Another Fight for Remembrance

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On a 60” x 48” canvas, New Haven artist, Titus Kaphar, takes a striking photo from the protests following the 2014 death of Michael Brown and makes it even more compelling using black outlines and bold brush strokes of white oil paint. In this monochromatic work, Kaphar changes a gripping photograph of young protesters with their hands raised over their heads, into a deeply disturbing commentary on race in our nation and the history we’ve been taught. The work, titled *Another Fight for Remembrance* (accession number 2015.132.1) hangs on the 3rd floor of the Yale University Art Gallery in downtown New Haven, Connecticut.

Born in 1976 Kalamazoo, Michigan, Kaphar discovered art while taking an art history class in the local community college. According to the artist, enrolling in school was part of an elaborate attempt to get an initial date with a woman named Julianne, who later became his wife and mother of his sons, Savion and Daven. Having taken the class, Kaphar discovered that he had a visual intelligence of which he was previously unaware. He could quickly recognize artists and techniques when his classmates were struggling. As his interest in art grew, he taught himself to paint by visiting galleries and museums. Kaphar went on to major in art, getting his bachelor’s in fine arts (BFA) from San Jose State University in 2001 and a master’s in fine arts (MFA) from Yale University in 2006.

Kaphar’s work is multidimensional. Both his paintings and sculptures make use of untraditional materials, techniques and subjects. Many of his paintings are torn or crumpled to call attention to subjects previously glossed over. Kaphar describes his work as “cuts, bends, sculptures and mixes of Classical and Renaissance painters, creating formal games and new tales between fiction and quotation.” Underlying all his work is a search for justice for both the living and the dead. He tells the story from the perspective of the unknown, the unheard, the unremembered.

The subject of this analysis, *Another Fight for Remembrance*, is quite large in scale, measuring 60” x 48”. This asymmetrical, monochromatic work is an oil on preprinted canvas, physically smooth but with an abundance of texture throughout the piece. The artist began with a photograph of the Ferguson protests, narrowed his focus, had it printed onto a canvas which he then stretched and used as a medium for this piece. The original photograph and the resulting painting are both overwhelmingly black and white, light and dark, positive and negative.

In the forefront of the painting are two young protesters, the focal point being the person on the right. With the artist’s liberal use of white paint, it becomes difficult to discern if they are male or female, even difficult to determine their race. Kaphar uses broad brush strokes to nearly erase them from existence, replacing them with outlines of black, reminding the viewer of where the subjects once stood. One of the most striking elements of the piece is the intensity of white, painted over the mouth of the focal point. That intensity is only repeated where the artist used it as a highlight.

In this painting we see all the elements we would expect to see in art and part of what makes this work outstanding is the artist’s ability to convey movement, intention, feeling, crowd size and depth with only white paint supplemented with black outlines. In the bodies of the two protestors, Kaphar uses stroke direction and color intensity to convey the shape and mass of bodies. Using a stronger intensity he both silences their protests and highlights their arms and hands. Still, working with only white paint, Kaphar again changes intensity and stroke direction to give us depth and uses the random rhythm seen in the background to give movement, suggesting lights, other people, even temperature. The hazy quality of the background is indicative of a sweltering summer night. It would have different rhythm and direction if this picture were of a winter scene. Direction of the strokes in the forefront give almost a frenzied quality to the picture suggesting the activity of a crowd. Kaphar’s use of value, particularly in highlighting, gives us the visual cue of a spotlight from the front and by changing the value and direction, indicates lights being directed at the back of the crowd. The artist varies intensity to emphasize the focal point and subordinate those behind. His careful placement of white and lack thereof, provide the negative space and depth to show individuals without having to outline them.

REACTIONS

**Anthony:** When I first laid eyes on the painting, *Another Fight for Remembrance,* I saw a depiction of the troubling times that we currently live in. The work depicts a march of black African Americans with their hands up, signifying the growing number of African American men being killed by law enforcement. This painting is a great representation of the culture in the 2000’s. The overall message that many of these African American men are killed while they have their hands are up and this is represented in the picture by the protester’s hands being up.

The painting’s main message to me, is that because of the color of their skin, African Americans are specifically targeted by law enforcement and victimized. The white to me signifies the racial dispute in our community that is continuously discussed. They never had a gun nor were they trying to cause any harm. The law enforcement officers in our community are there to protect us and help us in our time of need. In today’s world they are the people you must watch out for, people that in some ways, shouldn’t be trusted with a gun. There are good cops and there are bad cops, for the young men and women in this picture they will always have to watch their back.

Another aspect that appealed to me was when I looked closer at the painting I saw the outline of a phone in someone’s hand. This too signifies how all these acts of violence are recorded and yet it still seems to continue. It also implies to me how tough an officer’s job must be when put in these situations because they must make split-second decisions that will later be analyzed in hindsight.

**Sierra:** When initially seeing this painting, what caught my attention immediately was seeing the two African American men with their hands up in the air. I knew that their hands up in the air was associated with protests and movements that have been going on in recent years. After seeing that, it made me want to look further into the picture. I thought to myself “wow this artist is really trying to relay a message through his work.” One thing I loved is the fact that Kaphar uses a horizontal white line to cover their mouths to indicate that their voices are not being heard. I was impressed by this because it was such a simple, yet effective technique to get his point across.

Another part of the painting that I loved was the fact Kaphar uses random rhythm and diagonal brush strokes behind the men to represent motion going on in the back. It was nice that he does this because it lets his viewers know that there is background commotion. This painting triggered an emotional response due to the fact I have African American family, friends and loved ones. This painting sheds light on the reality of the challenges they may have faced or can possibly face.

**Myra:** Upon seeing *Another Fight for Remembrance* my senses perked up, finally, something I can relate to! The scene was familiar to me and yet there was so much left to be discovered about what the artist was saying. Initially the most striking part to me was the paint over the nose and mouths of the two protestors in front. Physically, I felt a gut reaction to be silenced and was also reminded of Eric Garner’s statement, “I can’t breathe.”

The protest scene reminded me of the 60’s. Though it showed no violence, I still felt a more militant stance. The body postures felt more upright and confrontational, the look in the eyes, more resolute. They were not marching in single file or a very orderly formation and that, compared to my memory of marches decades before spoke to me of a difference in attitude between the times.

In comparing the original photograph to the resulting painting, Kaphar’s intent to disturb became clear. I would almost like to see the two hung side-by-side in an exhibition. The problem, I believe, would be our human nature to turn away from that which makes us uncomfortable. The artist does not allow us that escape. Our inner disturbance is his message.

CONCLUSION

Titus Kaphar and his work, *Another Fight for Remembrance*, exemplify why art was one of the earliest forms and is still a cornerstone of human communication. With black lines and white paint, he offers us a frightening commentary on social issues and injustice in our time and in our history. Kaphar does not vilify or degrade great men, historic or current, he merely reminds us, “…evil requires only that good men to do nothing” and leaves us to examine our response.