

Titus Kaphar Behind the Myth of Benevolence

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January 9, 2022



In writing about the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's "Black American Portraits" I was captivated by Titus Kaphar *Behind the Myth of Benevolence* painting. In it, a Black woman peers out from behind what looks like a portrait of Thomas Jefferson that is "falling" off the picture plane. A striking image.

"Titus Kaphar *Behind the Myth of Benevolence* exposes, complicates and disrupts the notion, narrative and positionality of the so-called 'benevolent' founding father, Thomas Jefferson, our third president and author of the Declaration of Independence which articulated 'all men are created equal with an equal right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,' who owned more than 600 human beings," Christine Y. Kim, Curator, Contemporary Art, LACMA, told me. "The 'curtain' is simultaneously revealing and concealing Sally Hemings, a Black woman he owned whose six children he fathered, portrayed in a more stark and dark representation than other images of her.

Broadley, the exhibition reframes portraiture to center Black American subjects, sitters and spaces. Primarily drawn from the museum's permanent collection, "Black American Portraits, on view through April 17, 2021, features 140 works, including new acquisitions that will be on view for the first time.

Aside from Titus Kaphar Behind the *Myth of Benevolence*, artists featured in the exhibition include Jordan Casteel, Beauford Delaney, Kerry James Marshall, Archibald J. Motley Jr., Lorraine O'Grady, Augusta Savage, Amy Sherald, Mickalene Thomas, James Van Der Zee, Charles White, Kehinde Wiley, Deborah Willis and many more. In addition to work by artists of African descent, "Black American Portraits" includes several works by artists who are not of African descent but who have exemplified a thoughtfulness, sensitivity, and commitment to Black artists, communities, histories, and subjects, such as Edward Biberman, Bruce Davidson, rafa esparza, Shepard Fairey, Glenn Kaino, Alice Neel, Catherine Opie, and Betsy Graves Reynaud, among others.

Portraiture has provided a tool for generations of Black Americans to see themselves in their own eyes, countering a visual culture that often demonizes Blackness and fetishizes the spectacle of Black pain. "Black American Portraits" depicts Black figures in a range of mediums such as painting, drawing, prints, photography, sculpture, mixed media, and time-based media.

The exhibition spans over two centuries, with highlights including a late-18th-century portrait of a sailor, early studio photography, scenes from the Harlem Renaissance, portraits from the Civil Rights era and Black Power movement, and works exploring the politics of identity made from the 1990s to the present day.