

Kimathi Donkor is a contemporary artist and academic of Ghanaian, Anglo-Jewish and Jamaican heritage. His paintings focus on the history and myths of Africa and its global diasporas. He has exhibited widely in the UK and internationally. He studied Fine Art at Goldsmiths College and Camberwell College of Arts, and was awarded a PhD by Chelsea College of Arts in 2016 for a thesis titled ‘Africana Unmasked: Fugitive Signs of Africa in Tate’s British Collection’. He currently teaches Fine Art at Camberwell College of Arts, London.

This is the full transcript of an interview with **Emma Bridges** which took place at Kimathi Donkor’s studio in London on 17 September 2021 for a film discussing his 2011 oil painting, [*The Rescue of Andromeda*](#). The film itself forms part of the materials for the Open University module *Greek and Roman Myth: Stories and Histories*.

Kimathi has written about his *The Rescue of Andromeda* in a chapter titled ‘Africana Andromeda: Contemporary painting and the classical Black figure’, in Ian Moyer, Adam Lecznar and Heidi Morse (eds.) *Classicisms in the Black Atlantic* (Oxford 2020), pp. 162-193. More information about his work can be found on his website: <https://www.kimathidonkor.net/>

Emma Bridges: When did you first encounter the myth of Andromeda?

Kimathi Donkor: I think like most people with a lot of this classical mythology, indeed other types of mythology, I probably first encountered it without actually knowing about it. So when I was a child, I saw on TV probably the 1933 version of *King Kong*. And I don’t know if you remember the story of King Kong. It’s about a lot of things, but one of the important aspects of it is about a lady who is being threatened by a monster. It has lots of adventures. And the lady in the King Kong movie, the name of the character is Anne Darrow. And it’s an obvious pun, Ann-Darrow-meda. So they’ve taken this ancient myth and they’ve used it as a basis for a modernist take on all kinds of ideas around colonialism and adventure.

So there’s that way in which...ancient stories find a way into our culture. But not always in an obvious [way]. And then...I remember again as a child, teenager...seeing the film *The Andromeda Strain*, which is a paranoia movie about a virus that comes from space. It’s a little bit similar to what we’ve just been going through with the pandemic. So it wasn’t really that paranoid after all, it was real. Not that I’m saying that COVID came from space...I’m not quite sure why the strain of virus is called Andromeda.

I remember sometimes on night-time TV watching this sci-fi series *Andromeda* which was about a spaceship called Andromeda and the crew. I think the other thing where I would’ve really encountered it directly though...would’ve been in the *Clash of the Titans* movie...with lots of different stars like Laurence Olivier.

EB: She’s been a really rich source of inspiration for visual artists like you for a really long time as well. Why do you think that is the case?

KD: I think there's a number of reasons really. I mean, I think if we go back to the mythology, I think the myth itself gives a very clear pointer for artists, in that the myth of Andromeda, the reason why she has been put to be sacrificed to the sea monster Cetus is because her mother Cassiopeia, the queen of Ethiopia had boasted that her and Andromeda were the most beautiful women in the world. And this got back to some Nereids who complained to Poseidon, I believe, the sea god or Neptune, if you're a Roman. And then this led to Andromeda being put forward as this sacrificial victim. So if we go back to that first nugget, as it were the hubris, it's an example of hubris, of claiming to have some form of greatness, in this instance beauty. And so of course, visual artists are very interested in beauty; particularly male artists are very interested in the beauty of women. I think Andromeda as a symbol of this ultimate beauty has been... a potent source for male artists who want to depict ideas about beauty and also desire over the centuries.

EB: Do you see any patterns in the way in which Andromeda has been depicted in some of those visual representations?

KD: The main pattern that I was interested in as an artist and a researcher was the notion of Andromeda being both Ethiopian and white... Only about three or two even, have ever depicted her as a black woman. And yet most artists throughout this period, particularly in the Renaissance and post-Renaissance period might have used – we can't always be sure what sources artists use – but often have used Ovid's poetry, *Metamorphoses* and *Heroides* as the narrative source material and in which Ovid makes several references to Andromeda being not only Ethiopian but also dark-skinned, black or brown. And so that's quite an important contradiction which for me is a pattern. It's not only a pattern of depiction, but it's also a pattern of interpretation.

She's also often depicted as naked. I suppose even that is interesting because then she becomes part of this post-Renaissance tendency that if you want to find ways to depict the naked human body, particularly naked women in a very Christian society, which Europe was at that stage, where nudity and the body is taboo, classic stories become a way to legitimise that kind of... I don't know if you'd call it prurience or you'd call it just love of the human body. So I suppose that's another pattern, is this nakedness which not always but often appears in paintings about her.

EB: So what led you to decide that you wanted to produce your own Andromeda?

KD: That's another very interesting question. I suppose it was a challenge. I suppose in a sense, if I'm really honest about it, there was partly a sense of anger... And also I suppose there's an emotional thing about this idea of this...whitewashing of this character's identity. There's been injustice. Even though Andromeda is a fictional character, there's something I suppose, inherently offensive in the notion that when white painters, who are mostly the people who've been depicting Andromeda, are thinking about or they want to depict a mythology about the most beautiful woman in the world who's supposedly from Africa, but we can't do that for whatever reason. So we'll depict her as a white woman. Then to me, it seems racist...even though we might not always be able to ascribe those sentiments to particular artists. In some of my research after I'd made the painting as I was following up and writing the book chapter, I did come across some more direct racism from at least one of the artists who is quite relevant to this story. So I

suppose there's that sense of righting a wrong, if you like, that there's been an injustice to black women, to African women, to black people. And I suppose in the last couple of years, people have really heard a lot about systemic racism...You could even call this a macro aggression, do you know what I mean? It's not just about one instance, but it's about a repeated pattern. And then it's not just about this one character or figure. As an artist carrying out research, or artist researcher [I've seen] many similar instances of this, something which Frantz Fanon critiqued as an 'all-white truth', the notion that somehow the black or the African body has to be erased from particular areas of Western culture [1].

So I suppose there's that anger, sense of injustice. But then I suppose that sense of empowerment, of thinking, "Well, actually, I can do something. It's not that difficult. I'm a portrait painter. I could actually make a painting which references the Andromeda myth and depict a black woman in this." I suppose we might think, "Well, perhaps why are we thinking about beauty? What is beauty?" And that might be seen as perhaps a little bit retrogressive in some respects. But it's a decision that I wanted to take I suppose because I felt as well that, why not? There's I think what I call a dearth. Sometimes there's a dearth. By that I mean a gap. There is an infinite amount of paintings and artworks. And you might think, "Well, if there's an infinite amount, do they cover everything, every subject?" But they don't. There's always a possibility to create something new which fills this gap and I thought well yeah, I could do that. So yeah, those are some of my motivations.

EB: Could you tell me a little bit more about the process by which you created your Andromeda?

KD: Once I decided I wanted to delve into this mythology and this art, this artistic tradition more deeply, the very first thing I started to do was to really look really closely at all the different depictions of Andromeda that I could find. So a lot of research mostly online but also in art books, visiting galleries and that kind of thing. I also set myself certain parameters, certain constraints [and] the research project I was doing related to the Tate collection. What I wanted to do, I suppose was do something which...I think they call it reflexive, which is a work which in some ways comments on its own origins, its own method of production.

And so part of that meant thinking, well, I wanted to incorporate some aspect of one of these, we call them canonical works, work that's in museums and collections, into my own piece. So it was a commentary on this tradition. So not only was the myth of Andromeda referenced, not only was her beauty and her Africanness referenced, but also there was a reference to this tradition of whitening. So therefore to take some element, to copy some element of one of these works and incorporate into my painting was part of it. So because I've narrowed it down to Tate's collection, I started to think, "Well, which of the Tate works would I want to deal with? Do I want to deal with all of them or specific ones or an amalgamation?"

I became more and more convinced that [Henry Fehr's statue](#) would be the work which I suppose resonated in so many different ways for me. Some of them ironic ways like the irony that the statue – well the one that we have available to us now – is completely black. So in terms of thinking about whiteness and blackness, there's an irony that exists in a lot of European sculpture that white people are depicted as black because the sculptures are made with these patinas which

are very deep black color. So working with these notions at first and then once I'd decided that Henry Fehr's *The Rescue of Andromeda*, which was made in 1893, would be my main source material, then it was a matter of really studying it much more closely. So I'm going to Tate because the statue or the sculpture is outside of the actual Tate building, it's just on the balcony next to the entrance overlooking the Thames.

So going there with my sketchbook and my camera and drawing and photographing and walking around and measuring and reading about it, reading about Fehr himself or his ideas and notions. So really taking a much more forensic approach, a research approach to this work. And then after that, I felt that I had got a full understanding of how this sculpture came about and what it represented then starting to think, "Well, how can I use this as an interpretive model?" So my first initial thought was that I would think about translating the figures in Fehr's statue into another narrative. So I started working on this work, I won't call it a painting because it never became a painting. Initially it was a digital work which was translating the rescue notion that is at the heart of the Andromeda myth to another location, to the Caribbean. Thinking about the relationship of slavery, Africanness and slave masters and thinking, well... Because at that time I was working on another series of paintings about anticolonial, anti-slavery figures, particularly female ones, heroines.

So I thought, well, you could think of the slavery or slave masters being a monster, a black girl as being the Andromeda figure and then some rescuer figure, which I chose to be Nanny of the Maroons who was a Jamaican freedom fighter, I guess we'd call her. So this is quite an involved process. So I started making a lot of works around this theme and often just drawing digital paintings. It's a very long process. I also started to actually recreate the whole of Fehr's statue as a three-dimensional digital model, so in the computer using programs, creating this three-dimensional recreation... Well, it's not really three-dimensional, [it's a] virtual recreation of the sculpture. So I did a lot of preparatory studies and preparatory works. And eventually I produced this digital painting, for want of a better phrase, or digital work image, which took figures from Fehr's statue and made them into different characters. And I took it to a quite finished version, but there's something about it which didn't really resonate with me. And I think it was to do with the victim status of the Andromeda figure. The way that she's depicted in movies like *King Kong* or whatever else... she's just not really doing anything, just waiting to be rescued. And then the figure of the rescuer becomes quite problematic. So this was bothering me. I was looking at this image and thinking that's not really what I want to do here even though I had made the rescuer a black woman, Nanny of the Maroons. I thought I'm going to try something different, a different tack. So I went back to my comfort zone, which is portraiture, and thought why don't I just paint a beautiful black woman and say this is my Andromeda, as many other artists have done before me with different models.

So I spoke to my partner. We talked about the mythology and everything and I said, "Would you like to sit for this painting?" And she agreed. So I made the painting. So it's a long lead up and then a jump, I suppose. A feeling that I wasn't going in the right direction and try something different.

EB: Fantastic. And you chose to call your painting *The Rescue of Andromeda*, even though she's clearly not a woman who needs rescuing. I'm interested in why you chose that as your title.

KD: Yeah. I mean, titles are always an interesting thing because some titles are very literal, other titles sometimes are ironic and some titles are obscure or poetic. The reason why I wanted to call it *The Rescue of Andromeda* I suppose was partly thinking about rescuing the concept of Andromeda from this whitewashing process which has been historically perpetrated upon her narrative by many artists. So I suppose it's an ironic title in a sense. It's referring as much to the tradition of painting Andromeda as it is to the original mythological character.

EB: Could you talk me through the key elements of the composition of your Andromeda painting?

KD: The most obvious and important element of the painting is the figure of Andromeda herself who is depicted as a person sitting on a chair with her hands folded across her lap. And she's sitting quite upright, her legs or the ankles are crossed and she's gazing out towards, not so much the viewer but into our space, I suppose, to her front. And in her face, I think she looks quite calm, relaxed, untroubled. And I suppose another really key element of it would be the fact that the painting is very dark. I think of it as a nocturnal painting. I mean, the sky isn't black, it's quite dark blue. There's a little hint of violet. There's been maybe a couple hours after sunset or before dawn or something.

And then we have behind Andromeda, in the gloom behind, this other shape which is not really that easy to make out what it is. I think that probably if people aren't familiar with the [Fehr] statue, which probably a lot of people aren't, you wouldn't even necessarily know. You can see these are the wings of the sea monster, Cetus, as sculpted by Henry Fehr. And so the way that Fehr thought about Cetus was that it was a reptile. So you've got these little... I don't know what you call these, little spikes that I think chameleons have on the back of their neck. And then it's got these back line wings where they've got claws or talons. So it's quite a fearsome creature. And then this scaly tail almost armored like a rhino tail.

And then you can also see another part of Fehr's Andromeda, part of the statue of Andromeda's body. So we have her big toe, her foot, a manacle which is attached to her ankle going up to her knee. She's lying on her back basically or on her side, being attacked by this monster. And then you can see her hand, which is raised up in protest or I don't even know if it's resistance or it could be asking for help. And then again, behind my Andromeda, you see this dais shape in the background. And then we also have this web-like structure on the ground. And then this very dark area which for me, was intended to represent the Atlas Mountains. So I think just before I had made the painting, I'd been to the Atlas Mountains in North Africa and done some studies and it's based on that, although it's obviously nighttime, you can't really tell one mountain from another at night. In the sky, there's some very subtle elements. You've got the Andromeda galaxy, and...a jet stream, this pale area here. In terms of the colour it's quite loose. It's a bit ethereal, there's mistiness to everything.

I think one of the things about the Andromeda figure which distinguishes her from the traditional depictions is not only her blackness or her Africanness but also the fact that she's clothed, she's wearing a dress. And even you can see she's wearing a pair of purple tights and some shoes. So that makes her quite distinctive from the normal depictions of Andromeda in which she's usually or often completely naked. So in that sense, I think of her as having, if you like, escaped or been

rescued or removed herself from some of these traditions, which are not only racialising, but also I suppose, genderising if you like, that the Andromeda character by her nakedness is being put into a position of extreme vulnerability and I suppose dispossessed of cultural and other attributes which might render her as a social being in some respects. By giving her this different posture, this sense of calm, reposed, clothed, engaging with the world as opposed to in terror then I suppose I'm thinking there's an inherent thing about the myth of Andromeda which is to do with the aftermath of her encounter with Perseus, which is that they get married, she goes and becomes a queen of Mycenae, which is a very important ancient Greek city-state and I suppose lived a long and happy life having many children. So I'm thinking of her as someone who by her own will and her own volition changes her circumstances. And maybe this is to do with that element of the story. So it's in some ways a rebuke to the narrative or to the traditional depictions of Andromeda but also drawing upon those elements of the narrative which are less focused upon by other commentators.

EB: You mentioned that it's nocturnal and we've got these really striking blues and purples in your palette. What were the reasons for those choices?

KD: One of the things one has to be slightly honest or very honest about is when you're making a painting, many decisions aren't necessarily so easily traceable. The night is associated with obviously two powerful psychological states. One of them is terror and fear because people can't see so they're not sure what's going to come out of the darkness. But the other is rest, is the time of sleep, the time of dreams, the time of recovery. And so I think for me, that peaceful setting is part of it, that it's a way also to create focus particularly with the light striking the side of Andromeda's face, which really models or sculpts her face. And having that darkness in the background allows that to happen.

EB: Thank you very much for taking the time to talk to me today.

Note

[1] p. 126 of Fanon, Frantz (1952) 2008. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by R. Philcox. New York: Grove Press.