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Space to Forget (oil on canvas) | 2014 | Titus Kaphar
© Titus Kaphar. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

MEMORY'S WEAVE

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Even as academic research into questions of memory has made significant advances in the past twenty years, one could be forgiven for thinking we had entered a phase of deep cultural amnesia. All over the world we witness the resurgence of forces bent on reversing all and any emancipatory achievements of the last couple of centuries, be it in the realm of politics, gender relations, racial questions, or even plain and simple science. Vocabularies long thought to have been exposed as fascist and totalitarian hit us on the face once again in all forms of media, from the most unreliable personal chat rooms in the internet to very established press outlets. Commenting in *The Guardian* recently, Owen Jones did not mince words when he bluntly stated that “When the history of the far-right revival is written, the judgement cast on the British media will be deservedly brutal” ([28 September, 2018](#)). Far from being something played on the media alone, the attempt to revert back to the darkest past as if there were no memory at all is repeatedly and tragically taken to the streets, be it in Charlottesville when Heather Heyer was killed on August 12, 2017; in Rio de Janeiro when Marielle Franco was assassinated on March 14 of this year; in Porto on 24 June, 2018, when Nicol Quinayas was brutally assaulted by a security guard; or in Chemnitz on 26 August, 2018, where violent clashes between far-right groups made all too clear how quickly the evils of the past seem to be forgotten. In the latter case, the swift and massive response by German citizens intent on reaffirming the integrity of their country was an important ray of hope that all may not yet be lost.

Another such ray of hope, and one that hopefully will reverberate and be felt outside of its immediate context, is the exhibition on “Afro-Atlantic (Hi)stories” that opened at the Museum of Modern Art of São Paulo (MASP) and the Institute Tomie Ohtake, on 29 June, 2018 and will run until 21 October. All in it is about memory and yet memory is scarcely ever mentioned in any of the descriptions or theoretical texts that have been included in the second volume of the accompanying catalogue. Under any circumstances this would be an impressive, not to say monumental exhibition that performs a variety of functions across different strata. On the one hand it is a massive education on the importance, significance, and reach of African and African diasporic art, as it is on the incommensurable suffering brought on by slavery and its consequences to today. On the other hand it is both a celebration of human achievement and a stark reminder that one cannot forget; that the past lives on; and that, in spite of all attempts to silence the oppressed, deny their humanity, or even erase them from History, their memory is a crucial link across generations: their past achievements endure and help inform and transform our present world.

The sheer number (over four hundred), range, and variety of artefacts assembled together, is remarkable. Although the majority comes from Brazil itself, many objects were also loaned from other institutions in a variety of countries, including the USA, Angola, and a number of European ones, with the noticeable exception of Portugal. Several reasons can be imagined for such a situation but it points out to another lack and that is the way in which Portugal itself has not yet managed to come to terms with its imperial and colonial past. In a sense, another function of the MASP/ITO exhibition – however unintentional it may be – is to raise the question of where in this discussion can, or should, Portugal be situated. Can one imagine such an exhibition being held in Portugal? When public opinion seems to be actively engaged with the possibility, desirability, perhaps inevitability, of creating a museum to celebrate (once more) the “discoveries” and Portugal’s contribution to European expansion, it would seem equally, if not more, pressing to discuss in concrete terms a museum that would celebrate all those people and those cultures with whom Portugal engaged, often with the direst consequences, throughout the centuries, and that enriched Portugal in all forms of ways. Until we can have that discussion, until we can achieve that recognition, a gaping absence remains that does not, and cannot, cease to haunt us all.

From the immense variety of art works on display at MASP and the Institute Tomie Ohtake, there is one in particular I would like to briefly consider: Titus Kaphar’s 2014 *Space to Forget*. It is a large, square, oil painting at 162,5 x 162,5 cm. It depicts what one could easily mistake for a surrealist scene: a black woman whose blue dress closely resembles the large sofa behind her, on all fours, looking at us. Sitting astride her we see, or rather do not see, the cutout figure of a child. The woman’s left hand holds an elongated cleaning brush even though both hand and arm are almost transparent, as if not really there, or blending even more than the dress with the house. This is a highly complex portrait, not just because of what it shows but also what it chose not to show. The image with which it primarily dialogues is a photograph from 1899 by the German-Brazilian photographer Jorge Henrique Papf. The 20 x 22cm black & white print shows a similar scene, except that there is no furniture – the photographer’s studio backdrop shows a tropical landscape – and the white child is clearly visible. One could say that by removing the white figure from his painting Kaphar renders it absent, annulling its centrality inherent in the charged racial politics that inform the original image and so many others like it. Yet, at the same time it also makes it excessively white as the blank void left in the scene stands in high contrast to the rest of the painting. One cannot but read this as a way of representing whiteness as always already a form of excess and an empty absence.

Stephanie Berzon in *Artslant* has noted the importance that confronting the past has in much of [Kaphar's work](#): “Kaphar gives form and authority not only to black men, but also to the women who have been objectified or erased altogether from the art historical canon. They surface through formal interruptions in the painting process—whether through a ripped opening in the canvas to expose an interracial love affair in *Falling from the Gaze* or camouflaging a woman with the green curtains behind her in *Lost in the Shadows*”. She further notes a similar effect in *Space to Forget*. The painting registers the charged racial violence inherent in the original photograph and forces us to concentrate our attention on the black woman, precisely the one figure which should have been invisible, furniture-like, in the original image. Obviously Kaphar’s painting would be an eloquent denunciation of racism even if seen in isolation and devoid of any context. Juxtaposed to Papf’s photograph, however, it assumes an important other layer as it serves as a way of remembering and witnessing slavery’s violence and cruelty all the way down to the most intimate and domestic spaces. It goes without saying that Kaphar’s painting, far from constituting any kind of memorial or reflection on History is much more a powerful instrument to channel the suffering and endurance from the past into our present. As such it is helpful to draw on at least one other of Kaphar’s paintings, also from 2014. Titled *Another Fight for Remembrance*, and over two meters tall (228.6 x 182.88 cm), it was commissioned by *Time Magazine* for a cover intended to commemorate the Ferguson Protesters, who had risen on the wake of the fatal shooting of an Afro-American teenager, 18-year old Michael Brown Jr., by a white policeman in Ferguson, Missouri, on 9 August, 2014. The painting shows the black protesters with their hands raised high up in the air, but one can only partly see them as the painting has been additionally covered in white paint for the most part. The technique allows a form of protecting the identity of those depicted, but above all, and this can be seen in conjunction with other works in the same series, it forces us to take into account the processes of deep and systematic invisibility that our society still today inflicts on a large majority of people. The whitewashing afforded by the extra layers of paint that veil but do not fully erase the figures calling for justice, becomes an equally powerful metaphor, comparable in all senses to the blank void left out by the cutout of the figure of the white child in *Space to Forget*. Indeed, the titles of both paintings can be read together as signifying complementary sides of the work of memory that remains crucial if one is to make sense of how our society still perpetuates the cruellest forms of inequality. The exhibition in São Paulo did not follow any form of chronology. Choosing, instead, to allow for the pairing of different items and creating a dialogue across time and space, the curators have enabled a more powerful way of learning from the past and of letting the memory of those remote voices and figures, even those who were meant to remain at the mere level of objects, if at all visible, assume their human dignity and speak eloquently to all of us in the present who can garner hope from their resistance.

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