

**!!! SLIDE ONE** I want firstly to thank the British Art Network, Tate and Chelsea for inviting me to participate in this seminar. And, in particular, I'd like to thank the organisers, Professor Paul Goodwin, Martin Myrone and Rebecca Ball.

This presentation draws upon my recently completed doctoral thesis, which is called *Africana unmasked: fugitive signs of Africa in Tate's British collection*. My research began in 2010 under the supervision of Dr David Dibosa here at Chelsea – and, for two years, I was supported generously by a full-time award from the AHRC.

My thesis was practice-led, which means that I analysed the methodologies, historical context and theoretical premises of my studio practice, documenting in detail how and why I created specific artworks, and also reflecting upon how the artistic outcomes corresponded with my methodological intentions.

**!!! SLIDE TWO** With regard to the Tate Gallery display, *Picturing blackness in British art*, I cannot recall with certainty having visited it, although I do know that I saw the simultaneous Cezanne retrospective, which opened a month before *Picturing Blackness* closed in the Spring of 1996.

However, when in 2010, I began archival research in Tate's library, I was soon directed towards the documentation of *Picturing Blackness*. Consequently, my thesis included a quotation from Paul Gilroy's curatorial essay, which whilst pertinent to works in his and Victoria Button's display, also seemed empathetic to my own practice. So, according to Gilroy, in 1995:

*w]e urgently [needed] a more exhaustive account of how slavery, imperialism and colonialism contributed to the formation of modern British cultural styles and aesthetic tastes [...and] to consider how the relationship between Britain's colonial outside and its national inside was constantly negotiated and presented in artistic form.*

Gilroy's call: to reconsider links between empire, nation and aesthetics might, in part, have been aimed at *audiences* for art, including such professional audiences as historians, critics, gallerists, educators and curators.

But, as well as addressing audiences, Gilroy had also pointed towards methodologies important for artists themselves, exemplified by work in the 1995 display, such as Lubaina Himid's 1991 painting, *'Between the two my heart is balanced'* and Sonia Boyce's 1987, mixed-media piece, *'From Tarzan to Rambo'* - which are both now onscreen.

And, additionally, the motivation, identified by Gilroy, to account for the relationship between imperialism and aesthetics, had also become a consistent feature of my artistic practice during my undergraduate years at Goldsmiths in the mid-nineteen eighties, and has remained so to this day.

So, although art from *Picturing Blackness* also featured in my thesis, (including works by Rossetti, Himid and Boyce), it was the analysis and documentation of my own studio practice that formed the heart of my investigation, and which is also at the centre of today's talk.

**!!! SLIDE THREE** So, I intend to discuss twin paintings, both called: *Yaa Asantewaa inspecting the dispositions at Ejisu*. I've described them as 'twins' because they originated at the same moment, although they were born one after the other. In this case, the first was produced in 2012; and then, in 2014, I made a second, non-identical version.

**!!!!SLIDE FOUR** In fact, the paintings stemmed from a long-term cycle of work, which I had started in 2009. The name of the cycle was '*Queens of the Undead*', and that was also the name for my 2012, solo exhibition with InIVA at Rivington Place.

However, as well as being the name for a cycle of works and an exhibition, the phrase '*Queens of the Undead*' is also my term for an artistic methodology that guides the production of new works.

So, in order to sufficiently fulfil the *Queens of the Undead* methodology, it is necessary that each new work has three iconographic components:

**!!! SLIDES FIVE, SIX AND SEVEN** Firstly, The new works must represent historic African and Diaspora women who were military leaders.

2. The new works must also represent contemporary (that is, 21<sup>st</sup>-century) African women posing as those historic military leaders.

3. The new work must appropriate recognisable motifs from canonical, western artworks which were made by artists who were, themselves, contemporaries of the female, African commanders.

And, given my use of this three component methodology—historic commanders, contemporary sitters and canonical artworks—it makes sense to employ the art-historical concept of 'iconography' to interpret how the imagery of my paintings corresponded to these artistic intentions.

**!!!! SLIDE EIGHT** So, with regard to the representation of African women who were military leaders, I drew some of my motifs from the photograph on the right, which, according to the late historian, Professor Adu Boahen, was of the Ejisu Queen Mother and Ashanti commander-in-chief, Yaa Asantewaa. Boahen claimed that the photograph was made whilst Yaa Asantewaa was in the custody of the British army, sometime after the defeat of the Ashanti Kingdom by Britain in the Anti-colonial war of 1900. He also stated that it was made at a British prisoner-of-war internment camp on a remote Indian Ocean island, where Yaa Asantewaa was incarcerated for 20 years until her death in 1921. Comparing the two images, you can see clearly that, from the photograph, I have employed specific motifs such as her Ashanti toga, her rich skin complexion, her close-shaven hair style and the head in profile: re-interpreting them through my painting.

**!!! SLIDE NINE** You will recall that the second element of my *Queens of the Undead* methodology stipulated that I represent my own contemporaries posing as the historic, military leaders. So, from the image onscreen now, you can see that I drew other motifs in my painting from this photograph of my British-Nigerian sitter, (and, I should add, my partner) Risikat, in 2012. More specifically, in order to create the *Yaa Asantewaa* painting, I drew upon the unique contours of Risikat's individual profile and hands, as well as the less revealing, but more contemporary way that she wore the Ashanti-style toga. She also conveys two of Yaa Asantewaa's symbolic attributes as a military commander – in that she carries a firearm, and also, her that expression suggests an utterance. Perhaps, she is issuing a command about the disposition of Ashanti forces in preparation for battle with the British at Ejisu.

**!!!! SLIDE TEN** And, now, we come to the third rule of the *Queens of the Undead* methodology, which is that I appropriate recognisable motifs from a canonical western artwork that was made by a contemporary of the African, female commander. In this case, you might recognise that I have drawn some of my motifs from an 1884 painting by one of Yaa Asantewaa's contemporaries: the

elite portrait painter, John Singer Sargent. His painting is called '*Madame X*', and it has been on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York ever since its acquisition in 1916.

**!!!! SLIDE ELEVEN** However, in terms of my methodologies, this is where things start to get artistically complicated. Because, although I'd first seen *Madame X* in the 1998, Sargent retrospective at the Tate Gallery, it was actually my re-encounter with the painting's lesser known, British twin in Tate Britain's 2012 '*Migrations*' exhibition (co-curated by Paul Goodwin) that prompted my decision to appropriate Sargent's imagery for my planned painting about Yaa Asantewaa. Sargent's twin, 1884 painting, called '*Study of Mme Gautreau*', is now onscreen.

I started this talk by mentioning my doctoral research programme, *Africana Unmasked: fugitive signs of Africa in Tate's British collection*. My thesis title refers not only to the contents of artworks, but also to another, very specific methodology of artistic production, which I call 'Unmasking Africana'. And, just like the 'Queens of the Undead' methodology, the 'Unmasking Africana' methodology also requires adherence to specific studio rules of artistic production.

So, in ways that are analogous to the late Stuart Hall's concept of 'oppositional decoding', the 'unmasking Africana' methodology requires the artist to appropriate motifs from British artworks which embody African identities not through any overt visual imagery, but through their non-visual iconology. To be more precise, *Unmasking Africana* appropriates motifs from British artworks in which there is no obviously visible trace of African identity but, in which there are traces of having been produced as a *consequence* of specific, unseen or 'masked' African identities. In this sense, my use of Irwin Panofsky's term 'iconology' refers to coded, Africana conditions of production, or, perhaps, more precisely, to an Africana context of production for a given canonical artwork.

In order to appropriate motifs from the *Study of Mme Gautreau* in accordance with the *Unmasking Africana* methodology, I first needed to determine whether Sargent's painting was the product of any specific links to African identity (as it is such links which define the academic term 'Africana').

At first my enquiries were fruitless, because iconological information linking the *Study of Mme Gautreau* to specific African identities did not appear in documentation produced by Tate, including Ormond and Kilmurray's 1998 catalogue – and, nor did the Metropolitan Museum of Art publish such information about *Madame X*. And, surprisingly, not even in Tate's 2012, *Migrations* catalogue, which had directly addressed iconological questions of identity and migration, was there any mention of how Sargent's painting embodied masked Africana.

**!!!! SLIDE TWELVE** On the other hand, despite the opacity of the curatorial texts, it required only a modicum of persistence, to learn that the *Study of Mme Gautreau* was created as the direct historical consequence of some quite specific, Africana conditions of production.

Several art-histories and biographies explain that Sargent's sitter, the 24-year-old Mme Gautreau, whom Tate's website only describes as the 'wife of a French banker', was, in fact, the heiress to one of Louisiana's most prominent, African slave-exploiting, white-supremacist families. You can see her clan's lovingly maintained plantation villa onscreen now. Her family wealth, which sustained her until her death in 1915, derived directly from the brutal exploitation of enslaved Africans prior to the defeat of the Confederacy in 1865. Indeed, her father, whose military photograph is also onscreen, was a confederate officer who gave his life to perpetuate the

enslavement of Africans. And, in the aftermath of the U.S. Civil War, Mme Gautreau's uncle, who continued to manage her Louisiana assets, became a leading, white-supremacist politician.

After the Confederate defeat, and whilst still a child, the young Mme Gautreau, (who, in all probability would have been nursed by an enslaved African woman), migrated with her mother to Paris. And, it was there, in 1883, that her Africana-derived wealth brought her to public attention as a fashionable, emigré socialite. Sargent, an elite portraitist who hoped to capitalize on her renown as a fashion icon, proposed that she sit for him, and the resultant portrait became a somewhat scandalous sensation of the 1884 Paris Salon. Thirty years later, in 1916, Sargent, who had in the meantime painted luminaries like Rockefeller and Roosevelt, wrote that his portrait of Mme Gautreau was, 'probably the best thing I have done'.

**!!!! SLIDE THIRTEEN** Once my reading confirmed that the *Study of Mme Gautreau* did indeed constitute a clear example of masked Africana, I proceeded with the next phases of my unmasking methodology. I made observational studies of Sargent's painting, to determine what recognisable motifs might be appropriated for my planned Yaa Asantewaa artwork. One such study, a small drawing, is illustrated onscreen.

**!!!! SLIDE FOURTEEN** Then, I executed the next phase of unmasking Africana by synthesizing some of Sargent's motifs into my first *Yaa Asantewaa* painting. And that was why my sitter, Risikat, had occupied the precise posture with which Sargent had painted Mme Gautreau. Specifically, my sitter recreated the posture in her shoulders, arms, neck, hands and profile. And, likewise, the black colour and outline of Yaa Asantewaa's toga also alluded to Sargent's paintings. [15:51]

It is not known why Sargent produced two versions of his masterpiece. But Trevor Fairbrother demonstrated that the British version was probably not a preparatory 'study' for the New York version. In fact, it is probably misnamed by Tate, because in all likelihood, it is an unfinished copy. Without my recounting too many details now, Fairbrother explained why the missing, right-hand shoulder strap indicates that Sargent started the copy before the 1884 Salon, but never finished it.

**!!!! SLIDE FIFTEEN** My unmasking Africana methodology also has a fourth, final phase, which I termed 'critical reflection'. And, it was upon critical reflection that I too decided to make a second version of my 2012, *Yaa Asantewaa* painting. For the second, 2014 version, I altered Yaa Asantewaa's toga and neck posture, as well as the position of her left hand, in order to more closely resemble those in the *Study of Mme Gautreau*.

In the 1950s, Guy Debord and the situationists described how, through a process of *detournement*, artists might appropriate motifs from existing works to produce, new, oppositional meanings and, in 1991, Lubaina Himid used a similar method for her painting, *Between the two my heart is balanced*. In that sense, I think that there is also a decisive element of artistic critique in the way that Sargent's image of a Louisiana plantation heiress, whom he and others had specifically praised for her 'whiteness', has now been marshalled to function as source material for a new, painterly celebration of African, female resistance.