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Intersection of Art and Capitalism: Challenging Dichotomy of Form and Message and Regaining
Artistic Autonomy

“I want to make paintings, I want to make sculptures that are honest, that wrestle with the struggles of our past but speak to the diversity and the advances of our present” (“Can Art Amend History” 11:12-11:30). A rising name in the art world, artist Titus Kaphar is widely known for pushing the boundaries of physicality to address sociopolitical issues and amend the history of representation of the African American subject (“Profile: Titus Kaphar”). Entering the realm of art by chance in his 20s after taking an art history class in junior college, Kaphar has since obtained an MFA from the Yale School of Art and received several prestigious awards (Trouillot). Transcending socioeconomic barriers to become an acclaimed artist, his professional career reads as the ideal American capitalist success dream. Yet, for Kaphar, this shiny veneer of fame means little in the face of its underlying implications. While increasingly priced out of the reach of his intended audience, his artworks are increasingly collected based on superficial financial motives. At the same time, capitalist ideals in the art market attempt to tone down his activism and stifle the messages behind his artworks for the sake of marketability. To navigate this state of professional crisis, Kaphar ventured into film, exploring its potential as a medium of art. Reflecting this exploration of artistic medium, the use of the terms “artists” and “artworks”

in this paper will reference a more inclusive definition of art, expanding beyond paintings and sculptures to encapsulate works of film.

Working with Alex Mallis, Kaphar co-directed *Shut Up and Paint*, a twenty-minute documentary released in 2022, that delves into the struggles of contemporary artists of color. Showing Kaphar in conversation with poet Reginald Dwayne Betts and other figures in the art community, *Shut Up and Paint* utilizes Kaphar's experiences as a vehicle for social commentary on the intersection of art and capitalism. Actively critiquing the erasure of artistic intent, particularly for artists of color, the documentary emphasizes the history underlying Kaphar's works by shifting focus onto his creative process while building pieces of cultural relevance. Utilizing a complex frame narrative, *Shut Up and Paint* challenges the commodification culture that facilitates the forced dichotomy of artworks' physical form and artistic message. Amidst rising recognition of African American art, this film illuminates and challenges the capitalist influence that contributes to the loss of agency and exploitation of Black artists.

Considering the recent resurgence in the Black Arts movement, *Shut Up and Paint's* social discourse on the condition of Black artists becomes critical. In 2020, the increase in momentum in the Black Lives Matter movement due to the George Floyd uprising sparked a desire for visible Black representation in the art world. In doing so, the Black Lives Matter movement created a "space for Black imagination and innovation" that translated to a revival in the Black Arts Movement (Banner 278). Stressing artistic autonomy, the Black Arts Movement was based around the empowerment of Black artists to enable the creation of artworks that spoke to "Black life and the Black experience" (275). The ideals of this movement are reflected in the art market, as the shift in focus has resulted in growing demand for the works of Black artists. In

light of this social climate, *Shut Up and Paint*'s scrutiny of the experiences of contemporary Black artists becomes increasingly relevant.

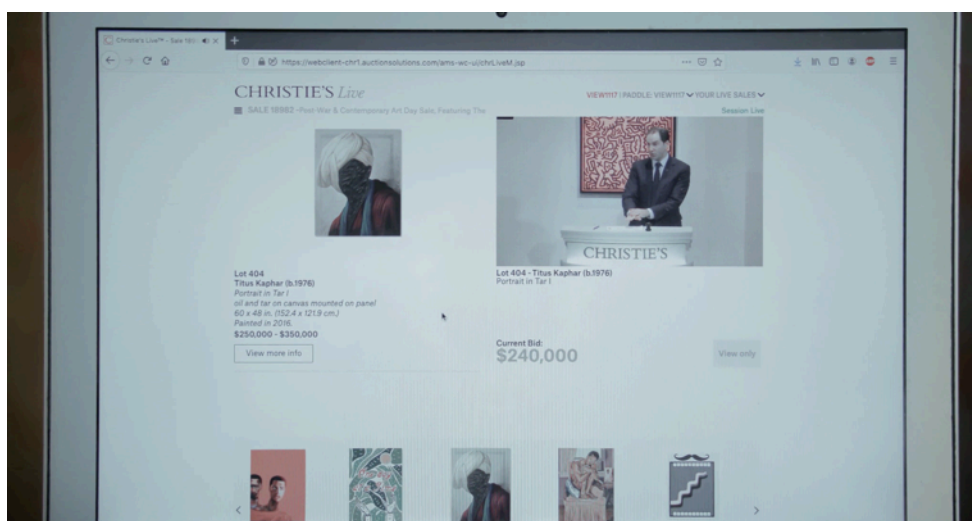
Adding another dimension to its cultural underpinnings, the documentary's title enhances its critique by alluding to a notable controversy in 2018. The phrase, "shut up and paint" speaks to an interview where NBA star LeBron James reflected on racism prevalent in politics while commenting on the challenges of "being Black and a public figure" (Sullivan). In response, Fox News host Laura Ingraham told him to "keep the political comments to [himself]" and "shut up and dribble" (Sullivan). In the face of this belittlement, LeBron held firm with the claim "we will not shut up and dribble" (Sullivan). The documentary's title references this perseverance in the face of systematic racism, as Kaphar resists pressures from the art market to stifle his activism, essentially telling him to "shut up and paint." With this title, the documentary speaks to a history of conditional inclusion where people of color are invited into predominantly white spaces while expected to abide by others' terms, speaking "only what they want [them] to speak" ("Screening" 2:45-2:53). This exploitative mindset holds origins in our economic structures; tracing back to the emergence of capitalism, this mutual reinforcement of "racialized exploitation and capital accumulation" has become known as "racial capitalism" (Laster Pirtle). Revealing how this social framework manifests in the art world, *Shut Up and Paint* confronts the racism that persists in professional spheres and undermines the autonomy of Black artists.

By disrupting traditional power dynamics on the film set, the documentary pushes back against this exploitation of artists of color, specifically addressing casual silencing and appropriation in film and the greater art industry. When approached by two producers interested in documenting his experiences, Kaphar initially declined multiple times before agreeing on the condition that he would act as both a director and producer of the film ("Screening"). By doing

so, Kaphar transcended existing norms in documentary history where “the subject and the director are two different people . . . with different degrees of agency” (“Q&A with co-Directors”). With the expertise of director Alex Mallis, Kaphar was able to achieve this unprecedented fusion of roles, preserving his voice in front of and behind the camera. In doing so, Kaphar opposes a troubling history within film and greater art industries where “story after story about Black people [are] told by white people” (“Screening” 45:53-46:02). Thus, Kaphar’s dual position reflects a greater endeavor to return original voices to narratives appropriated from people of color. His efforts to preserve the voices of people of color heighten the documentary’s critique of the distortion of narratives surrounding the artworks of artists of color. By literally directing the conversation in *Shut Up and Paint*, Kaphar actualizes its promotion of the preservation of artistic autonomy as he designs the message put forth by the documentary as well as the portrayal of his artworks introduced within the film. Taking control of his own narrative, Kaphar utilizes his unique position in the documentary to regain artistic agency, challenging capitalist frameworks that foster the exploitation of the artistic narratives of people of color.

To achieve the exposure of this capitalist presence in the art realm, *Shut Up and Paint* centers on the conflation of art and commodity. According to psychologist Tim Kasser, capitalist societies traditionally encourage value systems promoting financial success and elevated consumption. These systems are founded on the employment of commodities, products whose worth are determined by their exchange value (Patnaik). At first, art seems to defy this category due to its association with creative expression and originality. Yet, surrounded by the consumer culture innate to capitalist structures, artworks have been appraised based on their potential monetary worth. Examining the ways in which Kaphar’s works travel through the art market, *Shut Up and Paint* demonstrates how art has assumed the role of commodity. As Jason Stanley, a

philosophy professor from Yale, candidly remarks in the documentary, Kaphar's work has come to act as "non-fungible tokens for billionaires" (8:02-8:05). A non-fungible token, or NFT, is data that acts as a "digital certificate of ownership" for a certain asset (Nadini). With this comparison, Stanley explicitly equates Kaphar's artworks—pieces that function as culminations of personal and cultural history—to aesthetically pleasing financial investments. Even further, this remark reveals how his artworks have been reduced to symbols of wealth for an elite seeking to advertise their affluence. Showing how this perspective manifests in daily life, the documentary displays a computer screen with a single page open on the website *Christie's*, an



online bidding platform that allows users to view auctions in real time while placing bids on artworks and antiques ("Christie's"). This page presents an online auction of one of Kaphar's tar portraits, with an embedded live video of the auctioneer noting bids of customers reaching hundreds of thousands of dollars. Underneath a comparably small-scale image of the tar portrait, the price estimate and the words "Lot 404" and "Titus Kaphar" are bolded, as the artistic aspects of Kaphar's portrait become an afterthought to the promise of money and prestige that accompanies his acclaimed name. By purposefully focusing on a transaction in the secondary market, the documentary highlights how Kaphar's portrait was bought and resold with the intent

of making a profit. Using a dolly zoom onto the computer screen, the scene nudges viewers into a familiar perspective of consumers viewing a potential purchase. With an automated system to remotely place bids, this website resembles a high-end *eBay*, demonstrating how commercial culture has reduced the sale of Kaphar's artworks to an expensive form of online shopping. Illustrating how information on art consumption has been digitized, the documentary's close-up on this website demonstrates how artistic commodification has been integrated into modern society.

Communicating the significance of the advancing commodification of art, the documentary reveals its potential to disconnect the physical composition of artworks from their conceptual meaning and greater cultural value. According to Lisa Koegnigsberg, a widely recognized leader in visual culture, artworks that "may have had social or functional uses" are often viewed as "essentially aesthetic objects" following collection on the basis of financial investment. Evidence of this transformation in art appraisal is introduced early in the documentary through a phone call between Kaphar and a European gallerist. Asserting that some curators were uncomfortable with Kaphar's visibility as an activist, the art dealer advises him to "focus every interview given to your painting, to the work and not to the message" (2:54-2:59). His attempt to force the separation of cultural content and form aligns with ideas of aesthetic formalism: the theory that an artwork's value lies in its formal components or visual techniques such as color, composition, space or texture (Noaparast 102). In his attempt to blunt Kaphar's activism to increase his artworks' reception in museums on the basis of technique, this art dealer effectively disconnects the form of his artworks from the messages they were built to communicate. Displaying the nonchalant nature in which the gallerist put forth this perspective—even with the knowledge that their conversation was recorded—the documentary

exposes an implicit air of expectation that his advice be followed. Combined with the blend of familiarity and outrage in Kaphar's tone, this scene implies that this conversation is far from an isolated case, compelling viewers to imagine similar scenes playing out beyond the reach of the camera. In this way, *Shut Up and Paint* uses the gallerist's unsolicited advice to reflect a broader mindset deriving from the culture of commodification in the art world: the prioritization of formal aspects for the sake of increased consumption.

Considering the greater implications of this dichotomy of form and content, *Shut Up and Paint* reveals how this imposed separation contributes to the exploitation of artists of color. By dismissing context and greater non-perceptual qualities of artworks, this viewpoint disregards the potential for social and historical value beyond the surface aesthetic. For Kaphar, who approaches aesthetic beauty "as more of a Trojan horse" that opens "hearts to difficult conversations," this perspective is not only illogical but detrimental to his goals as an artist ("Can Beauty Open Our Hearts?"). A prominent example of this destructive impact becomes clear when revisiting the scene picturing the live auction on *Christie's*. Following the closeup on the auction website, the camera immediately moves across several of Kaphar's paintings, focusing on the faces of the individuals depicted. Yet, the auditory account of the auction continues even



after the visuals have moved on, as the auctioneer's voice continues noting bids, climbing above \$400,000. Finally fading away, the auctioneer's voice is replaced with an echo of the European

art dealer's words during his phone call: "If I buy a Titus Kaphar it's because I love the painting, rather than the message" (18:56-19:00). The bang of a gavel punctuates the end of this sentence as the auctioneer's voice returns to exclaim, "sold!" While the auditory fusion of the auction and the art dealer's phone call bolsters the correlation between artistic commodification and the separation of form and message, consideration of the accompanying visuals of Kaphar's artworks augments the implications of the scene. Contrasting the commercialized perspectives embodied by the auctioneer and the art dealer, the camera focuses on the faces in his paintings, recognizing the histories of the human beings that exist behind his artworks. In this way, the documentary provokes a discordant contradiction in visual and auditory stimulus, reflecting the conflict that manifests between artists of color and the art market. In stressing the histories of the people of color underlying these artworks, the visuals of this scene recognize the connections between Kaphar's artworks and Black culture and history. This emphasis on cultural value elevates in a later scene, as Kaphar superimposes etchings from oversized mugshots onto panes of glass.



Reflecting the unjust incarceration of people of color, these etchings question the systematic racism present in our justice system. Showing the piece at an intermediary stage, the scene reveals Kaphar in dialogue with collaborator Reginald Dwane Betts as they reflect on the families of these individuals as well as the themes of "justice" that are lost as these works travel through the art market. By stressing the ways in which Kaphar's works address generational

tragedies for people of color, these scenes reflect on the struggles experienced by many artists of color attempting to have genuine conversations on contemporary and historical events surrounding their community. For many Black artists, an environment that ignores content in favor of form translates to a devastating stifling of artistic message. Documenting how the art market selectively leverages talent of artists of color while denying artistic intention, *Shut Up and Paint* reveals how the culture of commercialization extends beyond artworks; the artists, themselves, are treated as commodities, reduced to the sum of their professional worth.

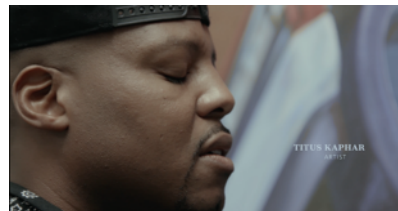
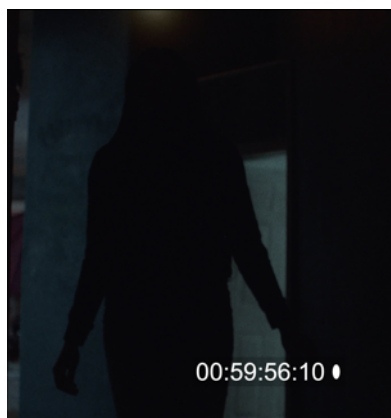
Upholding the principles of racial capitalism, the art market becomes a tool for the perpetuation of racial hierarchies in the workplace, simultaneously silencing and profiting off Black artists.

To challenge this culture of commodification, Kaphar emphasizes the importance of preserving artistic intent by shifting focus to the process behind the creation of his artworks. One way *Shut Up and Paint* achieves this transformation in perspective is through a multi-layered frame narrative. While providing insight into the creation of several of Kaphar's artworks, the documentary focuses heavily on one of Kaphar's upcoming films. Based on one of Kaphar's paintings from his body of work titled *From a Tropical Space*, this film depicts the fears and anxieties of Black motherhood. Tia, played by actress Tamika Pettway, is a young mother seen grappling with the loss of family as she faces her sister's death in the midst of her own crisis concerning her son's disappearance. Directly dropping viewers into this narrative, *Shut Up and Paint* opens with a clip from this film. As police sirens wail in the background, it shows Tia gaining consciousness on the floor while struggling to breathe. The camera focuses on her face



as she takes in her chaotic surroundings: overturned furniture, fallen lights and shattered glass – conveying escalating fear as she walks down a dimly lit hallway towards her sister’s room.

Interrupting this emotionally charged moment, a timestamp overlays this scene as viewers hear Kaphar’s voice: “Wait. Say that again. Say that again” (1:09-1:10). The timestamp reverses as the film rewinds a few seconds, and viewers see Tia continue walking while hearing Betts read from the script: “She screams her sister’s name” (1:10-1:13). In an overlap of diegetic and non-diegetic sound, Betts and Tia call “Sandy” in synchrony. Cutting to Kaphar’s studio, the



documentary shows how this scene was originally imagined as Kaphar and Betts review the script and brainstorm the details of Tia’s movement. At the end of the documentary, as credits are displayed in the right-bottom corner, the film continues where it left off. After Tia finds her sister's unresponsive body and picks up her infant niece in her arms, the camera shifts to a neighboring room where viewers see the painting that inspired this scene hanging on the

opposing wall. A smooth transition takes viewers from this moment within the film to an external view of Kaphar watching the same scene on the director's monitor while it is being



filmed. Presenting the audience with a direct view behind the scenes, *Shut Up and Paint* sheds light on artists' efforts to actualize their intentions and communicate meaning and emotions through their art. By blending clips of the finished film with scenes of the process behind its creation, *Shut Up and Paint* intertwines the display of Kaphar's film with his creative process. This unorthodox presentation blurs the line between process and artistic product, making it difficult to treat the two as separate entities. Thus, the complex frame narrative undermines impressions of a dualism between artistic intent and an artwork's finalized form. Instead, it presents artworks as inherently linked to the process and purpose behind their creation, such that attempts for individual consideration result in confusion. Challenging the forced disjunction between artists of color and their artworks, the non-linear narrative structure contributes to the critique of the erasure of artworks' greater social value. By emphasizing the connection between artwork and artistic process, *Shut Up and Paint* promotes the preservation of artistic intent, giving voice to artistic messages stifled within the art market.

After establishing the significance of artworks' intended message and purpose, it becomes evident why many artists are invested in ensuring these messages reach a genuine

audience. While acknowledging the value of museums as the traditional space to share artworks, Kaphar uses *Shut Up and Paint* to recognize the limitations of these spaces as he addresses the separation that exists between art institutions and his intended audience: “I’ve got family members that haven’t been to one of my exhibitions” (2:00-2:03). With these words Kaphar brings to light the distance that often forms between these institutions and the daily lives of the general public. The unfortunate reality is that there are many who avoid museums on the assumption there is nothing there for them (Briggs 98). Part of the issue resides in physical distance, as museums are typically placed in affluent areas, detached from many lower income neighborhoods. However, a larger source of this pattern can be found in cultural and societal norms. According to museologist Kevin Coffee, statistical data on museum attendance reveals that most museum goers tend to come from Euro-American ancestry and possess a college education. Preconceived notions of typical museum “goers” along with a history of racial exclusion in art institutions leaves a substantial psychological gap between these art institutions and communities of color. Kaphar’s venture into film begins to close this rift between his artworks and his intended audience. As a democratically accessible medium, film overcomes both geographic and psychological barriers. Through this transition, Kaphar breaks free of the institutional pressures of the art world by directly presenting his work to his viewers. Available to anyone with internet access, *Shut Up and Paint* redefines traditional notions of capitalist success, circumventing the art market and its propensity for commodification.

A continuation of this spirit of resistance can be found in the scenes centering on poet Reginald Dwayne Betts. As a collaborator in *Shut Up and Paint*, most of Betts’s scenes show him in dialogue with Kaphar, brainstorming ideas and discussing the implications of their pieces. However, there are a few scenes interspersed throughout the documentary where Betts is the sole

subject of the camera. In these close ups, Betts recites poetry addressing the experiences of contemporary Black artists and their struggles in the art world directly to the camera. By



breaking the fourth wall, this documentary disrupts the spectating role traditionally given to the audience, transforming a passive viewing into an interaction of active engagement. The combination of resonating phrases and eye contact creates a sense of connection that strips away viewers' detachment, heightening the impact of the critiques exposed in the documentary. In this way, the purposeful camera angles enable Betts' scenes to function as a kind of call to action. The transition in the role of the audience reflects a challenge to actively acknowledge the realities of the art market, rather than resign to a state of ambivalent observation.

In revealing the exploitative nature of capitalist influence in the art world, *Shut Up and Paint* effectively assumes a didactic role for artists of color. While warning of the risks of facing this environment with naive idealism, the documentary acts as a host for defiance, encouraging rising artists to challenge the pressures imposed by the art market. For Kaphar, *Shut Up and Paint* is only one aspect of his involvement in this larger social endeavor. As of 2016, he was one of the founders of NXTHVN, an Arts Incubator that “invests in young black and brown artists,” helping them “advance their career through education and access” (“About NXTHVN”). Based in Dixwell, New Haven, a historically Black community, this program breaks through the boundaries of the insular art world, bridging art and community with apprenticeship programs

and public exhibitions. In doing so, NXTHVN presents these artists with the tools to navigate the art market and actualize their professional dreams without sacrificing artistic intention. While assuming this incubator's essence of empowerment, *Shut Up and Paint* avoids oversimplified conclusions to the issues presented by capitalist forces in the art realm; neither accepting exploitation nor providing reductive solutions, the documentary instead acts as a tool for awareness and potential change. In addition to a critique of the art market's professional manipulation of artists of color, *Shut Up and Paint's* emphasis on resistance presents hope for a future where artists can preserve creative agency and thrive in this corrosive environment, thereby inverting the exploitative relationship between artist and market.

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