

Re-interpreting Art

By Jessie Moniz



American Artist Thomas Kaphar rethinking the European Collection at the Bermuda National Gallery.

A man entered the Bermuda National Gallery and attacked one of the paintings with a surgical knife during the opening of its latest exhibit.

Guests cried out in shock as the person went at what appeared to be a 248-year-old portrait of Thomas John Medlycott by renowned British artist Thomas Gainsborough.

Onlookers were later relieved and amused to learn that the slasher was American artist Titus Kaphar, and the work under attack was actually his own re-interpretation of Gainsborough's portrait.

Mr Kaphar was one of eight artists invited to show his work as part of the BNG's latest exhibit, Re-Interpreting the European Collection. The artists

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were asked to create work in response to art of their choice from the BNG's Decoding the European Collection Exhibition, which closed in June.

Participating artists in addition to Mr Kaphar were James Cooper, Louisa Flannery, Charlie Godet Thomas, Sunell Lombard, Lynn Morrell, Alan C Smith, and Sharon Wilson.

"Writer Freeman Tilden, whose definitive text 'Interpreting Our Heritage' (1957), established six principles for interpretation," said BNG director Lisa Howie. "He said: 'The chief aim of interpretation is not instruction rather provocation'. To this aim, these artists have repositioned the original artwork into the contemporary moment by providing another layer of meaning; they bring their own histories and perspectives to historical artworks that may well be far removed from their pasts. These artworks shape a new context for dialogue, using symbols, technology, collage and narratives, in order to provoke meaning making both about their own artwork and the original stimulus."

Mr Kaphar, 35, graduated with a Masters of Fine Arts from Yale University, School of Art and a Bachelor's of Fine Arts from San Jose State University. He was artist-in-residence at the Studio Museum Harlem in 2006, and more recently the recipient of the Gwendolyn Knight and Jacob Lawrence Fellowship. He is currently represented at the Friedman Benda Gallery, New York.

His work aims to encourage new questions about how family histories are told and who has the right to tell them. His paintings depict imagined symbolic acts of empowerment that never happened, but perhaps should have. Through layers of personal and national histories and iconic representations of truth, Mr Kaphar asks the viewer to become active producers of history.

"Although I did know what his intentions were, in terms of entering the gallery under character and intervening with his artwork, I wasn't sure when or exactly how he would do this," said Ms Howie. "It was a surprise to the audience. The finished work is as remarkable as the rest of Mr Kaphar's portfolio: stimulating, provocative, with many layers of meaning. By creating space in the artwork, he has opened wide new meanings for both his work and its stimulus, the original Gainsborough. The bottom line is you have to see it for yourself."

The exhibition also features a documentary by Milton Raposo, which adds another layer of meaning by exploring the artists' creative processes.

"This synergy of meaning moves away from a single, curatorial narrative," said Ms Howie. "By exploring multiple layers of meaning simultaneously this exhibition provokes the idea that meaning and truth are neither fixed nor finite."

The exhibition runs until May 2012.

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