

## Confronting the Present Through the Past

# INTO THE RABBIT HOLE

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BY THORSTEN ALBERTZ

“Do you want to know what it is?” begins one of the most memorable scenes in modern-day film history, as the sound of thunder dramatizes the miraculous choice offered by the spellbinding and mysterious protagonist, Morpheus, to his counterpart, Neo. That film is *The Matrix* (1999), and the choice is between a blue pill and a red pill—the blue guaranteeing blissful ignorance of unbearable truths, while the red opens up insight into hidden realities.

When I first cautiously stepped foot into a dark room in a house in New England that had been torn down and transported to a warehouse and reassembled to serve as an artist’s studio, I was not given the choice between a red and a blue pill. I was only handed the red one, by New Haven-based, Yale-trained artist Titus Kaphar. Kaphar told me convincingly how, on a visit to the Yale Art Gallery, he had encountered a man named Benjamin Vesper, whose ancestors lived in this Connecticut house in the late 19th century; how Vesper had made his family diaries and letters accessible, and subsequently how he—Kaphar—had uncovered fragments of a history of an apparent African-American family who—due to their fair skin color—had passed as white despite their African roots. Never was I given reason to doubt Kaphar. His interest in the matter made absolute sense, since his artistic practice always circled around African-American history.

Kaphar led me that day into an all-encompassing environment that he had supposedly re-created inside the walls of the dismantled house. He revealed the hardships of a family whose members lived in secrecy within the greater community, and the suffering that their secret inflicted on the Vesper family. That day, Kaphar had constructed a “matrix.” I was captured by the immediacy of the immersion into a narrative of a particular sociocultural reality in 19th-century America, which had been completely unknown to me.

Only when I was entirely submerged in this reality did Kaphar finally hand me a red pill and reveal that every detail—from the numerous diaries to the yellowed letters and original 19th-century family portrait photographs—were his own creations.

This loss of a reality check and its immediate efficacy, Kaphar’s time-machine if you will, had such a lasting effect on me that I knew I needed to bring Kaphar’s *The Vesper Project* (2012) to the Burger Collection—a global collection that in manifold ways promotes artists and artworks and initiates dialogues to create awareness of matters of cultural and historic significance.

Constantly questioning the role and responsibility of a private collection, the Burger Collection stresses art as a transformative agent, and as a catalyst for knowledge creation.

But just acquiring this multiroom installation and offering to lend it to museums and depicting it on a website was not enough for this demanding work of art. Instead, Titus Kaphar and the Burger Collection tirelessly engaged in conversation with curators, working to present the entire *Vesper Project* in a series of institutions in the United States. After its tour, the house will be divided into discrete segments that will be donated to the exhibiting institutions. The mandate accompanying these museum gifts from the Burger Collection is educational. Each institution that accepts a fragment of *The Vesper Project* will show it and create a program around it by inviting scholars, students and community members to participate in a dialogue about this fictional family, and consider its relevance to American history, African-American history, and the participants’ own histories.

Over the course of the next three years, the installation will be exhibited in four US institutions; in the New Britain Museum of American Art, where it is currently being shown, the Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center, the American University in Washington, DC, and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.

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## ART AND DISORDER AT THE NEW BRITAIN MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

What do art and disorder have in common? Do we have hidden family stories that weave among generations and even strangers? How do these apparent negatives add up to a positive at the New Britain Museum of American Art (NBMAA)? In the New/Now Cheney Gallery at NBMAA in Connecticut, New Haven-based artist Titus Kaphar is showing his installation, *The Vesper Project*, the story of a 19th-century mixed-race family who passed as white.

I first saw Kaphar's work in the NBMAA's Flora Humphrey and Bentley Gallery as an "Appropriation/Inspiration" series piece at the museum. Here the artist created *Jaavon and the Unknown Gentleman* (2011), based on *Gentleman with Attendant* (ca. 1785-88) by Ralph Earl. It interested me because Kaphar removed the identity of the "master" from his work and featured the "slave." The cut-out of the face made me want to investigate this work further.

Until I saw *The Vesper Project* in New York two years ago, I did not know the story of the Vesper family. At that time I enjoyed the project itself for its artistic creativity and genius. Kaphar's representation of the room hit close to home for me. The familiar objects—the typewriter, clock, toolbox, rebuilding, construction—brought back fond memories of my own childhood. However, the domestic peace was broken by closer observation. There is a crack in the wall; a damaged chair rests on its side; a filled trunk is tied and bound; a shattered mirror, part of a bureau perhaps, reflects the lies and deceptions of the Vesper family.

The unfolding of the stories of Benjamin Vesper and Titus Kaphar began to make me wonder. My own thoughts intervened, and I surmised that Vesper, who attacked a figure in one of Kaphar's paintings, and Kaphar, who was subsequently contacted by Vesper, are actually the same person. Both men had experienced lies and deception in their personal histories. They both fantasized about factual events. Vesper's destruction of his memory was as painful as Kaphar's construction of his artistic fiction in *The Vesper Project*.

This is the first time a project of this scale has come to the NBMAA. The museum faced the usual obstacles: time, space and money. However, with perseverance, and some luck, *The Vesper Project* was underwritten and is now installed and on view at a museum in New Britain, Connecticut.

I invite you to enter the space of *The Vesper Project*, engage with the architecture and structure; embrace the spirit of the piece, and create your own dialogue and story.

**HEATHER WHITEHOUSE**  
Associate Curator of Education

New Britain Museum of American Art, New Britain

All images are installation views from "Titus Kaphar: The Vesper Project" at the New Britain Museum of American Art, New Britain, Connecticut. All photos by John Urgo. © New Britain Museum of American Art, New Britain, Connecticut. Courtesy of Friedman Benda and the artist.

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## VESTIGE

What first drew me to Titus Kaphar’s *The Vesper Project* is what continues to make it resonate for me today: a haunting presence of lives, stories and losses that continue to reverberate, restlessly and insistently. I had known of Kaphar’s work prior to visiting the Friedman Benda gallery in 2013, but had not experienced it physically and spatially before that spring day. I thought I had a handle on his practice, but learned quickly that it could only be best appreciated in person, where the urgency of his materials and interventions confronts you, aggressive and elusive at once. I didn’t learn the full story behind the project until later, foregoing the media release in favor of feeling the work in a wordless but no less visceral arena. I may not fully comprehend the catharsis that *The Vesper Project* was (and is) for the artist, but I have no doubt that the emotional vestiges of his passage linger here, alive.

In the context of the Contemporary Arts Center (CAC) in Cincinnati, *The Vesper Project* lives as a provocative bridge between two distinct poles of our past. In 2014, the organization celebrates its 75th anniversary through unconventional means, eschewing archives and affirmation and highlighting memory as a creative challenge to the supposed impunity of history. In 2015, the CAC will mark the occasion of the 25th anniversary of Robert

Mapplethorpe’s landmark exhibition “The Perfect Moment” (and a legal victory over charges of obscenity) with exhibitions that explore classicism and transgression, the obfuscation of vision, and the tangled relationship between trauma and therapy. Kaphar’s *The Vesper Project* speaks to these conditions and sheds new light on their legacy—employing his own struggles with memory, history and hallucination. By physically excavating racial inequities sublimated in the aesthetic paradigms of art history, he forges a crucible so pointed that even the artist succumbed to its anachronistic disorientation. Kaphar’s subsequent navigation through this jagged terrain is as compelling as it is contingent, writing a renovated narrative that reformulates the history of every added houseguest.

**STEVEN MATIJCIO**  
Curator Lois & Richard Rosenthal Center  
for Contemporary Art

Contemporary Arts Center, Lois & Richard Rosenthal Center  
for Contemporary Art, Ohio



## THE VESPER PROJECT AT AMERICAN UNIVERSITY

Titus Kaphar's participation in the "2015 Kinetic: Conversations in Contemporary Art" at the American University introduces this important young artist to the art community of Washington, DC. Kaphar is the first artist from the "Kinetic" series to be exhibited in the American University Art Museum.

The "Kinetic" series, a collaboration between Dr. Darryl Atwell and the American University Studio Art Program, facilitates a critical dialogue between contemporary art and culture. The series brings significant, often emerging, voices together with local artists, art professionals, art supporters and art students to engage in timely cultural discussions. Kinetic artists emphasize content by discussing the concerns that inspire specific bodies of work.

The real memories and imagined narratives of a 19th-century family of mixed-race heritage assimilating into the dominant White culture is a metaphor for most of the American population. The great potential of *The Vesper Project* lies outside its particularity—Benjamin Vesper, the subject of the project, his psychotic break with reality and his subsequent obsession and search for the truth of his family's past. Kaphar's work explores how historical accounts and family myths weave the complex narrative of who we are.

*The Vesper Project* fits comfortably into our mission of inclusivity, research and social responsibility. American University values experiential education and the importance of creative practices in students' understanding of culture and history. Students are sensitive to the issues that are rooted in Kaphar's work; the complexity of the work will expand students' notions of shaping history.

American University's curriculum addresses the issues that Kaphar explores in *The Vesper Project*. The exhibition deepens conversations about the complexities of ethnic identity, politicized accounts of history, memory and cultural myths.

### ZOË CHARLTON

Associate Professor and Studio Art Program Director

American University, Katzen Center, Washington, DC

## INTERCONNECTIONS

Titus Kaphar's ambitious artwork is a convergence of personal memory and cultural memory, and how the two are affected by subjective experience. The installation is a physical manifestation of that ambiguous place where memory and interpretation intersect. How much of what we know about who we are and where we came from is embellished and invented (whether intentionally or not) inside us? The piece questions what is real and what has sprung from ripples in perception.

The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA) was the first museum and school of fine art in the United States. Since 1834, PAFA has educated African-Americans and fostered a close relationship with the black community in Philadelphia. Kaphar's ambitious and ever-changing piece relates closely to issues we explore in our school curriculum and exhibition program. We try to foster interaction between contemporary and historical American art to show how artists' concerns emerge within a shared cumulative history. It is critical that our audiences see how contemporary artists engage with the past and show the relevance of the past in the present.

Kaphar's *The Vesper Project* offers a way into these questions and meanings. Siting the piece within our 1876 Frank Furness and George Hewitt-designed historic landmark building will produce a dynamic tension between a vernacular ruin and an internationally renowned Victorian Gothic gem. Will the work appear as an apparition of memory and identity construction within the space? Or will its monumentality suddenly seem intimate and quiet, personal and accessible? We look forward to establishing a close relationship between the artist, the museum staff and our school, and to Kaphar's guidance on how we might bring our audience into the piece. The interactive aspect should evolve from conversations between him, us and the community.

### ROBERT COZZOLINO

Senior Curator and Curator of Modern Art

Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia

Heather Whitehouse, Associate Curator  
of Education  
New Britain Museum of American Art  
56 Lexington Street  
New Britain, Connecticut 06052, USA  
Exhibition dates:  
November 1, 2014 – February 22, 2015

Steven Matijcio, Curator Lois & Richard  
Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art  
Contemporary Arts Center  
Lois & Richard Rosenthal Center for  
Contemporary Art  
44 East 6th Street  
Cincinnati, Ohio 45202, USA  
Exhibition dates:  
May 15, 2015 – October 11, 2015

Zoë Charlton, Associate Professor and  
Studio Art Program Director  
American University, Katzen Arts Center  
4400 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, DC 20016, USA  
Exhibition dates:  
Fall 2015

Robert Cozzolino, Senior Curator and  
Curator of Modern Art  
Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts  
118 North Broad Street  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19102, USA  
Exhibition dates:  
January – April, 2016