

BLACK HISTORY PAINTING

Glossing the Outlines

To view this image, visit
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/544518>

Dr Kimathi Donkor

Today I'll be talking about an artistic genre which I term 'black history painting'. The scope of my enquiry includes what kinds of artistic practice constitute 'black history painting', and I'll also consider where black history painting has been made, who has been making it and when.

My field of reference is in the overlap of two other art categories, 'Black Art' and 'History Painting'. However, I'll also signal how an outline of black history painting extends, reshapes and complicates both Black Art and History Painting.

My research methodology begins with my studio-based painting practice, which is to say that through making art works, I've discovered new artistic knowledge not previously apparent to me. However, I also use more conventional art historical approaches, which include reviewing extant literature, as well as making image-based analyses, and reading archival material.



So, what is a black history painting? I propose that it depicts factual or mythic narratives which centre people from those global, African, indigenous and diaspora communities who are identified as black. The artists who create black history paintings usually intend to celebrate human dignity and integrity, although that noble aim can sometimes be filtered through an ironic or critical lens.

And, speaking, as an artist, I'll start this practice and literature review by looking at some of my own work in this field. So, I first began making narrative drawings about black history in the mid-1980s and on screen now is the 1987 drawing 'The Death of Cynthia Jarrett'. It offers the perspective of an intimate eyewitness to Metropolitan Police officers entering the home of the 49-year-old grandmother on 5th October 1985. Mrs Jarrett died of a heart attack and that evening, protests turned into a major civil disturbance in which a police officer, Keith Blakelock was killed. Alongside making this series, those events also propelled me into becoming a committed activist, and I spent the next 14 years working with grassroots community groups.



Charles and Sanite Belair (Kimathi Donkor, 2002)

At the turn of the century, I returned to working primarily in paint. On screen now is my first history painting, 'Charles and Sanite Belair', which depicts the eponymous couple long recognised as martyrs of Haiti's 19th century revolution. Drawn from CLR James's epic chronicle, 'The Black Jacobins', this work offers an intimate, sympathetic perspective of the tragic protagonists surrounded by botanical renderings of slave plantation crops. The hand of a dead French soldier is faintly visible in the undergrowth.

In the subsequent two decades my work has sometimes been discussed as history painting, for instance in the exhibition booklet for my 2012 London solo show 'Queens of the Undead', in which InIVA's curators, Tessa Jackson and Grant Watson wrote that I 'explore[d] the tropes of history painting, setting these to work in ways that undermine their original purpose and ideology'.



Installation view of Black History Painting (Kimathi Donkor, 2024)

Then, in 2023, I decided on 'Black History Painting' as the title of my planned solo show at London's Niru Ratnam gallery. I usually give a lot of thought to titles so, before confirming my choice, I researched the exact phrase "black history painting", partly to ensure I didn't unintentionally use the title of somebody else's exhibition, artwork or writing.

But I was somewhat surprised when, in the library catalogue of my own academy, UAL, the term "black history painting" produced no results. The same was also true of the British Library catalogue. When I turned to the content of millions of scanned works in Google books, 'black history painting' returned just four results—and only two of them were about actual black history painting. And, even today, in 2026, a search of academic texts using Google Scholar, only returns 9 results, with 5 of them being about my 2024 exhibition. By contrast, Google books returns about 300 results for the generic term 'history painting', whilst Google Scholar returns 21,300 results.

IMAGE DELETED FROM INSTAGRAM

“My Black History painting is a testament to inspire...” (Mylajoi, Instagram, 2026)

However, it's important to state that those specific search results only concern the titles and contents of formal publications like books, catalogues and journal articles. The picture changes when we move beyond formal publishing. In this less formal realm, Google's main search engine produces many more results for 'black history painting'. And, aside from duplicate instances about my exhibition, the vast majority of those mentions appear in non-academic sources such as African-American social media posts...

To view this image, visit

<https://fineartamerica.com/art/paintings/black+history>

Black History paintings (Fine Art America, 2026)

...or else from algorithmic marketing terms generated by commercial platforms like Etsy, or Fine Art America.

But, although, to my knowledge “black history painting” is not the title of any English language book, text or exhibition (except for this talk and my exhibition), the term does have a few mentions in academic literature. And when I say a few, I actually mean just the two I’ve been able to locate. So, I’ll take a moment to look at these occurrences in detail.

To view this image, visit

<https://www.talladega.edu/harvey-museum/amistad-murals>

The Mutiny on the Amistad (Hale Woodruff, 1939)

The phrase 'black history painting' appears once in "Walls of Heritage, Walls of Pride: African American Murals" edited by James Prigoff and Robin Dunitz, published in 2000. Curator Edmund Barry Gaither writes in the book's Forward that 'black history painting' was one of the three principal elements of mid-20th century African-American mural paintings, the other two being the symbolic legacy of Africa and the story of slavery. Yet, after the claim that black history painting was central to mural art, the subject is never again mentioned – which is puzzling. A seminal example from the book is Hale Woodruff's 1939 mural called 'The Mutiny on the Amistad'.

To view this image, visit

<https://oxfordamerican.org/oa-now/houston-muralist-john-t-biggers>

Contribution of the Negro Woman in American Life and Education (John Biggers, 1953)

In her 1979 essay about the muralist John Biggers, Alvia Short said that his work was 'an example of black history painting... comparable in intent to Hale Woodruff's Amistad mural series'. The term is not revisited in the essay, but clearly Short felt that Biggers 1953 'Contribution of the Negro Woman in American Life and Education' was just one example of a wider phenomenon.

To view this image, visit

<https://amistadresearchcenter.org/fine-art/general-louverture-confers-with-his-series-24-catalogue-177>

General L'Ouverture confers with his principal aides at the city of Dondon (Jacob Lawrence, 1937)

Of course, an absence of the exact term 'black history painting' does not mean writers are unaware of the historical content in works of black art. Jacob Lawrence was, arguably, the pre-eminent 20th century African American history painter, and in the 1997 catalogue for the Hayward Gallery exhibition, 'Rhapsodies in Black: Art of the Harlem Renaissance', Richard J Powell affirmed that the artist 'turned first to history' when creating his epic, 41-panel series about the Haitian Revolution. On screen now is the 1937 "General L'Ouverture confers with his principal aides at the city of Dondon".

At the time, describing somebody as 'black' was considered impolite, so Lawrence claimed that his 1941 paintings about the great migration to northern US cities were 'representing a certain history of the negro in America' – which is probably as close to using the phrase 'black history painting' as he could come, given the prevailing etiquette. That undated quote appears in Samella Lewis's 1978 survey 'African American Art and Artists', whilst in Regina Perry's 1993 survey of the National Museum of American Art, 'Free Within Ourselves', she also describes Lawrence as 'painting the history of the African-American people'.

To view relevant images, visit

<https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/exhibition/kerry-james-marshall>

Installation view, Kerry James Marshall 'Histories', Royal Academy (Photo K.Donkor, 2025)

However, in this century, Lawrence's status has been so completely overshadowed by the global successes of Kerry James Marshall that, in the catalogue for the younger artist's recent, major, touring, survey show 'Histories' at the Royal Academy, Lawrence was barely even mentioned in passing. Nevertheless, the first sentence of the main text contains Marshall's quote that 'I've always wanted to be history painter on a grand scale like Giotto or Gericault'. Given what I've already said, you might not be surprised to learn that combining the phrases "black history painting" and 'Kerry James Marshall' on Google Scholar produces null points.

To view this image (using the title 'Domino Hunters'), visit

<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/peter-doig-denzil-forrester-matthew-higgs-1288832>

Police in Club (Denzil Forrester, 1985)

Whilst most commentary about black history painting occurs in African American centred texts, there is a similar discourse centred on UK artists. For instance, in his 2014 survey 'Black Artists in British Art', Eddie Chambers said of Denzil Forrester that his paintings had 'created a series of historical documents related to the making of Black Britain'. Chambers illustrated his conclusion with Forrester's 1985 painting 'Police in Blues Club'. Again, the precise term 'black history painting' was not used by Chambers, but clearly, he understood Forrester's work in that light.

To view this image, visit

<https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/exhibition/entangled-pasts?sourceNumber=750497>

Naming the Money (Lubaina Himid, 2004-2024)

Similarly, in the catalogue interview for her 2004 exhibition, *Naming the Money*, Lubaina Himid spoke lucidly about her works reimagining the lives of enslaved Africans, saying that “I know what they are: history paintings, portraits, political treaties, strand ins, adverts and effigies”. And in, ‘Stick to the Skin’, Celeste Marie Bernier’s 2018 survey comparing African American to British Black Art, the author repeatedly invoked history and history painting. For instance, one chapter is called ‘Power to the Powerless: Tracing Black Lives in Protest Portraits, History Paintings and Radical Installations’. That chapter features an analysis of my own work, alongside that of Barbara Walker, Mary Evans and Lynette Yiadom-Boakye.

To view this image, visit

<https://spencerart.ku.edu/art/collections-online/object/58501>

Ceremonie Du Bois Caiman (Ulrich Jean Pierre, 1995)

Having already mentioned the Haitian revolution, it is important to acknowledge the role of Haitian artists in developing global black history painting. For my own series about country's struggle against slavery and colonialism, I was inspired by the work of Ulrich Jean Pierre, such as this 1995 painting about the legendary voodoo 'Ceremonie du Bois Caiman' that lit the spark for the world's most successful slave revolution.

To view this image, visit

<https://haitianartsociety.org/andre-pierre-ceremony-for-agoue-and-la-sirene-1963>

Ceremony for Ague and La Sirene (Andre Pierre, 1963)

But Ulrich Jean Pierre is just one of many generations of Haitian history painters, including, for example Andre Pierre who, born in 1916 created this 1963 work that also documented Haiti's spiritual mythologies and practice. This painting featured in the major 2012 survey at Nottingham Contemporary called Kafou: Haitian art and Voudou.

To view this image, visit

<https://mendeswooddm.com/artworks/50917-rosana-paulino-peixe-da-serie-mangue-2023/>

Fis, from the Mangrove series (Rosana Paulino, 2023)

Hailing from Sao Paulo, Brazil, Dr Rosana Paulina is said to ‘weave personal, scientific, and historical archives throughout her work, using these materials to demonstrate and then deconstruct violent colonial structures, particularly as they relate to Afro-Brazilian women’. She will this year represent Brazil at the 61st Venice Biennale.

To view this image, visit

<https://www.artforum.com/events/nigerian-modernism-tate-modern-review-1234740921/>

Ajaka of Owo (Akinola Lasekan, 1944)

In Africa, heartland of the black world, we must surely rank Akinola Lasekan's 1944 'Ajaka of Owo' amongst the notable mid-twentieth century black history paintings, depicting, as it does, the myth of Obatala, the Yoruba deity who descended from the heavens to create Humanity. This work can be viewed in the current Tate Modern survey show, Nigerian Modernism.

To view this image, visit

<https://thenjiwenkosi.com/stadium>

Gala (Rejoicing) Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi, 2023

In South Africa, Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi's paintings on athletic themes reflect her desire to critique, in her words 'the history of ...sport as a tool for propaganda, colonization, and white supremacy.' Her work mirrors the mass, pan-African engagement with black history through the supposedly 'level playing field' of sport, understood as a democratising opportunity to resist and evade neo-colonial repression.

To view this image, visit

<https://egypt-museum.com/inside-tomb-of-tutankhamun/>

Tomb of Tutankhamun (1324 BCE, Courtesy Egypt-Museum.com)

Before concluding this brief, initial gloss of black history painting, it is necessary to note that the artistic origins of our modern and contemporary expressions predate the disasters of slavery, segregation and colonialism or the incomplete triumphs of their abolition. Whilst undoubtedly drawing from Eurasian contributions, the fact that humanity began in Africa means that ultimately, history painting, like all culture has its deepest origins in the many artistic streams flowing through the African continent. Often these artistic streams have flowed along the Nile valley, where evidence suggests painting on canvas began thousands of years ago.

To view this image, visit

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Burial_Chamber_of_the_tomb_of_Tanutamani_\(5\)_33554932640.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Burial_Chamber_of_the_tomb_of_Tanutamani_(5)_33554932640.jpg)

Tomb of Pharaoh Tanutamani at El Kurru, Sudan, 623 BCE (photo by Hans Birger Nilsen, 2017)

They have flowed across the savannahs of Nubia, Kush and Sudan which are still the source of the so-called gum Arabic beloved by English watercolourists as a pigment binder.

To view this image, visit

https://www.si.edu/object/icon:nmafa_2004-7-2

Mary with Child, and St George (15th-16th century, Courtesy National Museum of African Art, DC)

They pass through the mystic Ethiopian mountains awash with medieval iconography...

To view this image, visit

<https://www.sci.news/archaeology/african-neolithic-populations-sahara-desert-04702.html>

Hunting scene at Tassili n'Ajjer, 5200 BCE (Photo by Patrick Gruban, 2006)

...and flow deep into the Sahara, where our ancient ancestors created some of the earliest chronicles of black life in paint.