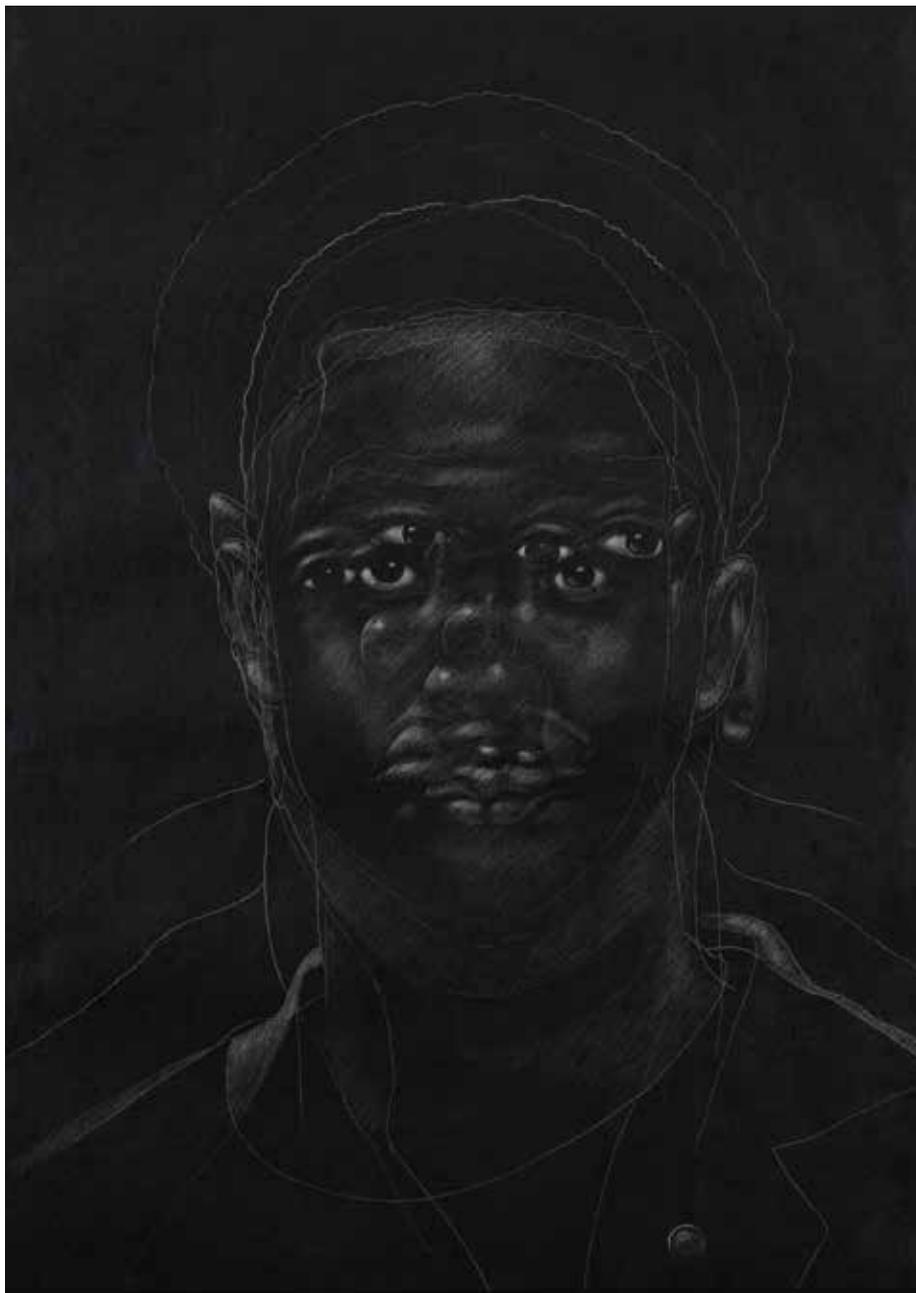


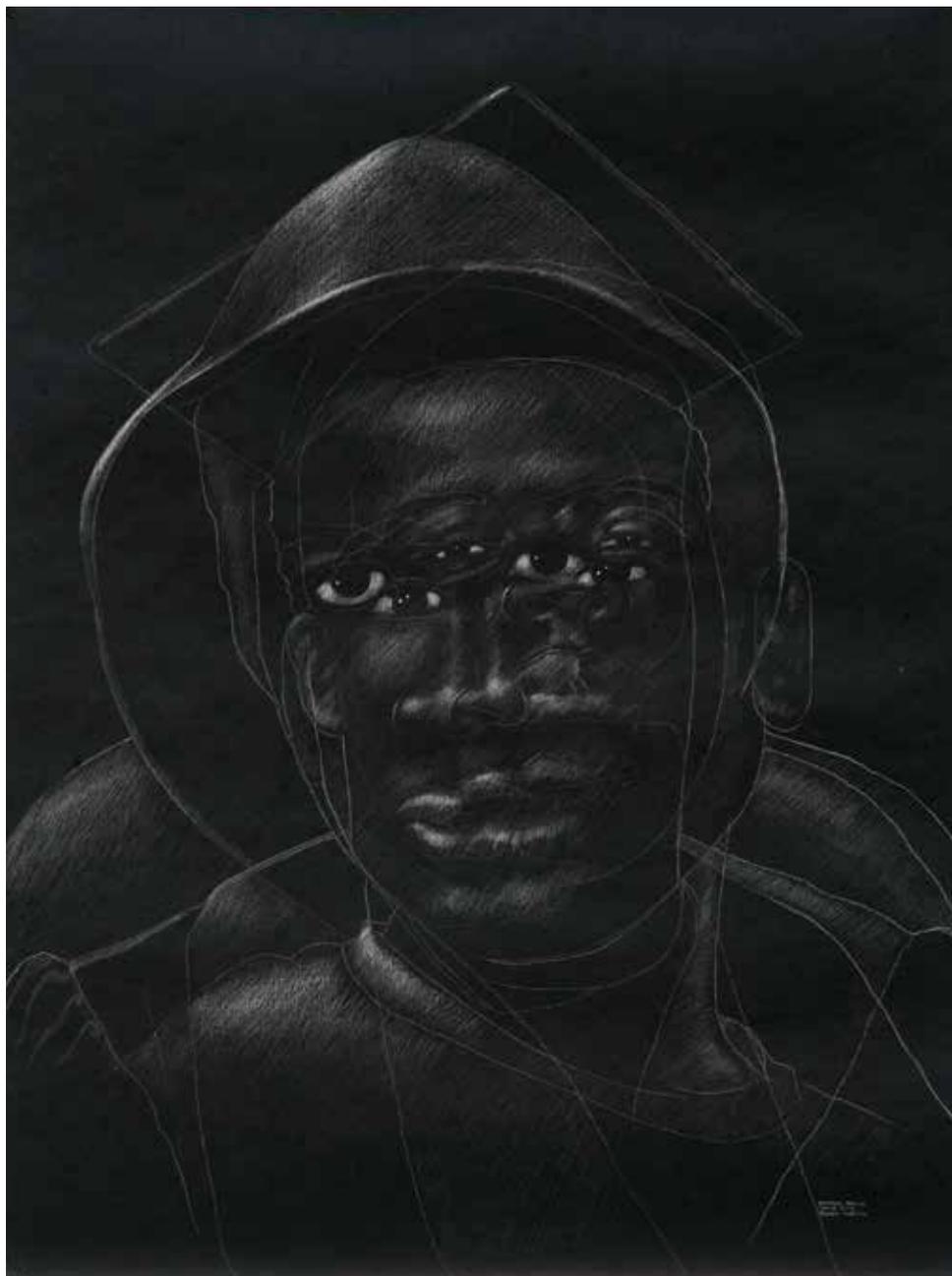
Titus Kaphar

Re'al Christian

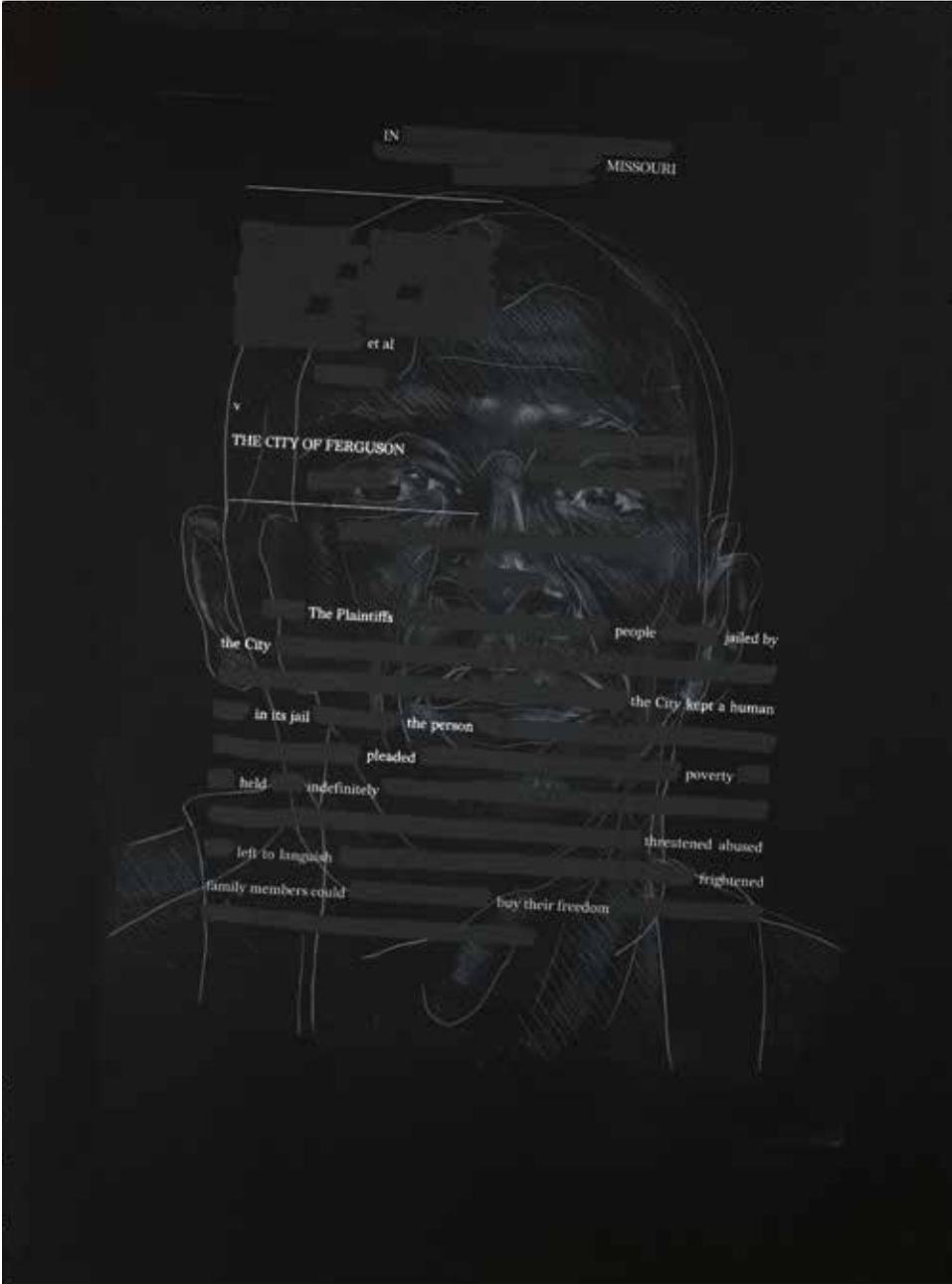
Titus Kaphar
The Jerome Project (Asphalt and Chalk) XV, 2015
Chalk on asphalt paper
49 × 36 inches
Museum of Modern Art,
Fund for the Twenty-First Century



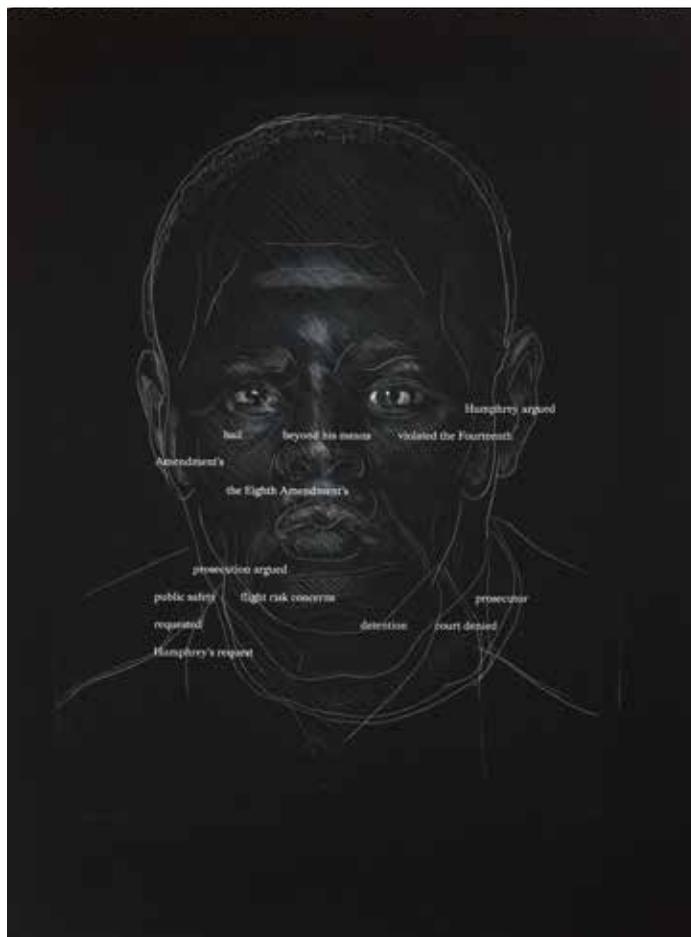
Titus Kaphar
The Jerome Project (Asphalt and Chalk) XI, 2015
Chalk on asphalt paper
48 ¼ × 36 ⅜ inches
Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, Maine,
Museum Purchase, Barbara Cooney Porter Fund



Titus Kaphar and Reginald Dwayne Betts
Redaction (In Missouri), 2020
Etching and silkscreen on paper
30 × 22 inches
Courtesy of the artists



Titus Kaphar and Reginald Dwayne Betts
Redaction (San Francisco), 2020
Etching and silkscreen on paper
30 × 22 inches each
Courtesy of the artists



Questioning historical images of Blackness has long been at the core of Titus Kaphar's practice. Kaphar made a relatively late start to his artistic career, completing his first painting at age twenty-seven while enrolled in an art history class where he was struck by the lack of representation of Black artists in his textbooks.¹ His ability to detect the aspects of our history that have not been addressed has directly influenced his practice. Through paintings, sculptures, drawings, prints, and installations, Kaphar resituates narratives lost from our national consciousness at the forefront of his portraits. Stylistically Kaphar exhibits traditional painting techniques, but he approaches his subject matter serially and through a critical historical lens. In doing so, he reclaims the stories of Black figures while extracting them from the periphery of art history.



Titus Kaphar. *Jerome I* from *The Jerome Project*, 2014. Oil, gold leaf, and tar on wood panel, 7 × 10 ½ inches.

Kaphar's early style was inspired by eighteenth- through twentieth-century European and American portrait painting. Early series such as *Visual Quotations* (2003-04) and *Conversation Between Paintings* (2006) replicate well-known neoclassical depictions of Black individuals as secondary or anonymous characters. In these series Kaphar makes copies of original paintings, removes the Black figures by cutting them from their canvases, and then integrates them into new scenes where they become the central figures. In recent years, his focus has shifted to contemporary social and political concerns of the African American community. His relationship with his estranged father, Jerome, led to *The Jerome Project* (2014). The project began with Kaphar discovering mugshots of ninety-nine Black men who shared his father's first and last name. Amid discussions about police brutality, violence inflicted upon bodies of color, and the overrepresentation of African Americans in the prison system, the artist examines individual narratives lost in the nation's rhetoric.

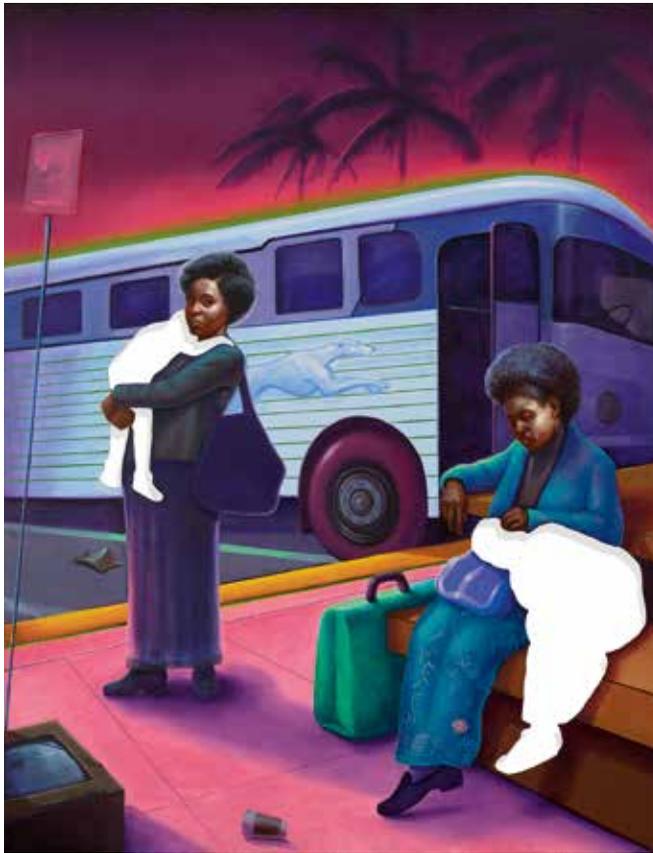
Kaphar returned to *The Jerome Project* with the *Asphalt and Chalk* series in 2014-15 (see pages 46-47). In a dramatic departure from the metallic, polychromatic portraits of the earlier works, *Asphalt and Chalk* is rendered monochromatically in white chalk on asphalt paper—made to recall chalk outlines of bodies at crime scenes.² Each drawing features three layered portraits, with the resulting image being an unidentifiable likeness of a man who has either been incarcerated or killed. Influenced by scholar Michelle Alexander's writing on the dehumanization of the prison industrial complex, *The Jerome Project* has far-reaching implications for Kaphar, both personal and public.

Although much of Kaphar's practice involves acts of erasure or visual disruption, he does not seek to erase history but rather to recontextualize it. In a 2017 TED Talk, Kaphar performed a live redaction of his copy of Dutch Golden Age painter Frans Hals's *Family Group in a Landscape* (1645-48).³ Kaphar's finished painting, *Shifting the Gaze* (2017) was the subject of a solo exhibition, *One: Titus Kaphar* at the Brooklyn Museum in 2019.⁴ As he covered each member of the titular family with translucent white paint, Kaphar pointed out the visual codes within the painting that elude to the family's status and patriarchal hierarchy. The one figure Kaphar left unobscured is a Black boy at the center of the composition, who is often unmentioned in descriptions of Hals's work. Kaphar challenges omissions of this nature by refocusing the viewers' gaze toward the boy, who becomes a symbol for figures that pervade historical paintings but have previously not been granted individual attention on the basis of race, gender, and class.

Another one of his ongoing projects, *Monumental Inversions* (2016-), addresses the heated discourse on national monuments. *Language of the Forgotten (Monumental Inversions)* (2018) features a sunken relief profile of Thomas Jefferson overlapped by an etched portrait of Sally Hemings, an enslaved woman



Titus Kaphar. *Shifting the Gaze*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 83 × 103 ¼ inches. Brooklyn Museum, William K. Jacobs Jr., Fund.



Titus Kaphar. *The distance between what we have and what we want*, 2019, part of *From a Tropical Space* (2019–). Oil on canvas, 108 × 84 ¼ inches.

who mothered Jefferson’s children—an association that was long denied. In interrupting Jefferson’s image, Kaphar shows both visible and invisible histories, reflecting on how the past can never be changed, but how it can be reinterpreted through the eyes of another. “It’s not enough to rename our buildings, tear down our statues, and deaccession the relics of our flawed past,” Kaphar has said. “The provision for amendment in the Constitution is integral to our national identity. It documents the mistakes of the past alongside revisions of an evolving present.”⁵

Kaphar’s work reflects how politicized bodies of color are often subjected to a more severe process of “translation” than their white counterparts—body language, clothing, and dialect all become objects of scrutiny. Kaphar grapples with what it means to live in an “untranslatable” body, and the injustice and trauma that manifests when that body is rendered silent. In 2014, Kaphar painted *Yet Another Fight for Remembrance* to commemorate the protesters in Ferguson, Missouri following the fatal shooting of Michael Brown; the painting was included in the 2014 *Time* “Person

of the Year” issue. In June 2020, Kaphar debuted *Analogous Colors* for the cover of *Time*’s issue “Time Special Report: Speak Their Names,” which reported on the nationwide protests over the death of George Floyd in May 2020 at the hands of the Minneapolis police (see page 63). Kaphar’s painting depicts a Black mother with her eyes closed cradling the ghostly silhouette of her child. She is surrounded by the names of thirty-five Black individuals who have lost their lives to violent policing and systemic racism. The names communicate a sense of collective, multigenerational loss.

Analogous Colors is part of a recent body of work, *From a Tropical Space* (2019–), which features similarly extracted figures of children from their mothers’ embraces. The subjects are shown in everyday, vibrantly colored settings, but there is an intensity in their expressions

that suggests fear and uncertainty for their safety. In these isolated landscapes, Kaphar communicates the psychological effects of trauma and grief in the Black community, while also suggesting that threats to Black life often hide in the most quotidian places.

Kaphar received his M.F.A. from the Yale University School of Art and his B.F.A. from San José State University. In 2015, Kaphar co-founded the multidisciplinary arts non-profit and residency program, NXTHVN (“Next Haven”), which provides professional development and mentorship for emerging artists and curators.⁶ Kaphar has been the recipient of numerous awards including the MacArthur Fellowship, the Rappaport Prize from the deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum, the Art for Justice Fund, the Robert Rauschenberg Artist as Activist Fellowship, the Creative Capital Award, and the Gwendolyn Knight and Jacob Lawrence Fellowship.

Kaphar has exhibited at the National Portrait Gallery, MoMA PS1, the Museum of Modern Art, the Seattle Art Museum, and the Studio Museum in Harlem. His work is included in the collections of Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, the Museum of Modern Art, Brooklyn Museum, the Studio Museum in Harlem, Yale University Art Gallery, Seattle Art Museum, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, and the Pérez Art Museum Miami, among others.

- 1 Annette Gordon-Reed and Titus Kaphar, interview by Krista Tippett, “Are We Actually Citizens Here?” On Being with Krista Tippett, June 29, 2017, <https://onbeing.org/series/podcast/>.
- 2 The Museum of Modern Art, “Titus Kaphar: Selections from Asphalt and Chalk,” accessed May 2020, <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/3705>.
- 3 Titus Kaphar, “Can art amend history?” filmed April 24, 2017 at TED2017 in Toronto, Canada, video, 12:44, https://www.ted.com/talks/titus_kaphar_can_art_amend_history?language=en#t-756468.
- 4 Brooklyn Museum, “One: Titus Kaphar,” June 21–October 13, 2019, accessed May 2020, https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/titus_kaphar.
- 5 Titus Kaphar, interview by Jason Stanley, *BOMB Magazine*, June 13, 2019, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/titus-kaphar/>.
- 6 Patricia Leigh Brown, “An Artist Rises, and Brings a Generation with Him,” *New York Times*, April 12, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/12/arts/design/yale-new-haven-titus-kaphar.html>.