Having borne witness to Muhammad Ali, one of the giant figures of the twentieth century, we employ pugilistic terminology to contextualize the work in Titus Kaphar: Knockout. Born in Kalamazoo, Michigan in 1976, Kaphar uses his art to encourage activism, transformation, and freedom. He challenges us to achieve self-liberation in new and self-affirming ways. Kaphar, received his BFA from San Jose State University in 2001, and MFA in 2006 from the Yale School of Art. He was awarded the prestigious MacArthur Foundation “genius” Fellowship in 2018. This is his first exhibition at an HBCU.

That Kaphar’s art is exhibited at Tuskegee University is not an accident. Instead, the presentation of Knockout at The Legacy Museum is a “homecoming” of sorts. In 1901, Yale University conferred an honorary doctorate degree on our first president, Booker T. Washington. On that day, Dr. Washington implored constituencies at Yale University to work more collaboratively with African Americans to improve the plight of everyone in America. During a June 2017 visit with students and mentors of the Alliance of HBCU Museums and Galleries at Yale University Art Gallery, Titus received a photograph of Booker T. Washington taken at Yale in 1901. The installation of Knockout is an extension of the stunning blows that Washington himself leveled against forces that opposed generations of African descendants coming “up from slavery.” The continuity in this linkage between Yale University and Tuskegee University that began in 1901 continues over 118 years later.

Kaphar’s art almost defies description. He is a shaman and polymath. His modes and media include prints, paintings, collages, and sculptures. He’s a man of many seasons. His painting Self Evidence (2011) of Muhammad Ali interrupting the founding fathers by standing on their documents is a sure knockout.

Kaphar’s art combines aspects of the downtrodden with majestic elements that cannot be put down. He conjures Maya Angelou’s inspirational phrase, “and still I rise.” This resilience is evident in the painting Another Fight for Remembrance (2014) which pays homage to the post-Ferguson, Missouri protests in the wake of the murder of Michael Brown. Like one of Ali’s victory knockouts, the black figures defiantly stand despite being whitewashed by the pall of white supremacy that oppresses us all. Kaphar captures the protesters, unarmed, with their hands and arms in the air, chanting “Hands up! Don’t shoot!” We can feel the excitement of the moment because Kaphar makes us feel like we are with the protesters. The painting reenacts the harassment, mayhem, and death that Black people have endured at the hands of police. He also depicts us from a place of empowerment in protest. If things are going to change for us in America, we’ve got to make them change.

We’ve got to do the work. We’ve got to go out in the streets and make our voices heard. (See, TIME MAGAZINE 2014 video of Kaphar creating this work.)

Kaphar considers images that “memorialize criminality” and transforms them into art that shares the tragedy of individuals held hostage in our criminal justice system. In The Jerome Project (2014–), he paints mugshots of incarcerated Black men named Jerome with rich gilded backgrounds because he believes in their divinity despite their criminal histories. Jock Reynolds, former director of the Yale University Art Gallery, suggests that we realize that their “humanity matters.”

In Asphalt and Chalk, 2014, Kaphar draws composite portraits of multiple Jeromes with chalk on asphalt paper. With images sourced from the same mugshot databases, subjects represent the recent dearth of black men and women whose lives were cut violently short at the hands of police officers and individuals motivated by unconscious racial bias. Kaphar layers the contours and features of each face; as each portrait begins to bleed into the next, the viewer becomes disoriented. This series seeks to visually articulate the collective inability to disentangle the lives of these men, one from the other, victims of institutional bias.

In Destiny II (2016) from a related series of paintings of incarcerated women called The Destiny Project (2016–), three figures...
Tradition can be understood as a pointer to that which is beyond tradition: the sacred. Then it functions not as a prison but as a lens.
—Marcus Borg

with locks, braids, and straight hair pulled back, form one blurred face with multiple sets of shifting eyes, mouths, ears, and noses. The images are shown against a vibrant blue background simulating the backdrop used behind the women when their mugshots were taken.

“I was attempting to take multiple Destiny’s and layer them one on top of the other,” says Kaphar. “Their different destinies have tragically come together in this horrific conclusion of jails and prisons.” He adds, “When I was thinking about the series, I was remembering women’s names: my cousins, friends, and family. Names that I knew in the African American community. All I remember is when I said it out loud—Destiny—the poetry of it wasn’t lost on me.”

In some works, Kaphar uses black tar that signifies the stereotyped imagery that paints us with one brush and stifles the truth of Black experiences. In other paintings, his figures are shredded or covered with pale layers of linseed oil to show how false representations of Black people have covered reality. In Behind the Myth of Benevolence (2014), a curtain is pulled, Oz-like, showing President Thomas Jefferson’s lover not as a winsome octoroon, but as a fully Black woman of West African heritage. In other works, there are similar images of naked enslaved women, juxtaposed with stunningly dressed 18th century heroes. Kaphar converts figures into puzzle pieces. He crumples portraits of white protagonists and isolates and elevates the representation of previously subordinate Blacks in the background making them more visible. In his revolutionary Voodoo, he turns history upside down. Kaphar is one of the frontline warriors in this battle against institutionalized white supremacy.

As Muhammad Ali was more than a prize fighting boxer, Kaphar is more than a painter. Ali, a quintessential American cultural icon, had bedrock convictions about religious faith and race. His quipping one liners and poetic verses about his skills, beauty, and beliefs made him fearless and powerful. When queried about the United States government attempting to jail him for draft-dodging, he said: “They did what they thought was right, and I did what I thought was right.” And after being convicted of draft-dodging in 1970, in one of his most famous lines, he said: “I am America. I am the part you won’t recognize. But get used to me. Black, confident, cocky, my name not yours. My religion, not yours; my goals, my own; get used to me.”

Like Ali, Kaphar has deeply felt convictions. His art is magical and mysterious and forms a mellifluous amalgam of African and African American culture. His paintings and sculpture deliver that same kind of Muhammad Ali one-two punch that has made global audiences pay attention. In his April 2017 TED talk Kaphar explains his modus operandi which is not dissimilar to that of Muhammad Ali.

Kaphar encourages us to venture into ourselves and reconsider the representation of Black figures in painting. Confronting themes that are critical to our survival, such as mass incarceration and police brutality, requires plunging into hurtful places. Kaphar pokes and prods us through his art to illuminate important ideas for viewers to consider and comprehend.

KNOCKOUT provides a critical and creative framework to understand the story of the 599 Black men and their families who were part of the longest non-therapeutic study in American medical history. Taken together these exhibitions demonstrate the need for education, flexibility, strength and resilience to survive in America. KNOCKOUT SHOUTS OUT: “WE MATTER”! TKO!

KNOCKOUT will be on view October 1, 2019 to March 30, 2020 at THE LEGACY MUSEUM.

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