



**Community
Engagement &
Education**

DISCUSSION GUIDE



SHUT UP AND PAINT

a film by Titus Kaphar and Alex Mallis

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SHUT UP AND PAINT

Painter Titus Kaphar uses film as a medium while grappling with an insatiable art market seeking to silence his activism.

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This guide is an invitation to dialogue. It is based on a belief in the power of human connection and designed for people who want to use *Shut Up and Paint* to engage family, friends, classmates, colleagues, and communities. In contrast to initiatives that foster debates in which participants try to convince others that they are right, this document envisions conversations undertaken in a spirit of openness in which people try to understand one another and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and listening actively.

The discussion prompts are intentionally crafted to help a wide range of audiences think more deeply about the issues in the film. Rather than attempting to address them all, choose one or two that best meet your needs and interests. And be sure to leave time to consider taking action. Planning next steps can help people leave the room feeling energized and optimistic, even in instances when conversations have been difficult.

For more detailed event planning and facilitation tips, visit <https://communitynetwork.amdoc.org/>.

KEY PARTICIPANTS

Titus Kaphar - American artist working in painting, sculpture, installation, and film questions how to remain authentic in an art market that is disinterested in the deeper messages of his work. Co-founder of NXTHVN, an organization based in New Haven, Connecticut, that supports the careers of the next generation of professional art talent.

Reginald Dwayne Betts - Poet, legal scholar, and collaborator with Titus Kaphar engages in conversations with Kaphar about his career.

Jason Stanley - Professor of philosophy at Yale University incorporates Titus Kaphar's work on mass incarceration into his classes.

Jason Price - Co-founder of NXTHVN and friend of Titus Kaphar.

Art Dealer - On the phone and in the gallery, an unidentified art dealer gives voice to an art market that values Titus Kaphar's work but encourages him to downplay his activist critique in order to sell more paintings.

Alex Mallis - Co-director of *Shut Up and Paint* talks about the challenges and opportunities that emerge when the subject of a documentary is also its co-director.

Shut Up and Paint is an excellent tool for outreach and will be of special interest to people who want to explore the following topics:

- Affirming and dignified representation of Black people in the art world
- Critique of White supremacy and institutional oppression in the art world
- Visual form versus conceptual content
- The limitations and opportunities of painting and film
- Critical representations of power and privilege and exploitation in art
- The artist's role in society and responsibility to their communities
- The artist as representative for their communities
- Economic class and mobility in the United States
- Art market commerce and artworks as financial instruments

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

MESSAGES AND IDEAS INTENDED TO TROUBLE

The artwork of Titus Kaphar consists of multidimensional paintings and sculptures that have been cut, crumpled, shrouded, shredded, stitched, tarred, twisted, bound, erased, broken, torn, and turned. Juxtaposing images that are charged in the racial context of the United States, Kaphar's work confronts viewers with painful legacies that are in danger of being obscured and forgotten. His monumental cutout paintings, such as those featured in *Shut Up and Paint*, depict Black women cradling children who have been physically removed from the canvases, exposing the walls behind the works.

Dignified and arresting, Kaphar's paintings are haunting representations of the women left behind after the traumatic loss of their children and loved ones. We can read Kaphar's work as connected to the U.S. history of institutionalized disappearances of Black children taken from their mothers, whether through chattel slavery, foster care systems, juvenile detention, or early death due to social and police violence.

In his 2014 collage paintings *Behind the Myth of Benevolence* and *Drawing the Blinds*, Kaphar layered portraits of President Thomas Jefferson and Congressman Thaddeus Stevens, respectively, with women of color in sensuous states of undress. Both men had intimate relationships with women of color at a moment in American history when mixed-race relationships were criminalized.

In a poetic interlude, Reginald Dwayne Betts highlights the miscommunication between the maker and the market, particularly in the case of a painter who aims to disrupt historic narratives. Kaphar's artworks not only confront the American image archive but also enrich it by revealing hidden connections among individuals, authority, and narratives that would otherwise remain obscured.

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Exclusion of Black Artists and Representation

Early in *Shut Up and Paint*, Titus Kaphar speaks with a gallery representative, only to be confronted with a disheartening truth. He discovers that museums are not lining up to acquire paintings from his major solo exhibition, *From a Tropical Space*. Kaphar, like many Black artists, has gained considerable attention, in part for his artwork's interrogation of narratives of American history and critiques of White supremacy. Ironically, the vocal activism that calls out structures of inequality has hindered his ability to sell his work.

This revelation sheds light on persistent challenges faced by Black American artists. Despite a perception that museums and the art market have become more inclusive of artists from marginalized communities, data reveals that not much has changed.

Astonishingly, the collective sales of artworks by Black artists between 2008 and 2022 amounted to only 3.6 billion dollars out of a staggering 186.9 billion dollars in auction sales in the art market. Notably, a single artist, the late Jean-Michel Basquiat, accounted for 2.6 billion dollars of that total.

These figures underscore the troubling complexities of economic systems and institutional racism that have historically led to the exploitation and exclusion of Black people. Artists like Titus Kaphar play a vital role in fostering a deeper understanding of our collective history. It is this conundrum that led Kaphar to turn to film so his message can travel beyond the exclusionary art world.

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THE DISTANCE BETWEEN MAKER AND MARKET

In the film, Titus Kaphar visits Yale University, where he earned his MFA, to talk with philosophy professor Jason Stanley about the conflicting emotions he's experiencing regarding the considerable and unexpected costs of his career success. Kaphar hoped that his artworks would be seen and appreciated by people who had life experiences similar to his, but to his dismay his works have largely become the private property of collectors and therefore out of view of his intended audience. Stanley informs him that his art has become "nonfungible tokens for billionaires."

Stanley's comment speaks to a troubling aspect of Kaphar's plight. Artworks sold in the high-end art market have become lucrative financial instruments in the investment portfolios of wealthy, often White, people. In many cases, artworks are valued as financial assets that will increase in value, rather than as works that convey critical messages to an

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audience. After one of Kaphar’s paintings sells at auction for 1.2 million dollars, he laments being excluded from a cut of the profit because it was sold in the secondary market. This model effectively means that through those resales, others are making a profit off of Kaphar’s work.

“People work their whole lives and don’t make that money,” Kaphar remarks while discussing the sale with his friend and NXTHVN co-founder, Jason Price. “My mother hasn’t seen a million dollars in her whole life.... The folks we grew up with, they don’t make that.” Kaphar makes paintings for and about the Black community, whose members continue to survive violence and dehumanization at the hands of the state and capitalist exploitation.

When asked why he started making films, Kaphar expresses that as he’s achieved greater success, his community has lost access to his work. However, through the medium of film, his art, messages, and ideas can travel anywhere. His yearning to make art that speaks to people who inspire him, understand where he’s come from, and grasp his experiences as a Black man in America has propelled him into filmmaking—and resulted in the creation of *Shut Up and Paint*.

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THE IMPORTANCE OF MENTORSHIP FOR ARTISTS FROM MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES

In *Shut Up and Paint*, we meet a few of Kaphar’s mentors and confidants. These people understand the importance of his work’s content and he turns to them for counsel. When talking with professor Jason Stanley at Yale, Kaphar admits to having been naïve in

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believing his work would reside in the community that inspires it. Stanley laughs, “You really thought that?”

Though Kaphar possesses masterful technical skill, talent, and conceptual power, we witness him struggling to navigate complex power dynamics within institutions that require mentorship. A heartening moment in the film highlights the significance of mentors for guidance and support when dealing with systems that are designed to be exclusive.

While an artist might have a mentor who supports their technical development, the ability to access art markets, audiences, and opportunities might require another mentor who has a nuanced understanding of these sociocultural power dynamics—namely, the way that race and class within the art market too often intersect to exclude young Black artists. Mentorship helps young artists develop clarity and power in their artistic voices; it also provides crucial guidance on how to know and navigate the structural barriers that exist in the art world. By fostering connections and providing guidance, a mentor can bolster an artist’s confidence and open the door to new opportunities.

STARTING THE CONVERSATION

Immediately after the film, you may want to give people a few quiet moments to reflect on what they have seen. You could pose a general question and give people some time to themselves to jot down or think about their answers before opening the discussion. Alternatively, you could ask participants to share their thoughts with a partner before starting a group discussion.

- Did this film challenge any of your beliefs about art, artists, and freedom of expression?
- Why do you think the film is called *Shut Up and Paint*?
- Can you describe a moment in the film that resonated with you? What was significant for you about this moment?
- When do you think this film was made? What is significant about this time in American history?
- Do you know of any artists in your community? What kind of art are they making and what is it about?

ART THAT MOVES

- How does Titus Kaphar's life experience inspire the paintings he creates?
- After seeing that one of his paintings sold for 1.2 million dollars in the secondary market, Kaphar laments that he will not get a cut of the sale and wonders, "Am I worth that?"
 - Reflect on his question *and* the content of his paintings. In what ways might an artist feel their own value is bound up in the work they create?
 - What are other ways we might determine value in things we create?
- Who determines the value of a piece of art?
- What sort of social and cultural factors influence the price of a piece of art?
- Had you seen Kaphar's work before watching this documentary? What role does the audience play in gaining access to the artwork of artists whose voices might be marginalized by museums and the art market?
- Can you recall and describe an artwork of Kaphar's that captured your attention? What do you think made it impactful?
- Where in your community can you admire and/or purchase artwork?
 - Are those places open to the community? In what ways is access to some of these places limited?

MENTORSHIP

- Who are some of the mentors and confidants with whom Titus talks throughout the film? How do they support him?
- Who are some of your mentors? In what ways have they impacted your life, for better or worse?
- What types of relationships can become mentor-style relationships?
- Where can we go to learn about artists whose important messages might not be supported by museums and wealthy collectors?

[NXTHVN](#) - Cofounded by Titus Kaphar, NXTHVN is a nonprofit that supports the careers of the next generation of artistic talent through intergenerational mentorship, cross-sector collaboration, and local engagement in New Haven, Connecticut.

[The Burns Halperin Report](#) - This report tracks data and reports on how well museums' programming reflects the communities they serve, as well as tracking data from the international art market.

CREDITS & ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**CALVIN STALVIG, DISCUSSION GUIDE AUTHOR**

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