

Exhibition Notes for Teachers

Kimathi Donkor: Queens of the Undead

13 September – 24 November 2012



When shall we 3? (Scenes from the life of Njinga Mbandi), 2010.

Introduction:

Kimathi Donkor is a London-based Black British artist who has chosen to explore and present his cultural history through his work. His work raises issues and opportunities to explore themes from across the curricula of Art & Design, Citizenship, History, Geography, English and Drama. The exhibition explores key moments in African and African Diaspora history. It therefore provides a superb framework through which schools can explore *Black History Month* in new, creative and imaginative ways.

In conjunction with a learning consultant, Iniva have produced this set of specially designed educational notes to accompany the exhibition. These notes provide background information on the exhibition and the artist. They also contain suggested pre-visit, during-visit and post-visit questions and activities, designed to open up pathways through which the main themes of the exhibition can be explored with any age group.



Madonna Metropolitan, 2005

Exhibition Themes:

- Contemporary figurative portraiture
- Storytelling through images
- Detail, scale and perspective as visual language
- Appropriation and dialogue within an art historical context
- The relationship between text and image
- Consciousness-raising through art
- Contemporary issues of injustice in Britain

On visiting the exhibition students will:

- See a series of newly commissioned paintings by Donkor, alongside selected earlier works.
- Experience the ways the artist explores portraiture, narrative and art history through the possibilities of figurative painting
- Gain insight into the ways Donkor uses a visual art form to explore identity, culture and gender.
- Explore the relationship between text and image through the exhibition's dynamic installation design

Pre-visit Activities & Questions:

Kimathi Donkor's paintings are an example of contemporary figurative portraiture.

- What is a portrait?
- What makes a good portrait?
- Provide (or ask your group to provide) other examples of contemporary figurative portrait paintings – use these to discuss different approaches and techniques to portraiture. For each painting discuss:
 - What does the painting look like? Form, colour, medium, scale...
 - Who is the subject of the portrait? Race, gender, age...
 - What is the subject doing? Standing, sitting, facing camera, side-on, making eye-contact...
 - What is in the background? Foreground?

As well as being contemporary portraits, Donkor's paintings also tell a story. They feature more than one character, and these characters are often depicting a real-life scene from history. In this way, they share many similarities with the genre of painting known as **history painting**. History painting is a genre defined by its subject matter rather than artistic style. They usually depict a moment in a narrative story, rather than a specific subject or person.

- Show and discuss some famous examples of history paintings, including Jacques-Louis David's *Oath of Horatii* and Raphael's *The Meeting of Leo the Great and Attila*.
- Discuss what clues are present within the paintings that we can use to understand what is happening – encourage pupils to speculate and imagine the historic scenario:
 - Who might the main characters be?
 - What do you think they are doing?
 - Why might they be doing it?
 - Why might someone have taken the time to paint this scene?



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

Each painting in *Queens of the Undead* is dedicated to the life of an historic female commander / royal figurehead from Africa or its diaspora, celebrated for their place in liberation struggles.

- Research and find historical images of the four following woman who the paintings are dedicated to:
 - Queen Njinga Mbandi who led her armies against the Portuguese empire in what is now known as Angola
 - Harriet Tubman, the underground-railroad leader who freed 70 people from U.S. slavery in the 1850s
 - Queen Nanny who led the Maroon guerillas that fought the British in 1700s Jamaica
 - Yaa Asantewaa, the 20th-century anti-colonial commander-in-chief, of what is now Ghana

Images of these figureheads are very common, almost iconic, in their homelands. Donkor is particularly interested in this existing visual relationship and what producing new images of these iconic figures does. This reference to icons is another way in which Donkor's work incorporates the wider narrative of art history into his work. He is deliberately opening up discussions on the position of the icon in art, both now and historically.

- What is an icon?
- Who are the contemporary black female icons?
- What makes them iconic?

During-Visit Activities & Questions

Rivington Place has two gallery spaces Project Space 1 on the ground floor and Project Space 2 on the second floor. Project Space 1 shows the series *Queens of the Undead* (discussed above). Project Space 2 shows examples of Donkor's earlier works.

Project Space 1:

- What are your first impressions on entering Project Space 1? Think about scale, colour and installation style and what effect these have on you as a viewer.

As mentioned in the Pre-Visit section, *Queens of the Undead* is a series of new commissions by the artist celebrating heroic black women from history. Choose one of the paintings as a starting point:

- Who is the painting about?
- What do you know about her?
- What do you think is happening in the painting?
- Who may the other figures in the painting be?
- What do you think happened before/after the scene in the painting?
- Why do you think the artist has chosen to paint this particular scene?

There is text on the walls close to some of the paintings. This text has been selected from two essays written by David Dibosa and Carol Tulloch (both of University of the Arts, London). Choose a piece of text:

- What does the text tell you?
- Which painting does it refer to?
- Is the text helpful or unhelpful?
- What does it tell you that you did not know just from the painting?
- Why do you think the text has been put there?

Find the painting *When shall we 3? (Scenes from the life of Njinga Mbandi) 2010*. Read out the text that refers to the painting and ask three students to re-enact the scene in the painting. Encourage a conversation about power relationships by asking:

- How did it feel playing each character?

- Who seems to hold the most power out of the three characters?
- Who seems to hold the least power? How do you know this?

Project Space 2



Johnny was borne aloft by Joy & Stephen, 2010

This gallery shows 3 examples of earlier works by Donkor that address issues of contemporary politics and injustice in Britain. The paintings all reference notorious examples of police and societal brutality and highlight issues of both gender and race.

- What are your first impressions on entering Project Space 2? How do they differ to when entering Project Space 1?

Similarly to downstairs, the paintings in Project Space 2 are displayed on stands, away from the walls, enabling the audience to walk around and behind the images.

- What effect does this have on you as a viewer?

- Why do you think the curators of the show chose to display the work in this way?

Have a look at the text on the walls in this room.

- Do you recognise any of the names on the wall?
- Why do you think Donkor has chosen to paint these people? What are his intentions?

Find the painting *Madonna Metropolitan*

- What do you think is happening in the scene?
- What do the positions of the characters tell you? Who is dominant?
- Where is the power in this scene? How has the artist shown this?
- What do you think happened before/after this scene?
- What race do the characters in the scene appear to be? What do you think is the significance of this? How does it relate to the depicted positions of power?

Find the painting *Helping with enquiries: 1984*. This is a self-portrait of the artist, which references a real-life incident of police brutality that he experienced. Discuss the same questions as above.

- What do you think the artist's intentions are with these paintings? What might he be trying to say/show?
- What is consciousness-raising art?

The text in Project Space 2 is less descriptive than in Project Space 1:

- Write your own description of one of the paintings and discuss where you would place it in the room. Think about:
 - What do you want to tell them about the painting?
 - Which painting does it refer to?
 - Who do you want to see it?
 - When do you want them to see it?

Post-Visit Activities & Questions

Kimathi Donkor's overarching subject is the relationship between painting and society. The way he works with that subject is to break it down into manageable themes.

- As a group, identify the broad themes of this exhibition
- Which theme do you most relate to?

Select an image from the exhibition that particularly interested you. Conduct a piece of visual research by writing a detailed description of the image in terms of both its visual qualities and its subject matter:

- Colour, tone, detail, scale, perspective etc...
- Who, what, where, when, why....

Donkor's work is constructed through extensive research both into history and the ideologically loaded genres of Western oil painting. The artist explores portraiture, narrative and art historical themes in his paintings, creating a body of work often conceived in dialogue with other artists from Jacques-Louis David and Diego Velazquez, to John Singer Sargent and Frank Bowling.

- Find examples of work by these artists and look for similarities and differences in Donkor's work.
- Explain how you think Donkor may have been influenced by these artists.

The works in Project Space 2 all reference notorious examples of police and societal injustice and touch on issues of gender, race and identity:

- Research the original news stories that have led to the following people being included in Donkor's paintings:
 - Jean Charles de Menezes
 - Joy Gardner
 - Stephen Lawrence
 - Cynthia Jarrett
- What do these stories share in common?

Can you think of an example of an injustice which you, or someone you know, has experienced? (Alternatively, students could use local newspapers to source an example from their local area)

- Develop a tableau of this injustice (a living picture). You will need to consider:
 - Characters
 - Costumes
 - Expressions
 - Actions
- Take a photograph of your tableau and use it to develop a portrait painting of one of the characters.

Additional Resources:

- Exhibition bibliography: A list of related material available from our Stuart Hall Library can be found here:
http://www.iniva.org/library/project_bibliographies/kimathi_donkor_queens_of_the_undead
- History painting http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_painting
- Jacques-Louis David's *Oath of Horatii*
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oath_of_the_Horatii
- Raphael's *The Meeting of Leo the Great and Attila*
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Meeting_of_Leo_the_Great_and_Atila
- Frank Bowling exhibition at the Tate Britain
<http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/display/focus-frank-bowling>

Visitor Information:

Admission: Free

Opening Hours:

Tuesday – Friday 11am–6pm

Late night Thursday until 9pm

Saturday 12pm–6pm

Closed on Sundays, Mondays and Bank Holidays

Address:

Rivington Place

EC2A 3BA

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Group Visits

We recommend that you make a pre-visit to the exhibition before bringing a group. If you are planning on bringing a group larger than 8 to the Gallery we kindly request that you book in advance so that we are expecting you.

Iniva-Led Tours

Groups are invited to participate in engaging Iniva-led tours of the exhibition to further explore the themes of *Queens of the Undead*. Tours last ½ hour and also provide information about Iniva and other resources available. Exhibition tours are provided for a fee of £25 and can be booked at the following times: Monday-Friday 10.00–1.00pm.

Artist-led Workshops:

Groups are invited to participate in a tour of the exhibition (see above) followed by a short art-focused workshop where they will work in partnership with an artist educator to produce a collaborative response to the show. Students will engage with the practice of contemporary portraiture and will address themes of cultural, social and political identity in relation to contemporary life in London, as experienced by young people. Artist-led workshops last 1 ½ hours and cost £75. We can also provide tailor-made workshops for schools on request.

**To book any of these options, or for more information
please call 0207 729 9616 or email amoawalla@iniva.org.**