SLIDE 1

Good morning.

My name is Kimathi Donkor, and I am an artist, based in London.

I'd like to thank Tate, and especially, Sonya Dyer, for inviting me to share research I have been conducting for my doctoral thesis at Chelsea College of Arts about the racial identity of the mythological heroine Andromeda.

SLIDE 2

My thesis title is Africana Unmasked: Fugitive signs of Africa in Tate's collection of British Art and the image, which is on screen now, is from one of my own oil paintings, which I produced as an early outcome of my research, in 2011. My research is practice led, which means that I interrogate and document my own studio methodologies, theoretical premises and techniques. So, I am approaching today's discussion from the perspective of an artist who experiments through image making, and who also draws upon the insights of art history and museology as an integral part of my process.

SLIDE 3

This painting is titled 'The Rescue of Andromeda' and, in reality, it is medium sized, being 120cm in height. I used a realistic, figurative naturalism in my perspective and modelling, also drawing upon the West-African, Ife tradition of realistic portraiture.

However, beyond style and technique, it is the 'iconology' of signs and meanings, which explain its relationship to the Tate's collection, and to this welcome Symposium on the black subject.

I intended my painting to be nocturnal, with a night sky above a horizon based upon my studies of the distant Atlas mountains of North Africa, which I visited in 2011, and which also feature in the myth of Andromeda. In the foreground a solitary, female figure, wearing contemporary, 21st-century dress sits on a chair; she faces towards us with her hands resting calmly on her knees. (2 mins - 2.15)

SLIDE 4

In creating this central figure, I wanted her skin tone and features to be unmistakably recognisable as the portrait of a beautiful, young, black woman, either from Africa, or the African Diaspora – which is why I asked my lovely wife, Risikat, a Londoner of Nigerian heritage, to sit for the painting.

In the surrounding darkness, she is illuminated by an ambiguous, unseen light source. There is a web-like pattern traced on the

ground, and behind the central figure, at the centre of the pattern, is an edifice raised upon a pedestal. (2:38)

SLIDE 5

The edifice has a pair of outstretched, bat-like wings, with a scaly, armoured spine, and tail. Beneath this creature we can make out – dimly – a shackled, human leg, and an outstretched hand, which are now enlarged on the screen. It is this shackled leg, and outstretched hand, along with the monstrous, bat-winged form, which constitute my painting's main visual connection to works in the Tate collection. (3:10 – 3.36)

SLIDE 6

The wings, hand and leg of the background edifice in my image were appropriated directly from Henry Fehr's monumental, bronze sculpture, also called 'The rescue of Andromeda', which is located on the balcony to the right of the Millbank entrance to Tate Britain. So, in this image, you can see that the outstretched hand in my painting, (in the top corner to the left) has been drawn, loosely, from the hand in Fehr's sculpture, (in the photograph on the right). (3:40)

SLIDE 7

And, in this next image, to the left of the screen, you can see how the bat-like wings and scaly spine in my painting have also been appropriated from Fehr's 1893 sculpture. And, you can also see, not only the mythological figure of Andromeda, naked and chained beneath the menacing sea monster, Cetus, but also Andromeda's rescuer, and future husband, Perseus – who was the son of the Ancient Greek God, Zeus, and who, having been captivated by the naked princess's astonishing beauty and courage, resolved to slay the monster and marry her. Perseus, though, is a figure, which, as you can see, is missing from my own appropriation of Fehr's artwork. (4:25)

SLIDE 8

The Tate collection holds about ten artworks which, in their titles, use the mythological name Andromeda. In the current slide, you can see an image of one that is quite representative of the countless works made about this subject in Western Europe since the renaissance in 15th-century Italy – which, was when depictions of classical mythology became increasingly important to artists and patrons. This particular image is from an 1869 painting by Sir Edward Poynter, who, when the Tate Gallery opened here in 1897, was, himself, the director of the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square.

As you can see, Poynter's vision of Andromeda represents many of the ancient myth's traditional narrative elements, as described by the celebrated, first-century, Roman poet, Ovid. Andromeda was shown as a young, conventionally attractive woman, who was naked because she was about to be sacrificed as the sea monster's dinner, for which

purpose, she was chained to a coastal rock.

However, there are some idiosyncrasies: so that, like myself, Poynter did not depict the rescuing hero, Perseus. And also, crucially, to the right of the screen we see evidence of how Poynter interpreted one element which occurs in all ancient sources about the Andromeda myth. It is a caption from Tate's website, written when the painting was on display in 2007. It says, 'This is Andromeda, the daughter of the Ethiopian king, from the ancient Greek story by Ovid'.

Now, it is fortunate that I copied this image and caption from Tate's website in 2011, because both have have since been removed. Nonetheless, it was clear that, for Sir Edward Poynter in 1869, it was necessary, artistically speaking, that the beautiful daughter of the mythological, Ethiopian, King Cepheus and his proud, Ethiopian Queen Cassiopeia – – would have the typical 'Pre-Raphaelite' appearance of a white, Victorian Englishwoman, with reddish hair, and a pale complexion. (7:17)

SLIDE 9

And, in this slide, you can see, on the right, two other paintings from Tate's collection of British art, which follow the same racialized logic – that depictions of the beautiful, Ethiopian princess, Andromeda, must always be shown as white women. At the top, you can see an 1875 study in gouache by Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones, and beneath it a 1798 study by JMW Turner, two of Britain's most well-loved artists. (7.46)

SLIDE 10

And, this white, male, artistic tradition, of depicting the beautiful, Ethiopian princess as white, was not only British, but was also pan-European in scope and very ancient – so that, onscreen now, there are examples of white Andromedas: a ceramic painting from ancient Corinth in Greece (made in about 500 BC); and also, from 16th-century Venice, the oil painting 'Perseus and Andromeda' by Titian; and, from the 17th-century Netherlands, an oil painting by Rubens. The Titian painting can be seen in London's Wallace collection, the Rubens is in the Prado. (8:10)

SLIDE 11

In recent years, the ancient story of Perseus, the king of Mycenae, and his Ethiopian queen, has also been taken up by Hollywood in three, popular 'Clash of the Titans' films made by US and UK production companies. And, onscreen now, you can see Andromeda, as played by the white, British and American actresses Rosamund Pike, Alexa Davalos and Judi Bowker. The combined box office takings of these eye-popping, star-strewn blockbusters are estimated to have been in excess of 800 million dollars. So, it would be a mistake to regard the subject of Perseus and Andromeda as being entirely an obscure curiosity confined to the esoteric ivory towers of art

historians, connoisseurs and classicists. (8:56)

SLIDE 12

Some modern scholars have drawn attention to the elusive, African identity of Andromeda and her role in mythology and wider culture. Such writers include the African-Americans, J.A. Rogers in 1941 and, F.M. Snowden in 1983 and also, as recently as 2014, Professor Henry Louis Gates Jr, in his essay 'Was Andromeda black?'. However, it was in the UK, in 1992, that Professor Elizabeth McGrath, herself a white woman, conducted the first, modern, systematic, art-historical study of the phenomenon.

McGrath's fascinating essay, 'The Black Andromeda', noted that enquiry into Andromeda's racial identity was not a purely modern phenomena. Not only did the poet, Ovid, pointedly draw attention to Andromeda's dark skin tone in his poem, 'The Heroines' 2000 years ago, but, also in the 3rd century of the common Era, that is to say, 1,700 years ago, a writer called Heliodorus (from, of all places, Homs in Syria), wrote a novel called 'The Ethiopians', in which, the entire, melodramatic plot revolved around the unfathomable mystery of Andromeda's racial identity. And, McGrath also recounted how, in the age of Rubens and Titian, that is to say in the early modern period, white artists and patrons across Europe were in correspondence about whether the Ethiopian, Andromeda, should be portrayed as white, or else, as Ovid had described her, as black. So, in 2011, at I was glad that Professor McGrath had the opportunity to see my work, which was, in part, inspired by her research – when 'The Rescue of Andromeda' was exhibited at St Martins in the Fields in Trafalgar Square.

SLIDE 13

Finally, I want to draw attention to the work of two, contemporary painters who have also approached the subject of Andromeda. They are, on the left 'Andromeda', by the white, Romanian artist, Corina Chirila, and, on the right, 'A liberation in three Acts' by the white, British artist, Fiona MacDonald. As you can see, Chirila painted her 'Andromeda' as a bikini-clad, black woman, although she had also made an earlier, nude, white version. Fiona MacDonald's interpretation of a 1597 fresco in the Palazzo Farnese by Annibale Carracci and Domenichino was created whilst she and I were both on a residency with the British School at Rome, in 2011. Ironically, my own painting had only just been exhibited in London, so, of course, I did ask whether she was aware of Andromeda's mythological, Ethiopian identity. Thank you very much for listening.

SLIDE 14