

SANITE BELAIR

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Good afternoon!

I'd like to start by thanking Nicole for inviting me to participate in this wonderful event.



**Sennedjem,
*Ineferti and
Sennedjem
in Aaru (c.
1213 BCE)***

**Stock photo,
blurred for
online use.**

In 2000, I undertook a long-anticipated trip to Egypt, touring the Nile river, visiting ancient tombs and temples. I was struck by the directness with which our African predecessors, such as the artist Sennedjem whose tomb paintings are on screen, created vivid depictions of their lives and realities.

Having almost completely stopped painting since graduating from art school 13 years earlier, I was seized with a renewed determination to revive my creative practice and on my return to England, I began to think about how I could harness the aesthetic clarity, romantic sincerity and historical certainty of ancient Egyptian art to my own deeply felt interest in African and Diasporic liberation struggles.

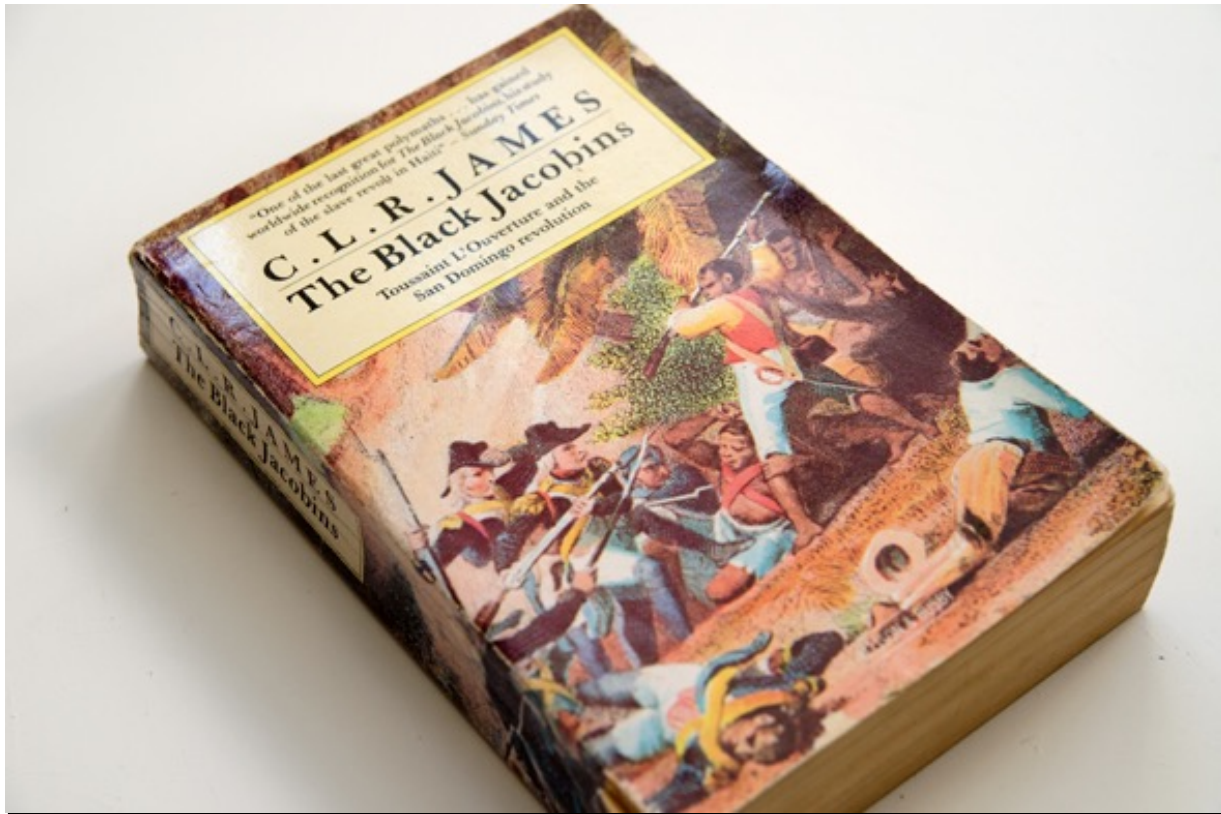


Photo: Kimathi Donkor, 2015

Looking for historical subject matter that would galvanize my creative energy, I found inspiration in the classic 1938 book '*The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*' by the great Caribbean historian C.L.R James. In his magnificent, ground-breaking text, James recounted how the couple, Charles and Sanite Belair, were among the leaders of armed resistance to the Napoleonic invasion of their revolutionary homeland in the years following the abolition of slavery, but before the declaration of independence in 1804.



Kimathi
Donkor,
*Charles &
Sanite Belair*
(2002)

Charles was a nephew of the revolutionary leader, Toussaint L'Ouverture and had risen through the ranks to serve as one of Toussaint's generals. James says that Charles 'did not like the whites, and Sanite, his wife hated them.' Later in the text, James says that Sanite accompanied Charles to some negotiations because 'the women were now fighting side by side with the men'.

According to James, Jean Jacques Dessalines regarded Charles as his rival for the leadership of the revolution and so betrayed the couple to the French, although other accounts propose different reasons for their capture. James recalls that, facing execution by a firing squad of black soldiers, Madame Belair refused to wear the customary blindfold, preferring instead to look her killers straight in the eye.

So, in my life-sized painting, completed in 2002, the legendary rebels are portrayed in a tender moment of seeming calm during the armed revolt. Their pose is quite intimate, she sits between his open legs, with her hand resting on his shin and he seems to caress her face. However, both of them also hold weapons in their other hands, which was an artistic decision directly inspired by James's brief phrase 'the women were now fighting side-by-side with the men'. Just next to Charles's sword you can see a pale hand on the ground.

Beyond the figures themselves, their landscaped setting is also key to generating the picture's meaning, with each element determined by historical research.

The Belairs are surrounded by plantation crops, which embodied the colonial economy's dependence on enslaved African labour. Cotton shrubs, tobacco plants, coffee bushes, cocoa trees and sugarcane are all rendered with a level of botanical detail that makes them identifiable to people familiar with them as agricultural produce, rather than as packaged luxury goods for metropolitan consumption.

Behind the figures and their grove, the far horizon leads our eye out across the Caribbean sea, with blue skies and candy-floss clouds.

The painting was a pivotal moment in my artistic career. It was my first major history painting and at 152 by 152cm was the most ambitious artwork I had made since graduating in 1987. I started making it in 2000 and because I was at that point in full-time work, it eventually took two years to complete. The long period of its creation convinced me that I had to leave my job if I was to revive my artistic career. Soon afterwards, curator Sireita Mullings exhibited the work in her show called 'The Jamaican Influence' at the pop-up Fridge Gallery in Brixton, London.



caribbean passion: Haiti **1804**

new paintings by kimathi donkor
in celebration of Haiti's bicentennial
4 - 28 november 2004

the **bettie morton** gallery

62 atlantic road
brixton london sw98py
tuesday-friday 10.30-6.30
saturday 10.30-6.30
sunday 2-5 (monday closed)

www.bettiemortongallery.co.uk email info@bettiemortongallery.co.uk +44(0)20 7733 5874

Kimathi Donkor (2004)

Portrait of Toussaint (detail) oil on linen 72 x 53 ins

Then, in 2004, I had my first solo show in 14 years at Brixton's Bettie Morton Gallery. Titled 'Caribbean Passion: Haiti 1804' the exhibition was a celebration of Haiti's bicentenary created through a series of history paintings, including Charles and Sanite Belair.



2004: Opening of '1804: Caribbean Passion' at the Bettie Morton Gallery, Brixton, London. (Photo Ayo Johnson)

Above is a photo from the private view, of that show in 2004. And to the far right of the image, you can see Charles & Sanite Belair on the wall.



In that year, I was also thrilled to discover that the national bank of Haiti had created a 10 gourde bank note in honour of Sanite Belair.



Pupils and staff
at Fircroft
School, London
working on the
'Charles and
Sanite' project.

(Photo, Kimathi
Donkor, 2008)

My painting has had a vibrant existence through exhibitions, online presence critical writing -- and is now held in a prominent New York private collection. However, one of the most enjoyable encounters catalysed by the work was when I was invited to create an art project at Fircroft Primary School in London in 2008. I created a slide show about the couple-- which you can just see in the top right-hand of this image on the class white board, telling the children all about the story of Haiti and my painting. I then invited them to all copy a small portion of the artwork from printed sections I gave them.



Charles and
Sanite Belair,
by the children
of Fircroft
School,
London, 2008

We then stuck together all 50 of their artworks into a giant collage.



Charles and
Sanite Belair,
by the children
of Fircroft
School,
London, 2008

(Photo,
Kiimathi
Donkor)

You can see the scale of their efforts from this photograph of the work on display in the school assembly hall and gym.



Thanks very much for listening!