

Portraiture as Politics: Afro Lisboa

Illustrated paper by Kimathi Donkor given for the workshop 'Portraiture as Politics' during the 1:54 FORUM at Somerset House, London on Thursday 4th October 2018 (See separate file for slide show illustrations)

Okay, so I'm going to do this talk slightly different to how I normally do my talks (which is by going through paintings and giving a kind of deep understanding of their meanings and why I created them). [Instead,] today I'm going to just leave these [slide] images to work through by themselves and talk to you about something which I think works with this subject quite well.

So, back in 2013, I was invited to take part in a residency in Lisbon, called 'Offline Between Transits and Journeys'. And the organization was called Xerem, (I think. It's with an 'x', so, I don't know—I'm just trying to be a bit Iberian. Is it 'Therem, Zerem, X-serem?') But anyway, they invited me to come, and they asked me to do a proposal for the residency. And when I was thinking about the subject of this talk, I wanted to use this image particularly (and the other painting which is coming up). And I was looking back at the documentation around the residency, and I read through my proposal, and it just fitted so well with what we're here to discuss. So, all I'm going to do is just read through my proposal to Xerem from 2013, and hopefully it will make sense in terms of what we're here to talk about.

So: 'Proposal for participation in the 2013 international workshop, Offline Between Transits and Journeys, organized in Lisbon by Xerem'. And they asked me [for a], 'Description of work to be undertaken during the workshop'...

...I will give my painted portraits of three Afro-Lisboans to the sitters. See community section below. For more than a decade, I have created many portraits of African European people, often depicting them as characters in historical dramas such as the Life of Queen Njinga or the Haitian Revolution. I have received reviews, commissions, sales, awards, residencies as a result of this work. Most of my sitters have received satisfaction through the knowledge of their participation or sometimes a small modelling fee. For example, during my 2011 residency with the British School at Rome, three Afro-Romans devoted their time to sitting for me, thus enabling me to complete the project. However, I left Rome with the finished painting, which is now part of my oeuvre, as they say.

So, although I give my work to the world in the form of exhibitions, and I do sometimes pay my sitters, I would like to reflect the generosity that the Afro-European community has given to me over many years by creating three individual portraits during my residency in Lisbon and giving

the finished paintings to my sitters as a gift from myself and Xerem. I would like and need Xerem to identify three suitable candidates who are prepared to give their time to sit for the portraits. This for me is also a departure as I usually organize photographic sittings and work from the photographs. In this case, I shall use the ancient method of working directly with the sitter.

Portrait painting has an intriguing place in the contemporary art world, sometimes seen as anachronistic and conservative. However, there are certain concepts at play in this practice which have important contemporary significance. For example, in the title, (and then I sort of break it down in relationship to the title of the project, which, like I said, was Offline Between Transits and Journeys).

So, the concept of 'Offline'. An oil painting is a craft object, personally handmade in an era of anonymous machine production. It is usually slow and considered in an era dominated by high-speed cameras and instant facial recognition software. In the museums, galleries, and mansions of the West, the oil portrait is regarded as the repository of national treasure, where the great and good are immortalized by genius. However, Africa also has a long tradition of high-status portraiture, stretching back to the pharaohs, through the Fayum, to Ife of 1000 years ago, and now evident in the homes of business and political leaders.

In its contemporary survival, is the handmade portrait purely a conservative retreat from progress and an assertion of luxury and privilege? Or is it inevitably an item of kitsch, a pastiche object that aspires only to emulate and appropriate the aura of an authentic and ethnocentric luxury item? Or is it now also possible that it can be, along with other handicrafts, a subtle form of resistance to the automation, digitization, and corporate state control of the means of representation?

Then, I looked at the concept of 'transits and journeys': Afro-European or Euro-African subjects often find themselves situated by the media and political practice on the fault lines of political conflict and intransigent binaries. whites and Christians seen as colonizers versus blacks and Muslims as victims or insurgents, with mixed or so-called migrant people viewed as being out of place and in between those pure binaries.

But obviously, life is far more complex than such simplistic formulas allow. So, for instance, much of Africa was Christian before Europe was. Africans also enslaved millions of Europeans. African states have had periods of military conquest and domination in Europe. All Europeans are themselves descendants of African pioneers.

I hope that my portraits of Euro-Africans can inevitably embrace this infinitely complex history embodied in its subjects, including myself and my methods. I also hope that this can assist viewers to revisit what they think they know. Once the portrait has been created and given to my sitter, I will inevitably relinquish control of its destiny. Where will it go? Who will possess it? How will it be valued, cared for, or discarded? For me, this moment of transit will be unusual as I have consistently kept my work within a well-regulated cycle of ownership and circulation. Will this gift be a burden or a blessing to its new owner? Will anybody even want to take part?

And then I sort of went through a list of equipment that I wanted them to buy for me. Which is quite a long list: Twenty tubes of premier quality oil paints, etc. And I think they did, I think they were quite generous. (No, I didn't use it all up.)

So, and then 'Space necessary to develop the work' — Studio with good daylight, good ventilation, access to running water.

They asked if I wanted to have access to the photographic archive in Lisbon, which I don't think I answered.

'Do you want to, during the workshop, do any public presentation event?' And I said—I'm happy to give a 20-minute presentation about portraiture in African and European history. (And so, when I read that, I was thinking, oh, why didn't I just use that presentation for today?)

'Do you intend to work with the community?' —Yes, I would like to create 3 portraits of Afro-Lisboans. They will be people having a strong personal connection to Lisbon and a strong personal connection to Africa. They can be of any race, age, gender, religion, sexuality or nationality. The only condition is that in their biography they have a connection to Lisbon and a connection to Africa. An example could be that they were born in Lisbon to African parents or that they have African and Portuguese heritage. The word African for me includes the entire continent, including Muslim and Arabic-speaking countries, and people of overseas territories such as Brazil or in the Caribbean or the United States. I include people classified as white, but who may have lived in or been born in an African country or district. It is up to the individual to define their own Afro-Lisboan heritage.

Each sitting will last three days three times 8 hours. Sitters must be prepared to give this time. At the conclusion, the portrait will be given to the sitter. Sitters must be prepared to take the paintings with them. They are free to dispose of them as they choose.

I'm sure that if my art dealers had known that I was going to be doing this, they would have been horrified. But anyway, thanks very much for listening. I think I'll leave it at that. Thank you.