

KIMATHI DONKOR

SELECTED REVIEWS, INTERVIEWS, FEATURES AND VIDEO

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Princess Politics - Women on top: Subverting subordination

Mary Corrigan | 15 September, 2015 00:13



SITTING PRETTY: 'When Shall We 3?' by Kimathi Donkor

When two Angolans stood in front of Kimathi Donkor's *Kombi Continua* (2010) on show at the 29th São Paulo Biennial, they gasped "It's our queen!"

"They recognised [the figure] was Princess Nzinga before they read the caption," said Donkor, sitting in an art studio next to Gallery Momo in Parktown North. It was a source of pride and delight for the British-born artist of Ghanaian, Anglo-Jewish and Jamaican extraction, as his paintings transplant the famous African princess into contemporary clothes and scenes.

In *Kombi Continua*, she is depicted riding on the back of a motorbike with an AK-47 in her hand. According to the famous story, when the princess met the Portuguese governor, he did not offer her a chair during negotiations, and placed a floor mat for her to sit on, which in Mbundu custom

was appropriate only for subordinates. Thus, to preserve dignity, Princess Nzinga sat on the back of one of her servants.

It was a pivotal moment in history that Donkor has represented in the present in the work *When Shall We 3?*

He's subverted the scene; instead of the Princess using one of her servants as a chair, she uses a white woman dressed in quasi-dominatrix gear.

The result is a highly contentious work, on show at *Some Clarity of Vision*, at Gallery Momo Johannesburg. It's bound to be a conversation starter, given South African's heightened interest in racial debates.

Said Donkor: "What interests me about South Africa is the interplay between the (different racial) groups and how race and gender is mediated via visuals. Not just by artists, but everyone, how we structure society through the visual."

Donkor is particularly fascinated by famous motifs, not only of Nzinga, first rendered by an Italian priest called Cavazzi, but all sorts of imagery such as Frans Post's landscapes of Brazil created during the colonial era, one of which is replicated in the background of *When Shall We 3?*

Donkor tends to gravitate towards images and figures presenting strong black women who led antislavery movements in America or challenged imperialism in Ghana and Jamaica.

"These women weren't overlooked, we know about them now because they have become folklore."

- *Some Clarity of Vision shows at Gallery Momo, Johannesburg, until October 10.*

Kimathi Donkor

Iniva, London, UK

'For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.' So said Audre Lorde, the black feminist writer, in a scathing speech to white feminists in New York in 1983. Nearly 30 years later, at a discussion at London's Rivington Place, her words were quoted by Nana Adusei-Poku from the University of the Arts, Zurich, to query the large, lush figurative paintings of Kimathi Donkor, the 47-year-old black British artist whose first major solo exhibition, 'Queens of the Undead', is currently at the gallery.

The two-part show offers a series of imaginary scenes featuring heroic figures from Africa and the diaspora, which span four centuries. First, the compelling portraits of four historic women. From 17th-century Angola, we are presented with three paintings – collectively titled *Scenes from the life of Njinga Mbandi* (2010) – of Queen Njinga of Matamba, a complex and skilled leader who fought Portuguese armies but also helped develop the local slave trade. In *Drama Queen*, she is shown wearing wedged stiletto shoes and talking into a mobile phone, her arresting image emphasized against blocks of bright paint. From the 19th century, Harriet Tubman, the African-American who was born into slavery but became a leading abolitionist, also appears in *Harriet Tubman en route to Canada* (2012) against vivid splashes of colour that seem to lift off the canvas in a shaft of light. In contrast, Jamaica's Nanny of the Maroons, who led several slave rebellions during the 18th century, and Ghana's Yaa Asantewaa, who headed the Ashanti uprising against British colonialism in 1900, are painted in such deep, dark oils as to conjure ghosts in, respectively, *Nanny's fifth act of mercy* and *Yaa Asantewaa inspecting the dispositions at Ejisu* (both 2012).

In the gallery's upstairs space, the second, smaller part of the exhibition focuses on more contemporary – and, to some, more familiar – scenes of British police brutality and racism. We see Stephen Lawrence, the black teenager who was murdered in 1993, and Joy Gardner, the Caribbean woman who died the same year after police raided her home. In *Johnny was borne aloft by Joy & Stephen* (2010) these two carry the body of Jean Charles de Menezes, the Brazilian who

About this review

Published on 19/11/12

By *Lara Pawson*



Kimathi Donkor, *Drama Queen*, 2010

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was shot dead by police in 2005. In *Madonna Metropolitan* (2005), Cynthia Jarrett, who also died during a police raid on her home in 1985, is staring out of the canvas – possibly dead, possibly still alive – while her kneeling daughter squares up to the priapic hand of a white policeman.

Striking for their overt political content, Donkor's paintings provoke an uncomfortable pleasure. This is partly due to his appropriation of European masterpieces, including William Hogarth's *The Bagnio* (1743) and Diego Velázquez's *The Surrender of Breda* (1634), which lend his own work an immediate, if enigmatic, familiarity. Inspired by Guy Debord's notion of *détournement*, Donkor's riff on classical art enables him to question – or, responding to Lorde, to dismantle – the myths and memories of European history from the Renaissance onwards.

However, Adusei-Poku's provocative observation that Donkor's paintings use 'the master's tools' may be tempered by a different perspective on art history. As the artist himself discovered at the British Museum's magnificent exhibition 'Kingdom of Ife: Sculptures from West Africa' (2010), figurative portraiture was not simply a European invention. It was in West Africa, between the 12th and 15th centuries, that these sculpted heads – not only of royalty, but of the sick and the poor too – were crafted so carefully. So why not place Donkor in a historical lineage that includes Ife, as the artist himself proposes? In doing so, we might start to consider more seriously the argument at the heart of 'Queens of the Undead': that Africans and the diaspora are perpetually being erased from history.

Lara Pawson

Frieze

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BLOUIN ARTINFO

REVIEW: Kimathi Donkor, "Queens of the Undead"



Courtesy the artist and Iniva

Kimathi Donkor, Drama Queen (Scenes from the life of Njinga Mbandi), 2010

by Coline Milliard, ARTINFO UK

Published: November 2, 2012

Kimathi Donkor is an enthusiastic cultural sampler. His large-scale figurative paintings — currently on show at **Iniva** — are genuine cornucopias of interwoven reference: to Western art, social and political events, and to the artist's own biography. But all share a common goal: the celebration and exposure of lesser-known, or shady, aspects of ancient and contemporary history, from great female leaders of Africa and the African diaspora to the harrowing "mistakes" of the **Metropolitan Police**.

Shown on the first floor, the self-portrait "Helping with Enquiries: 1984" (2005) can be read as a seed for most of Donkor's recent work, encompassing both his early political commitment and use of art historical sources. The canvas shows the artist, stark naked, beaten up by two uniformed officers at a police station. The real-life episode coincided with Donkor's first day at art school, and no doubt played a role in his progressive politicization in the second half of the 1980s. There's a palpable sense of immediacy in this image. The painter pictures himself his face half-turned, having just been slapped — almost, and disturbingly so, like Christ during the Flagellation.

The other pictures in this room constitute a strident attack on racist abuse of minorities in Britain. Donkor doesn't shy away from the theatrical. "Johnny was borne aloft by Joy & Stephen" (2012) represents **Jean Charles de Menezes**, the young man shot by police who mistook him for a terrorist in 2005, carried by victim of racist assault **Stephen Lawrence** and **Joy Gardner**, a Jamaican woman who died while being arrested to be deported. The painting's composition mirrors Caravaggio's "Entombment of Christ" (1602-3). The direct religious reference is again uncomfortable, but it is perfectly in keeping with Donkor's agenda. Christ is the most prominent embodiment of suffering in the Western tradition. The artist sets out to create icons of our time, contemporary monuments immortalizing those who are only ever shown as victims, if at all. Here they are presented as saints.

Donkor's series of paintings "Queens of the Undead," which forms the bulk of the exhibition, also pertains to icon-making. The subjects are four black female leaders considered national heroines in some parts of the world, barely known in others. One of them is the Queen **Njinga Mbandi**, who fought the invading Portuguese army in 17th century Angola. Donkor has dedicated three paintings to the life of Njinga, famous for her power and — according to her biographer, the Italian priest **Cavazzi** — her decadence. She is believed to have kept a harem of cross-dressed men at her disposal. In "Drama Queen (Scenes from the life of Njinga Mbandi)," (2010), the artist pictures a modern day Njinga, on the phone as if on important business, absent-mindedly stroking the head of one her husbands sitting at her feet (another self-portrait). Through a window, a crop from the background of Veronese's "The Family of Darius before Alexander" (1565-7) gestures towards Italian art made during Njinga's reign, materializing a lateral reading of history.

Donkor's fictional portrait gallery also comprises **Nanny**, an 18th century Maroon leader in Jamaica, the fierce **Harriet Tubman** who led black people to the slave-free Northern states and Canada, sometimes at gunpoint, and **Yaa Asantewaa**, the Ashanti queen who spearheaded the uprising against British colonialists in what is now Ghana. Compositions borrowed from **William Hogarth** and **Joshua Reynolds** are combined with Third World revolutions' iconography, contemporary fashion, and cinematic framings. Donkor's meticulous style verges at times on the pedagogical, but his message is as clear as the figures he depicts. In his hands, history painting regains some of its power as a tool of commentary on the present.

Kimathi Donkor: Queens of the Undead, September 13 – November 24, 2012, Iniva, London

MSAFROPOLITAN

History meets present-day in Queens of the Undead by Kimathi Donkor

By Minna Salami
Published on 26/9/12



Drama Queen (Scenes from the life of Njinga Mbandi), 2010

In my view, if Kimathi Donkor's painting of Queen Nanny of the Maroons was an antique, precious Tarot card, she would be 'The High Priestess', standing as a veil between life and death, her arms outstretched; one mercifully forgiving, the other holding a deadly sword, reminding us that when it comes to life, she both gives and takes...

To view the painting of Queen Nanny alongside five other dramatic large-scale paintings of African heroines (including 'Drama Queen' pictured above) who each helped define the modern world, and, who are revered as armed warrior women, Iniva at Rivington Place is showing a roughly two-month long exhibition of Kimathi Donkor's **Queens of the Undead**.

Queens of the Undead is a series of works exploring female power through the filters of modernity, history, legend and myth. Each painting is simultaneously a contemporary portrait, an exploration of art history and a resurrection of an historic female commander from Africa and the diaspora. In the works we find Queen Njinga Mbandi who led her

<http://www.msafropolitan.com/2012/09/kimathi-donkors-queens-of-the-undead.html>

armies against the Portuguese empire in Angola; Harriet Tubman, the underground railroad leader who freed dozens of slaves in the 1850s; Queen Nanny who led the Maroon guerrillas that fought the British in 1700s Jamaica; and in what is now Ghana, the 20th century anti-colonial commander-in-chief, Yaa Asantewa.

All four warrior-women portrayed in **Queens of the Undead**, quite possibly intentionally, remind me in a haunting way of how repetitive history can be. Warriors. Destroyers. Mothers. Desirable women. Feminine wrath, strength and acuteness all intertwined in captivating bold scenes. The paintings challenge - without compromising artistic sensibility and subtleness – our perceptions of historical accuracy. They cause me to observe the predicament that with the ebb and flow of time, not only are the same questions resurrected but their ineffective answers too. Does a woman's masculine side compromise her womanhood? Never. Does her feminine side compromise her humanity? Too often. Then why do we still inquire into our social existence so mindlessly? Ask otherwise, the paintings seem to urge. Re-memb(h)er.

“Until the philosophy which hold one race superior / And another / Inferior / Is finally / And permanently / Discredited / And abandoned / Everywhere is war / Me say war”

Bob Marley's words (and also Haile Selassie's) echo through my thoughts when I leave the exhibition. **Queens of the Undead** forces us to view, in a mesmerizing way, the persistent struggle for liberation by Africans, as well as the paralleled and obstinate historical battle against patriarchy by women.

Queens of the Undead runs until 24 November. Admission is free. For more, visit www.iniva.org

ARTFORUM

Kimathi Donkor

INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL VISUAL ARTS (INIVA)
 Rivington Place
 September 13–November 24

In “Queens of the Undead,” a two-part exhibition of large-scale oil paintings on linen, artist Kimathi Donkor pays homage to historical figures that represent both authority and victimhood in equal measure. In the first part, the works portray heroic black women through the ages. *When we shall 3?*, 2010, for example, is a portrait from the series “Scenes from the life of Njinga Mbandi,” 2010; it depicts a moment during a seventeenth-century meeting with the Portuguese governor João Correia de Sousa, when Mbandi, the queen of Angola, refused to accept a floor mat as a seat, instead summoning a servant to bend over and act as her chair. This, when seen alongside equally vivid works that depict female leaders liberating their people, such as *Harriet Tubman en route to Canada* and *Yaa Asantewaa inspecting the dispositions at Ejisu*, both 2012, evokes the freeing power of authority.



Kimathi Donkor, *Under Fire*, 2005, oil on linen, 47 1/2 x 71 1/2”.

In an interesting juxtaposition, however, the second part depicts the destruction that can be caused by the abuse of such authority. Donkor here presents images of the victims of police brutality in the UK, either in the precise moment of their death—as with *Madonna Metropolitan*, 2005—or in a symbolic and heavenly reunion of the victims, with *Johnny was borne aloft by Joy and Stephen*, 2010. Yet, despite the sense of grief emanating from these works, the wall text draws our attention to the changes that these tragedies have instigated; for example, the deplorable handling of Stephen Lawrence’s murder, which happened in 1993, led to the landmark exposure of pervasive institutional racism within the Metropolitan Police. These works are dedicated to, as Donkor notes, “the undead glory of charismatic black women.” That said, his images are so deeply poignant that the exhibition speaks not solely to issues of race but also to basic human issues of struggle and victory.

— Ashitha Nagesh

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Reports Published 05/12/12

Retelling history through art – an interview with Kimathi Donkor

by CAROLINE MENEZES

Kimathi Donkor is an artist with an appetite for historical research. Born in Bournemouth in 1965, Donkor moved to London in the 1980s to begin a Fine Art degree, and it was during this time that he learned in depth about the African Diaspora.

Due to his ancestry, he was already familiar with the narratives, but had not had the chance to discover more about them through formal education. Struck by life stories that have been disclosed to him, he has incorporated the biography of powerful female figures from Africa and its diaspora into the imaginary and colourful landscapes of his paintings. His artworks give these women a new chance for liberation. The women's untold histories are expressed through their portraits, bringing their characters to the viewers' attention, and thus informing the general public.

In his most recent exhibition *Queens of the Undead* at the Institute of International Visual Arts – Iniva, in London, Donkor presented four of these highly regarded heroic women: "Queen Njinga Mbandi who led her armies against the Portuguese empire in Angola; Harriet Tubman, the underground-railroad leader who freed 70 people from US slavery in the 1850s; Queen Nanny who led the Maroon guerillas in Jamaica that fought the British in the 1700s; and lastly in what is now Ghana, the 20th-century anti-colonial commander-in-chief, Yaa Asantewaa".¹ In the second part of the show, three large-scale earlier paintings were on display in which his primary source of artistic creation were contemporary facts of violent confrontations. The active discourse intended by his paintings articulates a hidden history, tales of the past and chronicles of suppressed voices.

Caroline Menezes: *Firstly a simple, obvious question: who are these people that you portrayed in *The Queens of the Undead*? How did you learn about them? What exactly do they represent to you? When did your sympathy and appreciation towards to them begin?*

Kimathi Donkor: I became aware of these historical characters when I was at Goldsmiths University in the 1980s. Partly it was just self-interest because I have family connections in Jamaica, Zambia, Nigeria and Ghana. Even though Britain had long standing ties to many of these countries, there was nothing in the British education system, particularly the art system, which spoke about this. Why is there no interest educationally in this part of British history? It is perhaps due to a sense of shame about Britain's involvement in slavery and I suppose what you might call an institutional racism. I became frustrated with this situation, so I took the opportunity of being in Brixton, where Goldsmiths used to be, to get involved in various community initiatives to learn about things which I couldn't learn at college. There was no funding, in fact we didn't want any funding, because it was the state's intervention which caused this lack of education in the first place. We wanted to remain independent. There was a very high level of engagement in the classes of the "Black History for Action" group. It was quite hard to get this kind of knowledge about black history in those days before the internet. Every session a member would be delegated to research the biography of a person or cultural, political, historical subjects, and then we would discuss it. It was a proper seminar. This is where I would have first come across many of these historical black female characters.



Kimathi Donkor.

Click on the picture below to enlarge



CM: *And was it at that moment that you started to bring the historical figures to your paintings or was it later on?*

KD: No, I still didn't feel confident that I wanted to make such a strong relationship between my painting and historical figures. At that stage I was more interested in the people who were involved in what was happening in London at that time, in the 1980s. These other historical figures were running around in my thoughts for about 15 years and then in 2000 I was doing a tour of the Egyptian tombs. Egypt is a long way away isn't it? I suppose being back in Africa and seeing this ancient art in which the painters didn't have any inhibition in being engaged, in thinking about their society and this relationship to death, rebirth and bringing the dead back to life, the antiquity of it; I thought that I really needed to think about what I was doing. When I came back to England I immediately started working with this vision. At first I started a historical series about the Haitian revolution, my first series of paintings about historical characters. Before the experience of being in these Egyptian tombs, looking at these magnificent artworks, I wanted to create something more contemporary. I had become involved in the community and political activism, so for my graduation show in 1987 I created drawings related to London's political history at that time.

CM: *Once you learned more about black history and were politically active, when you brought that into the art school, was this easily received there?*

KD: I couldn't conjure up this kind of engagement with society at the university library. This kind of understanding was not in the academy. I had a really supportive tutor, Professor Sarat Maharaj, but unfortunately a lot of the college authorities found it difficult to understand that I needed to immerse myself in this community environment. Remember: I had been living mostly in rural England, and to come into the London urban struggle was something very new and I needed to immerse myself in it, in order to be able to make art. So, no, it was a difficult relationship.

CM: *But do you feel that maybe nowadays things are different?*

KD: I have just been involved in the Shades of Noir project which is at the University of Arts London and addresses this question of attainment gap, the way that black and white students are given different grades and why this might be. I speak to young black students male and female, they all seem to be telling me a very similar story to what I experienced. I don't want to hear this. I want to hear that the system is improving, that the curriculum is being broadened out, that the success of people like Steve McQueen and other black artists whose work also have a political nature has made some difference. You would think that this would have changed, but it doesn't seem to have, it's kind of a shock.

CM: *Maybe by works like yours and these other artists such as John Akomfrah's and Theaster Gates² that are bringing back a narrative that was unexposed up to now, maybe people will be more aware of this concealed history. How do you see the impact of displaying a history that was invisible as an artistic expression in a painting? Does it have an impact on the way that someone learns about history or would this kind of artistic manifestation just impact the way that you experience art?*

KD: I think it does both, many people are very glad to be able to see art that has a strong social and ethical awareness. I respect the viewer who goes to the gallery and wants to experience something that is uplifting or disturbing, that engages them intellectually. I am not just trying to put them into a dreamlike reverie. If you look at my paintings, they have got a very complex psychological and even spiritual element. I don't think of them as being easy to read, they are difficult images, in a sort of surrealism sense. The answer to your question is that you can have an engagement with history; it is a necessary and valuable contribution to art and vice versa. For example, with



necessary and valuable contribution to art, and vice-versa. For example, with the painting *Nanny's Fifth Act of Mercy* (2012) I took the composition from Joshua Reynolds's portrait of *Jane Fleming, later Countess of Harrington* (1778), who was an aristocrat whose family was involved with enslaving people in the plantations in Jamaica, brutal exploiters. I made her portrait into the figure of her arch-enemy Queen Nanny of the Maroons. Jane Fleming's family was involved in the oppression of Jamaica and the painter Reynolds who was one of the founders of the Royal Academy of the Arts in England took her money to finance his studio. I have inhabited Fleming's body with the body of a contemporary young British Nigerian woman who poses as a model for Nanny. It is something which you can just do through art. Art can do something a bit magical with history, the two things aren't separate. All artists work with history anyway and with the history of art. Whenever artists make a work, they are entering into the stream of our history.

CM: *All artists have a visual repertoire that is going to provide them with the skills to create something as well.*

KD: Absolutely, all I'm doing is really just slightly extending that notion beyond the false enclosure, just extending it into the ethical questions that this art history produces. In California, at the Huntington Library where the portrait of Jane Fleming is now hung, it just mentions that her mother married into what they call a West Indian plantation family. That is just a euphemism for repression, West Indian plantation to me were places of death. The average life expectancy of the African slaves in the Caribbean territory was 10 years. It was a brutal system. And then we go into our museums to see all these lovely paintings, no one can deny the grace and the elegance of Joshua Reynolds's paintings. The beauty of the painting which we worship but cannot see that there is so much suffering involved in its creation. It is not about condemning this art, but to somehow question it.

CM: *I was going to ask you why you had chosen to compose in a European white style but I think that you have already answered that. Could you explain a bit more about this system of re-interpretation?*

KD: Every painting in *Queens of the Undead* contains a clear visual quotation or appropriation of the work of a contemporary of the figure who is portrayed. So, Nanny is born in the late 17th century, she dies in the mid-18th century, therefore Reynolds is one of her contemporaries. Veronese, Velazquez and Franz Post, they were contemporaries of Queen Njinga Mbandi, there are these collisions between people who have never met but who could have met, it is a fantasy. If Veronese had known Mbandi what might he have done? For example, the composition of *Harriett Tubman en Route to Canada* (2012) is taken from a pre-Raphaelite painting by Henry Bowler, *The Doubt 'Can these dry bones live?'* (1855) where there is this woman leaning on a gravestone, looking down at a newly dug grave, the sunlight is pouring, trees, there is a lot of leaves and it is summer. Now when you see that scene with Harriett Tubman, it is winter, snow on the ground, the leaves have all gone, and trees have turned into telegraph poles. We are in the United States, heading towards Canada, but in the industrial revolution, the new age of telecommunications. Henry Bowler's pre-Raphaelite finely observed painting is an allegory, there is a church, a bit of human construction, but there is a lot about nature, the beauty of sunlight. My painting is much more about a harsh nature and the human construction is a telegraph pole. Every time Harriett Tubman goes back to the south, to the slave area, she frees people, she leads them on these journeys north, to Canada, which is very wintry place. She dictates this landscape by her life. For the setting of the figures, I kind of allow the figures, if you like, to determine that, but at the same time, the artwork from where I have taken the composition also helps.

CM: *We learn about the characters, we see the names, read about their histories, however the landscape, the background of your paintings is always*

very surreal as you mentioned before, heavy white snow, a red dessert, why do you choose a kind of scenery that is always very dubious?

KD: Part of it is just purely the joy of being able to have an overwhelming colour experience and to just abandon the constraints of naturalism. Then, it is about giving the viewer the opportunity to seriously question what is being presented. There are all these disruptions about place and time, there is a constant sort of jumping in the work, between today and yesterday, between here and there, there is this disorientating sense and I find it hard to not do it.

CM: *In Carol Tulloch's text there is a statement of yours saying that "I'm interested in the representation of memory, identity and agency".³ Could you develop this notion of agency for me? What exactly do you mean?*

KD: Agency is the ability of people to shape their own life, destiny, to be the agents of their own change, that makes all the figures of the Queens of the Undead particularly outstanding. We are getting into the Nietzsche's notion of the will to power. I'm not going to say I'm for or against it, but he said that what makes people tick isn't the will to reproduce, it is about power. I think he is really thinking about power over others. In Nietzsche's philosophy superman is basically a slave owner. For instance, Yaa Asantewaa was a member of the Ghanian royalty and by the dawn of the 20th century the country which she was from, Ashanti, had fought three wars against Britain. They won the first two and lost the third. The British came all the way to the capital city, Kamasi, and burnt it down. They took the king of Ashanti as prisoner. It was a disaster and Yaa Asantewaa just decided she would not accept this. The accounts tell that she gathered the aristocracy of Ashanti and said they were supposed to be the great warriors. So, she galvanised the nobility to make this campaign against Britain and was personally the leader of the armies. It was the first war of the 20th century. Britain was this mighty industrial power which could bring steel ships to Ashanti, and Ashanti just basically had rifles. Yaa Asantewaa had this sense of agency, she tried to liberate her nation from this foreign power at any cost.

CM: *Yes but it is difficult to talk about agency in that sense when you talk about slavery, because people were not allowed to recognise themselves as agents, as people with a will, that can do things.*

KD: You are right and that is an interesting thing about all of these different women. You have some of them like Mbandi, and Asantewaa who were monarchs, they really were literally queens, and then you have people like Nanny and Harriet Tubman who were from the exact opposite end of society, and probably would have been despised by the other two. There are two quite different groups of women, in that sense, from very different classes and backgrounds, but what draws them together is this sense of agency. People like Harriett who was told, over and over again, in her life that she and her family were nothing, that they had no power over their lives and that they were just the property of these so called masters. On account of race, because she was black, because she was African, on the account of class, because she was a slave, on the account of being a woman, because women were accorded a secondary status in American society at that time. So, she overturned all of that and said no: I don't accept any of that, I don't accept that I'm racially inferior, I don't accept that I can't be a dynamic active person in society. I think she's a very inspiring kind of person in that sense and I don't necessarily understand how it happens. I think this notion of agency whereby people who might be under the most terrible circumstances just make a decision to change, is what we do every day on a tiny little level.

References

1. This brief description is found on the Iniva website: <http://www.iniva.org>. Nanny (born 1686-c.1745); Harriet Tubman (1822-1923); Yaa Asantewaa (c1840-1921) Mbandi (c1583-1663).

2. To know more about John Akomfrah's work see the Liverpool Biennial review [<http://www.studiointernational.com/reports/liverpool-biennial-2012.asp>]. Theaster Gates was one of the highlights of Documenta 13 and he recently had a solo show called [My Labor is my Protest at the White Cube Bermondsey](#)
3. Carol Tulloch is a writer and curator and Reader at the Transnational Art Identity & Nation Research Centre of the University of the Arts London. She contributed with the text "Take a look at it from my point of view" to go along with Donkor's paintings at Iniva.



Resurrecting The Past

Artist Kimathi Donkor celebrates the strength of black women in his new exhibition

Written by **Hazelann Williams**

Published on 29/09/2012



RESSURECTING THE DEAD: Artiist Kimathi Donkor

NANNY OF the Maroons, Queen Njinga Mbandi, Yaa Asantewaa and Harriet Tubman are all legends in their own right.

They are powerful black women who have made a huge impact on various societies throughout history. They are also the focus of the new Kimathi Donkor exhibition, Queens of the Undead.

Often overlooked as important historical figures in the West, Queen Njinga Mbandi, who fought against the Portuguese empire in Angola; Harriet Tubman, the underground-railroad leader who freed 70 people from US slavery in 1852, Queen Nanny who led the Maroons that fought the British in 1700s Jamaica and the queen mother of the Ejisu of the Ashanti Empire, Yaa Asantewaa have all been resurrected in paintings by the artist in order to be celebrated and take their rightful place in history.

In the first complete exhibition of painting to be

showcased at the Institute of International Visual Arts, Donkor has chosen to display the defiance of these heroines in each painting. Depicting them at their most fearsome; either during battle or after a victory the painter said he wanted to show the true nature of his subjects.

“These four women were incredibly strong, resilient, determined people,” the 47-year-old said. “They also did something very unusual, they became military leaders, they became warriors, which was relatively unusual in all societies. These women not only defied class barriers but they were also ruthless killers, they were very dangerous characters that people wouldn’t cross too easily.”

Initially inspired to create the Queens of the Undead series after seeing the courage of seriously ill Jamaican women in hospital, the Bournemouth-born painter wanted to create a piece of art that would capture the strength of black women who fought to against all odds.



DEFIANCE: Queen Nijunga Mbandi meeting the Portugese

“I was visiting a friend in hospital and there was a group of women on the ward, all from a Jamaican background and all going through serious illnesses. They shared a grim optimism and I started to think about the struggle that these women went through to enjoy life and to find even amongst the worst pain something enjoyable. It also

reminded me of the Jamaican national hero Nanny and the desire of the human spirit to go forward," he said.

Despite the vital roles that these heroic ladies have played in history, they are scarcely known outside of their own countries, but that is something Donkor hopes to change with his exhibition.

"In their home countries, these women are revered, they are all national heroines. They are taught on school curriculums they are historic celebrities but in England they are figures that are less well known. They are not figures that have been portrayed in paintings or films, so I wanted explore them and to do something unusual."

Another extraordinary part of Donkor's paintings is that he has used dark skinned models for his art work. It may seem like an obvious choice for the average reader but, as the artist explained, dark skinned women are not usually depicted in the industry due to selective racism.

"I think this issue of racism in the arts is a very serious issue," he admitted. "In terms of the beauty of dark skin, it is not something I have a problem with, although others do. It's obvious that within the arts there is an association about the notions of beauty. And beauty whatever it might mean, is generally held up as something we should desire, aspire to and admire. So when you have a circumstance, which you do in the Western media, where particular forms of beauty are being excluded consistently and systematically for hundreds of years it can't be right. I'm hoping that we can expand our notions of beauty beyond the narrow confines of the present and hopefully as a painter I can contribute to that."

Queens of the Undead will be at the Institute of International Visual Arts, Rivington Place, EC2A until November 24. For more information visit www.rivingtonplace.org

Posted on: 29/09/2012 09:09 AM

The black ghosts haunting Downton Abbey

Black people have been in Britain for hundreds of years, but these spectres of the past find no place in national myth-making



Lara Pawson

guardian.co.uk, Sunday 4 November 2012 11.00 GMT



A scene from John Akomfrah's *Peripeteia*, 2012. A Smoking Dogs Films production, in association with Carroll/Fletcher and the European Cultural Foundation.

Those of us who are seduced by the saccharine comforts of costume drama will have to face facts tonight, when the third series of [Downton Abbey](#) draws to a close. It will be months before we find out what happens next. Of course, most of us already know, somewhere in our subconscious. Either that, or we don't really care.

For the reason we watch *Downton* is to seek solace in a glorious past while trying to cope with the crises of the present. The kindly Crawley family and their beloved servants settle our nerves. Their fiction reassures us, drawing us to a time when life was simple – when, give or take the odd exception, people accepted their place in society, and when our isles were homogeneous and hermetically sealed, as one [Lord Fellowes of West Stafford](#) would have us believe.

But what if the classic costume drama were turned on its head? What if we were presented, not with the reinforcement of this untroubled past but its absences – those people and events that have been erased from hundreds of years of national myth-making? What might Sunday evenings be like then?

To test the water, you could start by engaging in the work of two British artists, [Kimathi Donkor](#) and [John Akomfrah](#), whose solo exhibitions are currently on at London's Rivington Place and [Carroll/Fletcher](#) galleries. Although they work in different mediums – Donkor uses oil paints to create lavish figurative portraits whereas Akomfrah works with film, sound and photography – they share a common concern with the spectres of the past and how their presence might be felt in the present.

In *Queens of the Undead*, Donkor brings us face to face with four historic female commanders from Africa and the African diaspora. Spanning four centuries, from the

17th to the 20th, these women were fighters, who either led slave rebellions or rose up against Europe's colonising armies. Yet they are little-known here. With his large paintings, Donkor disrupts our memory, showing these women, candidly, in their full glory and complexity. His vivid use of colour grabs your attention, imploring you to stop and consider.

One of these heroic figures, Angola's 17th-century Queen Nzinga, is portrayed wearing 21st-century clothes and using a mobile phone. More disconcerting, however, is Donkor's appropriation of classical European paintings. Jamaica's Nanny of the Maroons, an 18th-century folk hero and former slave, is modelled on Joshua Reynolds' 1778 portrait of Jane Fleming: the two women strike the same pose. This technique makes his work appear to be familiar, even to the amateur eye, but as you stand before it, the centrality of the black figure is unsettling. And it is precisely in this moment of realisation – that you are shocked – that his work is so effective. You find yourself querying history and reflecting on that which has disappeared from view.

Some of Donkor's paintings show more contemporary scenes of police brutality and racism. We see the artist, naked, being hit across the face by a white policeman, and, in another scene, the body of Jean Charles de Menezes being carried by Stephen Lawrence and Joy Gardner.

In Hauntologies, Akomfrah is less overtly political, but the politics of representation is at work here too. Exploring the components of costume drama, the artist is emphatic in his insistence on the place of Africans in western history. The catalyst for his film *Peripeteia* is a pair of portraits – one of a young woman, the other of a man – from the 16th century by Albrecht Dürer. They are thought to be among the earliest representations of black people in Europe. Akomfrah also draws on *The Garden of Earthly Delights* by Hieronymus Bosch, showing close-ups of encounters between white and black figures. "For me this painting has always depicted a utopia," comments Akomfrah, "because it suggests that the Adamic space of our emergence was multicultural!"

In a year in which Danny Boyle was congratulated for including Windrush arrivals in his Olympic opening ceremony, watching *Peripeteia* reminded me how short-sighted a historical representation that was. Black people have been in Britain for hundreds of years, possibly thousands, and it is a sad indictment of all of us that the work of artists such as Akomfrah and Donkor still seems to be so radical, so rare and so political – while Downton's aristocratic agitprop goes largely unnoticed.

Yet there is overlap in these works of drama. In staging history, they all invoke questions of mourning and memory, and the artists' attempt to exhume the dead. They are all encouraging us to imagine a past, one in which we might place ourselves and from which we might gain comfort. And they are all testimony to the circular nature of history, which repeats itself with such regularity. However, unlike Fellowes, Donkor and Akomfrah are encouraging us to rethink these islands along more hopeful and provocative paths.

Queens of the Undead – Black history brought up to date

Kimathi Donkor's exhibition explores African and Caribbean history as well as racial tensions today

Annie Ridout
Monday 1 October 2012



Kimathi Donkor, Madonna Metropolitan, 2005, oil on linen, 152 x 152cm

On his first night in London Kimathi Donkor, aged 19, was walking down a street in Brixton when he was stopped by the police. They said they needed his help with some enquiries and took him to the station, where he was interrogated.

It was the mid-eighties and not uncommon, says Donkor, for black youth to be arrested and detained with no palpable allegation.

“I’ve been detained several times since then. It’s a joke. ‘Helping with enquiries’ is a common, ironic phrase meaning someone has been arrested. They say ‘so and so is helping with police enquiries,’ and it’s a euphemism for being interrogated.”

Donkor had moved to London to study art at Goldsmiths. He chose to use his harrowing experience to inspire a disturbing self-portrait *Helping with Enquiries 1984, 2005* – in which he is naked and being attacked by a policeman.

This piece is currently hanging in the Iniva Gallery, Rivington Place, as part of Donkor’s exhibition *Queens of the Undead*.

Spread over two floors, Donkor’s large canvasses explore black African and Caribbean history: bold political figures of African origin, discrimination, slavery – but they also comment on the racial tension that still exists today.

The three portraits on the first floor pay homage to Stephen Lawrence, Joy Gardner, Jean Charles de Menezes and Cynthia Jarrett: four people whose deaths were considered to be connected with race issues and all of which prompted investigations into the Metropolitan Police.

“Stephen Lawrence’s death was not properly investigated,” explains Donkor, “and it was a watershed moment when the police force eventually admitted it was institutionally racist. Hard to say if that’s a good thing or a bad thing – good that they were able to acknowledge the problem, bad that the problem existed.”

Donkor leads me through the gallery, explaining the beguiling narratives that weave through his portraits. He is calm, cool and eloquent – a captivating story-teller. But the stories are not made up, they are taken from real life, and Donkor is acutely aware of this.

“Jean Charles was actually a close neighbour of mine,” he admits, “lived 100 metres from me, and the person the police were looking for probably looked more like me than Jean Charles – so there’s this notion that it could have been be.”

Donkor’s portraits are intricately detailed. This is because, he says, he has a “strong affinity with these people, the way the state interacts with communities seen as other or migrant, so the detail is a way of generating empathy with the subject of each painting.”

“The reaction of the authorities is to claim that each incident is isolated and nothing to do with anything else. But one of the central aspects of my work is memory. If you have one – you will start to see a pattern.”

Donkor grew up in rural Dorset, “an idyllic life,” he says, “but lots of hard work too”. His family was involved in agriculture. He had a Christian upbringing; “attended a religious school, got sent to Sunday school.”

“Christian imagery and literature had a strong effect on my early life,” he explains, “but I’m not a church-goer now.” Biblical references, however, continue to appear in the titles of his works, as well as in the narratives.

In his painting *Johnny Was Borne Aloft By Joy And Stephen, 2010*, Donkor has depicted Jean Charles de Menezes being carried to heaven by Stephen Lawrence and Joy Gardner.

As with all his portraits, friends have posed as models, so Joy and Stephen are only recognisable because of the title of the piece.

“Stephen and Joy are guardian angels taking up the soul of Jean Charles, perhaps not guardians – it’s too late by

then – but perhaps the scent of an afterlife.”

In the ground floor gallery, Donkor’s paintings of powerful black women throughout the centuries are displayed on metal stands – “They’re more like objects,” he says, “so you can walk around them and read the narratives on the back, which put them into context.”

In this painting *When Shall We 3?* (Scenes from the life of Njinga Mbandi), 2010, Njinga Mbandi, a 17th Century southern African princess is sitting down opposite a white, male European governor. Instead of sitting on a chair like he does, she sits on the back of a white woman.

“The governor attempted to intimidate the princess by telling her to sit on the floor in front of him, and she responded by getting one of her servants to act as a seat,” explains Donkor, “this immediately transforms the power dynamic of the meeting. She steps from being a subordinate character to taking a dominant position.”

The white woman/stall in the painting is a friend of Donkor’s. “With these paintings I’m working with people and places who are very far removed from our life, centuries ago. Somehow I want to bring them closer to create an environment for the viewer where they can approach these figures.”

In another piece, *Nanny’s Fifth Act of Mercy*, 2012, based on Nanny, a revered historical figure in Jamaica, a European woman cowers below the powerful Nanny, hands in prayers, and a white man lies dead at her feet.

“The common discourse is that black people, in terms of servitude, are servants of white people,” Donkor says. He is subverting this stereotype in these two paintings. And it is powerful.

He discusses his diverse cultural heritage and why he has made this the subject of his exhibition – “the people of Africa, the Caribbean, people from these parts of the world who settled in Britain, they’re important to my heritage.”

But why the focus on females? “‘Why’ is a difficult question for me, as a practitioner, but I know what I’m doing. I want to bring these particular heroines to the foreground. For me, they’re people I’ve grown up with, but I understand they’re not widely known so it’s wanting to generate that environment myself – I want more of this imagery to be available to me.”

Kimathi Donkor: Queens of the Undead

Until 24 November 2012

Iniva (Institute of International Visual Arts)

Rivington Place

London EC2A 3BA



Cool Art & Stuff

Kimathi Donkor: 'Daddy, I want to be a black artist' @ Peckham Space

Review and interview by Yvette Greslé, published



Kimathi Donkor (b.1965) is one of the most significant figurative painters, of his generation, working in the United Kingdom today. London-based, his recent exhibitions include 'Queens of the Undead' (Iniva, London, 2012), and the 29th São Paulo Biennial (Brazil, 2010). Donkor who is a graduate of Goldsmiths College and Camberwell College of Arts, has been the recipient of Awards, Residencies and Commissions including the 2011 Derek Hill Painting Scholarship for the British School at Rome. He is currently a practice-led PhD candidate at [Chelsea College of Art and Design](#).

Donkor's paintings bring a visual language of closely observed human figures into a dialogue with History, both as art and as narrative. Historical events and accounts bound up in questions of race, colonialism, slavery and contemporary forms of violence are powerful, urgent themes. His paintings are distinctive in their dialogue with the history of colour, perspective and the imagining of human figures in grounds that oscillate between illusion and the canvas, as a flat, two-dimensional surface.

Donkor's current exhibition 'Daddy, I want to be a black artist', at Peckham Space, presents two new paintings: 'Oshun visits Gaba at Tate's "Big House"' and 'London visitation from Nanny of the Maroons'. These large-scale works are extraordinarily beautiful explorations of intense, luminous colour and human figures in relation to heritage, architecture, and space (both public and private).

Directed by Emily Druiff, Peckham space, together with partners and critical friends, is committed to working closely with young people and residents of Peckham, to encourage positive creative experiences. The exhibition with Kimathi Donkor is in collaboration with Leaders of Tomorrow (LOT), a leadership, enrichment and development programme designed to raise the academic achievements of young people, particularly those of Caribbean and African heritage. LOT (London) was established by Vallin Miller in 2002, and is a partner of Peckham Space. More about Leaders of Tomorrow can be found at www.lotlondon.org.uk.

'Daddy, I want to be a black artist' runs through to 24 November 2013, Peckham Space, 89 Peckham High Street, SE15. The gallery is open Wed–Fri, 11am–6pm and Sat–Sun 11am–5pm. See the website for more information and associated events www.peckhamspace.com.

Interview by Yvette Greslé

Tell me about your collaboration with Peckham Art Space which included mentoring a group of young people from Leaders of Tomorrow (LOT). This process and the dialogue that developed between you as an artist, and the group of young teenagers, informed the making of two new paintings.

Peckham Space approached me about working with Leaders of Tomorrow. The idea is to introduce school children/teenagers to aspirational figures in black leadership, not only in Britain but around the world. This prompted me to think about black leadership in Britain. There are several black artists who represent artistic excellence and have received recognition. But at the same time, this recognition can be quite art-world, and is not necessarily more widespread. I thought it would be interesting to take these young people to Tate Britain and introduce them to examples of high profile black British artists (examples of black leadership within my field, contemporary art). Tate is also the subject of my PhD thesis. We went behind the scenes at Tate. Our first encounter was with the Conservation team who showed us a piece by Donald Rodney, who I knew (he died in 1998). He was quite a young artist whose interests were very radical and political. What struck me then, and in subsequent encounters at Tate Britain and then Tate Modern, was this group of young people's enormous enthusiasm, optimism, and determination to succeed. Leaders of Tomorrow normally meet at gallery closing times and so we had to get special access to Tate. We would wander around the galleries after hours. What struck me was the way they'd stop and want to talk about work that grabbed their attention, and not just the pieces that I had decided to focus on (Chris Ofili, Donald Rodney, Frank Bowling and so on). They were really into it. I

was struck by their enthusiasm, and it got me thinking about the whole notion of studiousness, enthusiasm, love of knowledge, love of culture



Kimathi Donkor and one of the Leaders of Tomorrow with 'Oshun visits Gaba at Tate's "Big House"', oil on canvas, 2013. Courtesy of the artist.

The painting 'Oshun visits Gaba at Tate's "Big House"' is based on a visit to the Meschac Gaba show at Tate Modern, his [Museum of Contemporary African Art](#).

Gaba's exhibition included a series of dinner events in collaboration with artists. We were invited to a special artist dinner by Harold Offeh. He invited guests to create a collaborative artwork together in the form of a 'gathering' that encouraged a form of dialogue and exchange via a series of calls and responses. There was a very participatory element to the whole of Meschac Gaba's exhibition. One of the rooms of his Museum of African Contemporary Art is a Salon, where there was a baby grand piano. On the evening of the dinner, I heard some really nice jazz music coming from that part of the Museum. One of the Leaders of Tomorrow, one of the young teens, was sitting there playing, and doing some really beautiful improvisatory work. People started gathering around and began singing. It was amazing. All of this made me think about creativity, studiousness and inspiration in general – this was the wellspring of the two paintings I then made. I also introduced some of my own concerns into the work. These include the flying figures, named in the titles. The figure Oshun is a Yoruba goddess of creativity, fertility, beauty. The figure in 'London visitation from Nanny of the Maroons' is a national heroine from the colonial era. These figures are like angelic guides. In 'Oshun visits Gaba ...' the setting is one of Tate Modern's galleries looking out over the Thames. You can see St Paul's in the distance. In 'London visitation ...' there is a more domestic space looking out over a typical South London back garden, with Victorian buildings and beautiful summer trees.

I am struck by colour in both the paintings, so intense and luminous. You appear to have a particular interest in colour.

Yes, as a painter that's your first interest even before drawing, in a sense. With drawing you have line but with paint you have colour. So for many years I've been working on ways to integrate really intense and very striking areas of colour. But in a way that presents an abstract element or feel to the work while at the same time conveying a sense of naturalism. I work in a way that is very reminiscent of Renaissance Italian or Dutch painting which works with illusionism, single-point perspective and very well delineated figures. It's a way of painting that draws you into an illusion. One of the ways I use colour is perhaps as a barrier to that, it stops and reminds you that this is a painting. It's been constructed and it's an artificial thing. It's perhaps a way of allowing a person to appreciate the beauty of the painting.



Kimathi Donkor and one of the Leaders of Tomorrow with 'London visitation from Nanny of the Maroons', oil on canvas, 2013. Courtesy of the artist.

You also seem to work with symbolism a great deal. The figure of Oshun holds a bell, and the 'Nanny of the maroon's', holds a horn.

Some of the Leaders of Tomorrow have Nigerian heritage. This actually came out on the night of the dinner with Harold Offeh at Tate Modern. We were asked to participate in an improvised 'call and response', by Offeh, and one of the Nigerian teens used a Yoruba greeting. I thought about Oshun as a figure and the Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove in Nigeria where her main shrine is. There is a yearly festival and as part of the ceremonies, people ring little brass bells, and click their fingers over their heads to ward off evil spirits and bring good luck. The Orisha religion in Yorubaland is still strong and has spread, despite colonialism and slavery. It's now present across the Americas (Brazil, Haiti, Cuba) – these regions owe their ideas about spirituality to this Yoruba tradition. This is what I've tried to embody here.

You've paid close attention in these works to the human figure, gestures, facial expressions and so on.

Figurative painters are incredibly sensitive to all the minutiae of the human body – down to the tiniest

detail to do with gesture, posture and facial expression. How does the direction of a figure's gaze draw your eye to a particular section of the composition? All of this is important to the painting's composition. In this sense, perhaps I am thinking about my own relationship to art and creativity. What are the things that draw my attention, as a figurative painter?

Do you always begin with watercolour and pencil when you're thinking about new paintings? I'm interested in how some parts are left empty, while others are coloured in with the watercolour.

I do tend to do quite a lot of drawing. That's how I begin thinking about my composition. In the first watercolour sketch I coloured in the whole of the surface. I really like a lot of Japanese and Chinese painting. One of the things in Ancient Japanese and Chinese painting is how so much of the composition is left unpainted. The focus is on certain elements and details – quite a contrast to European Renaissance painting, where my main focus has been and where you cover the entire surface and everything is colour.



Kimathi Donkor, Study for 'London visitation from Nanny of the Maroons', 2013. Courtesy of the artist.

What interests you so much about the figure of the girl on the laptop, which is repeated in the watercolour sketches, part of the preparatory work for 'London visitation from Nanny of the Maroons'?

From talking to these teens and getting a sense of their interests and their attitude to life I got this very strong sense of studiousness and the desire to succeed. I've spent a lot of my life sitting around people who are studious, with their heads in a laptop. This figure could be interpreted in any way because you could be doing anything on a laptop. It is a machine which grabs our attention and we can pour out our interest and creativity in it. The watercolours were part of the process of thinking about iconographic

elements, and gradually working them into the composition. I also feel that we are living in an age of increased female empowerment.



Kimathi Donkor, 'Drama Queen', 2010, oil on linen. Courtesy of the artist.

Your work as a whole seems to figure many strong female figures.

Absolutely. I've been working for many years on a series called 'Queens of the Undead', shown at Iniva in 2012. I refer to four 'Queens of the Undead': the 17th century Queen Nzinga of Angola; Nanny of the Maroons (born in Ghana she was a Jamaican slave who led a series of rebellions against slavery); Harriet Tubman (born into slavery, in America, she freed herself, and became a leading abolitionist) and Yaa Asantewaa (who led the Ashanti rebellion against British colonialism in Ghana in 1900). What unites these women is their African heritage and their military roles: they all broke the boundaries of female, historical characters. They are similar to figures such as Joan of Arc or Boadicea. Many nations have these heroic female figures.

Where does the reference to Gaba's 'Big House' come from?

That's Tate's Big House. It's a reference to Henry Tate who was a sugar magnate. His fortune was built on sugar plantation slavery. If you read *Gone with the Wind* or *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or any of the American slave-era literature or folklore then often the plantation owners house would be called 'The Big House'.

Your paintings think about history in a very interesting way. You make visible histories that are hidden to a Eurocentric way of seeing the world.

What interests me about these figures is that they are not that hidden. If you live in any of the countries where they come from, they are very well known. They are visible on bank notes, statues in squares. In some ways this speaks to how national cultures are insular. As much as we think we know about the rest of the world there is so much that we don't have a clue about.



Kimathi Donkor, 'Johnny was Borne Aloft by Joy and Stephen, 2010, oil on linen, 2010. Courtesy of the artist.

I see a relationship between your work and place, or geography. I was struck by the painting for the São Paulo Biennale, and how you engaged São Paulo but also London.

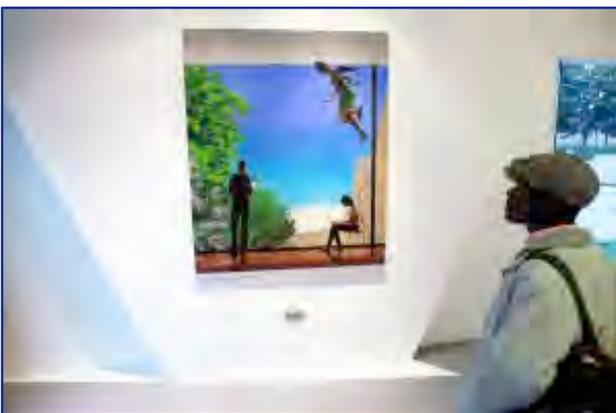
The building is Tower 42 which is the iconic City of London building. It's symbolic of the apparent wealth of our glorious capital. The work was commissioned by the São Paulo Biennale Foundation. They proposed to me that I do a commission, or make a proposal to them about the death of Jean Charles de Menezes. He was a Brazilian who came to London from São Paulo and was shot to death by Metropolitan Police who mistook him for a suspected bomber. This was a few days after the 7 July 2005 London bombings. Jean Charles lived about 100 metres to the other side of the square where I lived, in South London. I didn't know him but he was a close neighbour of mine. His death had a strong impact on me personally. The police were looking for someone who looked more like me – the actual person they were hunting.



Kimathi Donkor, 'Madonna Metropolitan', oil on linen, 2005. Courtesy of the artist.

Probably to do with other work, which I'd done in relation to policing in London, the Biennale asked me whether I'd like to do a painting that addresses this kind of thing. So I did this very Catholic image, perhaps related to Titian or Caravaggio, with these angelic figures bearing Jean Charles up through the atmosphere. They don't have wings but you do get this sense of them floating. I wanted to do something that is sensitive to Jean Charles's background, his country, Brazil is a very Catholic country. The other two figures are very symbolic of Stephen Lawrence and Joy Gardner who also had unfortunate encounters with the police. There is this pattern of these three figures who in one way or another came from migrant communities in London. All three had really violent deaths which exposed inequities in how the police have dealt with these communities.

I try to let my paintings speak. What the painting for the São Paulo Biennale tried to address is a sense of mourning but also a sense of hope and memory. If we do remember these things, and try to confront some of the issues they raise, hopefully this will lead us to a more tolerant and less aggressive city.



Installation view of 'London visitation from Nanny of the Maroons'. Courtesy of the artist.

Was the title of the show ('Daddy, I want to be a black artist') your idea?

I wanted to choose a title that thought about the project, and the idea of introducing these young people to black artists. I wanted to talk about inspiration, desire, commitment, and the determination these young people have. I framed it as an imaginary conversation in which a young person is expressing what they want to do with their life.

Was there anything particularly special that you got out of this project and these paintings as an artist?

I think definitely in terms of the actual painting. What I've done with the areas of sky – these intense blues is something I've been working with for many years but I think I've made a further breakthrough, aesthetically, in the way that I've been able to use colour, landscape, composition to generate this mood of optimism. In a lot of my earlier work there was more menace or ambiguity.

The paintings do embody a sense of inspiration, the protective female figures, the luminous colours.

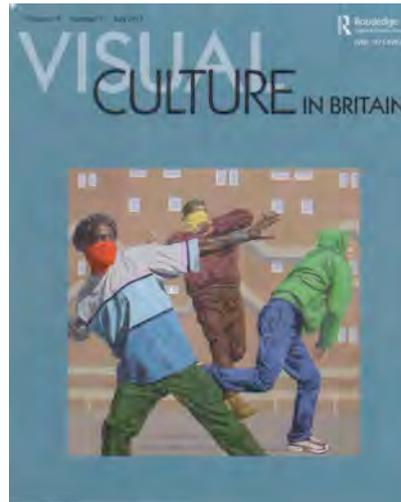
That's what I wanted to get across, something that is quite optimistic and hopeful. Leaders of Tomorrow try to embody a communal sense of care for young people. We all know these stories about young people, particularly in places like Peckham, who are demonised as being out of control etc. But the other side of that is where society, and communities, try to guide and bring young people on, help them to find direction and go forward.

'Daddy, I want to be a black artist closes 24 November, 2013.

For more about the show visit www.peckhamspace.com

For more about Kimathi Donkor see www.kimathidonkor.net

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Eddie Chambers

Reading the Riot Act

(extract)

This article explores some of the ways in which the act of rioting has been visualized...
within the work of several black British artists.

Figure 4. Kimathi Donkor,
Coldharbour Lane 1985, oil on
canvas, 152 x 153 cm, 2005.
© Kimathi Donkor.



[...] Another artist to document, or recall, the riots that had occurred at the other end of London, in Brixton, a week earlier than the riots sparked by the death of Cynthia Jarrett, was painter Kimathi Donkor. His *Coldharbour Lane 1985* was painted some two

decades after the events themselves (Figure 4). In Donkor's painting, the essential elements of [Tam] Joseph's *The Sky at Night* – the brutalist and brutalizing housing, the battles and the attempts to repel the neighbourhood's invaders – were present. As mentioned earlier, Groce's maiming sparked rioting in the vicinity of Brixton, a region of south London. BBC News ('Riots in Brixton after police shooting', 1985) recalled that:

Riots have broken out on the streets of south London after a woman was shot and seriously injured in a house search. Armed officers raided a house in Brixton early this morning looking for a man in connection with a robbery. Crowds began to gather outside the district's police station when news broke the police had accidentally shot the man's mother, Cherry Groce, in her bed with apparently no warning. Local people had already been very critical of police tactics in Brixton and a mood of tension exploded into violence as night fell. Dozens of officers dressed in riot gear were injured as they were attacked by groups of mainly black youths with bricks and wooden stakes.³²

As with pretty much all mainstream media coverage of rioting, one needs perhaps to be careful in processing such coverage. While reports of rioting routinely include tallies of police injured, no such consideration of physical frailty is generally extended to those members of the public caught up in disturbances not necessarily of their making. No tallies of injuries sustained by/inflicted on members of the public – either at the hands of rioters or at the hands of the police – are included in such reporting. In similar regard, we perhaps ought to be sceptical of the prospect of a timely and fortuitous availability of medieval-sounding 'wooden stakes'.

Along with Railton Road, Coldharbour Lane had over the course of the middle to late twentieth century developed or acquired near-iconic status as one of the original 'frontlines', indicating the contested territory wherein the police and black youth regularly clashed or otherwise came into confrontational contact with each other. On a map, Coldharbour Lane is one of the main thoroughfares in South London leading south- westwards from Camberwell into Brixton. Although the road is over a mile long, with a mixture of residential, business and retail properties, the stretch of Coldharbour Lane depicted in Donkor's painting centres on a few blocks, not too far from Brixton Market and nearby shops, bars and restaurants, where Coldharbour Lane meets Acre Lane in central Brixton. Donkor's painting recalls a time when Brixton was very much, and very much regarded as, a black (as in distinctly African-Caribbean) neighbourhood. True to the 'frontline' nature of Coldharbour Lane, Donkor's painting shows three ghetto defenders, each in various stages of hurling rocks at the massed ranks of their tormentors, located outside the frame of the canvas some distance to the right of the depicted rock-throwers. In point of fact, we do not know for certain what the first rioter is about to hurl, as his hand/weapon are located beyond the left side of the artist's canvas. Rock, half-brick, petrol bomb, whatever the weapon, the first rioter, and the one closest to us, is about to let it fly. As something of a dramatic backdrop to the group of three, there stands an anonymous housing block, its façade of muted colour effectively pock-marked by what seem to be impossibly small windows, making the building more reminiscent of a prison, or a low-rent Ministry of Truth³³ building, rather than a building of homes in which Londoners are supposed to live.

Reminiscent of images of rock-throwing young Palestinians of the Intafada, some of Donkor's urban warriors are at pains to mask their faces, to prevent subsequent identification by police photographers and surveillance cameras, and the judicial and extra-judicial retribution that would come with such identification. Only the face of the third figure is visible, though he nevertheless wears the traditional clothing of the disaffected ghetto dweller, the hoodie. Like *The Sky at Night, Coldharbour Lane 1985* consciously avoids (re)creating a scene of bloodlust, wanton destruction and mayhem. And, like Joseph's painting, Donkor's, in its particularly restrained way, shows a small group of ghetto defenders, seeking to join righteous battle with the uniformed aggressors who have come into their midst and invaded black territory in the most brutal and rudest of ways. *Coldharbour Lane 1985* is characteristic of Donkor's style of painting. He fearlessly tackles key, dramatic, monumental moments of African diaspora history, but does so with a painterly preciseness that borders on aesthetic frugality. Despite the animated scene depicted, *Coldharbour Lane 1985* resonates with an almost deafening silence, almost as if the riot is taking place with the environmental volume turned right down or muted altogether. As such, the painting stands in marked and salutary contrast to the shrill, hysterical and sensationalist tones that normally accompany television reports of urban disturbances, reports that, by their nature, offer more in the way of heat than light, on the causes and anatomies of a riot.

Notes

32 http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/september/28/newsid_2540000/2540397.stm (accessed May 25, 2012).

33 The Ministry of Truth was where Winston Smith, the main character in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, worked. In the book, it is described as an enormous pyramidal structure of glittering white concrete rising some 300 metres into the air, containing in excess of 3000 rooms above ground level. To emphasize the sinister and terror-laden function of the Ministry of Truth, on the outside wall of the building there appeared three slogans of the Party: 'WAR IS PEACE', 'FREEDOM IS SLAVERY' and 'IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH'.

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Eddie Chambers is an Associate Professor at the University of Texas at Austin, where he teaches classes and seminars on art history of the African Diaspora. Chambers' book Things Done Change: The Cultural Politics of Recent Black Artists in Britain (Rodopi Editions, Amsterdam and New York) appeared in 2012. Reflecting Chambers' interest in black-British artists, the book addresses recent developments in the profile of black-British artists, in an era in which British art has come to be dominated by the so-called yBa (young British artists) generation. In 2012 Chambers had an essay (An Inqlan Story, An Inqlan History) in the catalogue to accompany the autumn 2012 exhibition of one of the UK's most important photographers of black Britain, Vanley Burke, at mac – Midland Arts Centre – in Birmingham. Chambers also had an essay ('Who'd a Thought It?') on the interplay between the work of Frida Kahlo and black-British artist Donald Rodney published in a recent issue of Wasafiri. His current book project is a history of black artists in Britain from the mid-20th Century onwards (I.B. Tauris, London). At the College Art Association in 2014, Eddie Chambers will be co-chairing a panel on 'Visualizing the Riot'.

Kimathi Donkor's *Caribbean Passion: Haiti 1804* paintings...

Extracts from Chapter Four of
*'The Haitian Revolution in the Literary Imagination:
Radical horizons, conservative constraints.'*

by Philip Kaisary.
Published by University of Virginia Press
Charlottesville and London, 2014.



Kimathi Donkor, *The Small Axe*, 2004, Oil on linen, 70 x 100 cm (Private collection)

...*The Small Axe* is the most ambiguous painting in Donkor's Haiti series and it makes an excellent contrast to *Toussaint L'Ouverture at Bedourete*. Whereas the Toussaint painting is forthright in demonstrating its subject, its narrative, and its sense of place and occasion, *The Small Axe* is by contrast an equivocal work. It does not represent a specific (or notable historical event, it impossible to attribute to it a specific location or date, and it is unclear exactly who the three subjects actually are. However, these features grant the painting a rewarding indeterminacy, while complicating traditional notions of black agency and victimhood. *The Small Axe* thus goes to the heart of this book's argument.

In the foreground are two women, one white and one black; standing immediately behind the white woman is a black man. There is no white male figure present. The black man is holding the white woman by the back of her neck in order to direct her gaze towards the black woman's back. The black woman, who is holding the eponymous small axe in her

right hand, has revealed her brutally scarred back by carefully lowering her red dress, but in such a way that she is still able to preserve her modesty. The black man is pointing at her scarred back with his left index finger in a gesture that recalls the apostle St Thomas's act of poking his index finger into Christ's open wound in Caravaggio's *Doubting Thomas*... ..The painting's sophisticated control of the symbolic act of seeing - who is looking at who, or at what - and of who holds power of whom, is the painting's central dramatic question. None of the three figures seem to be in control of the situation: there is no direct eye contact between them. The black woman is the only figure with whom the viewer can make eye contact. Thus although she might be considered the victim of the scene by virtue of her status as a torture victim, she is the only one of the three who is proactively looking. However, her look conveys worry—with her back turned she is vulnerable and the painting also conveys the embarrassment of the public sharing of her private trauma. However, her scars have the power to shock, as the white woman's horror indicates, and they ensure that she hold a perverse power over the white woman. Thus by staging a scene in which the drama of looking, or being looked at, is the main act, the painting communicates a scene of profound instability: power is balanced precariously, and serves as a metaphor for slave society in revolutionary Saint Domingue....

TV AND VIDEO INTERVIEW LINKS

(click to connect online)

Link to interview about the exhibition '*Some Clarity of Vision*' with *Art Africa*, 2015

Link to interview with Hannah Pool for the *Arise Arts and Culture Show*, on Arise TV, 2013

Link to interview about '*Toussaint L'Ouverture at Bedourete*' – by Richard Barbrook, Fabian Tompset and Ilze Black, 2012

Link to video interview about the exhibition '*Queens of the Undead*' by the Institute for International Visual Art (InIVA), 2012