

GREG THOMAS

JOSIE KO

As part of the RSA 200 celebrations, Josie KO responds to the complex history of the remarkable mixed-heritage Jardine Sisters in a new commission at the Reid Gallery

'Growing up, going to art galleries was not part of my culture. I saw art on the street, in the form of public monuments.' Josie KO is talking about the background to her large-scale sculptural practice, which involves making Black female bodies, often constructed from everyday craft materials such as papier-mache and glitter, unavoidably visible. They are also, in the best sense, confrontational, staring down at viewers from magisterial heights, in bold colour and shape.

Graduating from Glasgow School of Art in 2021, KO has made significant work for Glasgow International 2024, the 2025 British Ceramics Biennial in Stoke-On-Trent and for Quench Gallery in Margate, where her solo exhibition *Mekle Lippis* was held in 2025. 'As a research-based artist, my practice manifests from an interest in archival texts, specifically looking into pre-colonial histories,' she says. 'I search for sightings and whisperings of Black existence across the diaspora which challenge the narrative that Blackness in Britain (and specifically Scotland) is recent.' Her new challenge is to respond to the archive of the Jardine Sisters, two mixed-heritage women who studied at GSA in the early 1900s, as part of a Reid Gallery commission to mark 200 years of the Royal Scottish Academy.

The show, opening at the GSA-run gallery in September and curated by Jenny Brownrigg, will also feature works by the sisters themselves. Bridget 'Jet' Jardine (1881–1964) was born in Helensburgh, Scotland, while Aeta Jardine (1886–1969) was born in Georgetown, Demerara, now part of Guyana on the northern tip of South America. This far-flung location is explained by their Glaswegian father Charles Kennedy Jardine's job as founding editor of *The Demerara Chronicle*. The siblings' childhoods were thus strung between Scotland and the wider Caribbean region, reflecting the grim realities of Dutch and British plantation-based economies, yet not quite capturing the complexity of the sisters' own identities.

Through their father, Jet and Aeta were direct descendants, six generations removed, of Scipio Kennedy (c.1694–1774), an enslaved and later freed African who lived at Culzean Castle in Ayrshire from around 1710 until 1774. His birth name is unknown, but Scipio was probably born in Guinea and sold into slavery at the age of five or six. Bought by a Scottish sea captain in the Caribbean, the boy was gifted to the captain's daughter, potentially as a page, then transported to her new husband John Kennedy's estate in Culzean. Freed by Kennedy in 1725, Scipio went on to marry and father eight children with a local woman, Margaret Gray, living in the local area as a weaver – and probable smuggler – until his death.



'I search for sightings and whisperings of Black existence across the diaspora which challenge the narrative that Blackness in Britain (and specifically Scotland) is recent'

As part of the general reckoning over the last decade with the histories of enslavement bound up in Scottish historical properties, Scipio has become relatively well-known, at least compared to the thousands of other enslaved African children who faced the same tribulations. Indeed, in September 2023, Culzean Castle hosted a two-day symposium reflecting on his connection to the estate. Still, the fact that so much about Scipio remains occluded reflects the ongoing struggle to reveal hidden histories of Black Scottish culture. Responding to these blind spots is a mainstay of KO's practice: 'I believe Scipio is a hidden figure in Scottish history, revealing that the presence of Black people in Scotland is not new.'

The sisters, by contrast, remain a more enigmatic and liminal presence in the history of Black Scots. 'Their history is so complex, full of changes in social class and wealth,' KO reflects. 'It causes me to think of Scottish identity in a new way.' Photographs to be included in the GSA exhibition suggest that the sisters could have 'passed' (in the parlance of Black cultural responses to structural racism): perhaps even to themselves. They claimed descent from a wealthy wing of the Jardine family and may not have known of their lineage from Scipio. Yet they remain the first recorded female mixed-race artists to study at the institution.

It helps that the sisters' work is delightful, much of it comprising sumptuous, warmth-filled landscapes – suggesting the influence of the Glasgow Boys and post-impressionism – depicting both Scotland and the Caribbean (from 1907–10 Jet, Aeta and their mother visited Trinidad and Demerara several times). There are also still lifes, figurative studies and illustrations of figures from folklore and mythology, such as goblins and fauns, which have a hint of Celtic revival-era romance about them.

The exhibition will also include the launch of a newly compiled sketch diary by Aeta Jardine, 'A Year in Glasgow 1908', which gives an intriguing glimpse into middle-class Glaswegian culture during the Edwardian era, in the crisp, illustrative pen-and-ink cartoon style of the time. This text has been compiled by Caroline Palmer, an anthropologist and garden writer based in Wales, who is the great-niece of Aeta.

KO's commission will respond, in particular, to the life of Scipio, utilising her by now well-established approach of constructing large sculptural monuments and installations. 'I'm interested in exploring his life in Scotland,' the artist says. 'How he became a free Black African man, integrating with working-class Scottish communities and starting a textile business.'

Indeed, the show will touch on the branches of the family between Scipio and the Jardine sisters, most of whom remained tied by class and lack of wealth to Culzean and Glasgow, until the opportunities afforded by education allowed Charles to establish his newspaper business across the Atlantic.

The hidden dimensions of Scipio's story are a perfect fits for KO's modus operandi, which involves working with archives to reveal hidden histories of Blackness, or to dream up possible ones. Her double-header show with Kialy Tihngang at Glasgow International 2024, *fir gorma*, proposed a speculative history involving enslaved north Africans brought to Ireland and the Hebrides who escaped and set up a clan on an uncharted Scottish isle. We can look forward to similar fantastical manifestations and imaginings at the Reid Gallery in September. As KO herself puts it: 'My work transports people into confronting and exciting new worlds.'

Greg Thomas is a critic and editor based in Glasgow.

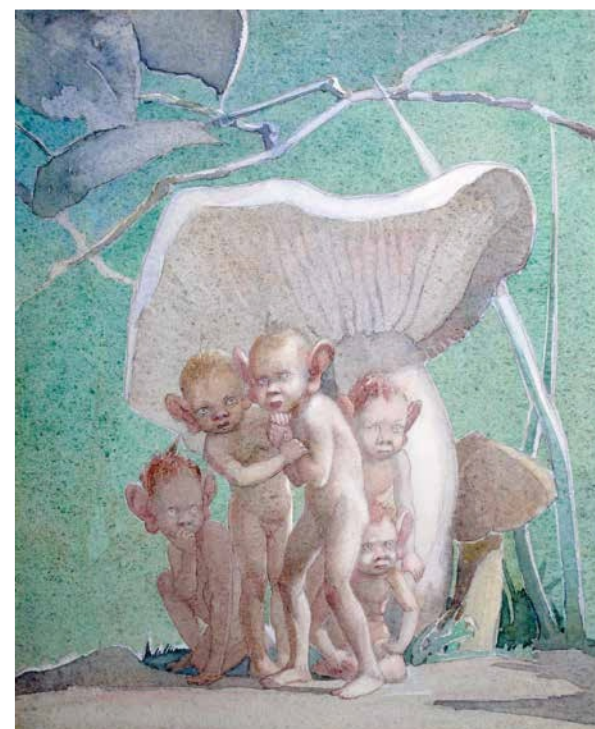
Josie KO

19 September–31 October
Reid Gallery
The Glasgow School of Art, 164 Renfrew Street,
Glasgow, G3 6RQ
T: (0)141 353 4500 | gsaexhibitions.co.uk
Open Monday to Saturday 10am–4.30pm

'The hidden dimensions of Scipio's story are a perfect fits for KO's modus operandi, which involves working with archives to reveal hidden histories of Blackness, or to dream up possible ones'



3



4



5



6

1
Josie KO, *The Chimney Princess*,
Ceramic Biennial, Stoke on
Trent, 2025

2
Josie KO, *Fir gorma*, 2024,
© Glasgow International.
Photographed by Eoin Carey

3
Josie KO, *Monument*, mixed
media installation (2021)

4
JS Jardine, *Coming nearer*,
(1908-1930). Image courtesy of
Caroline Palmer

5
JS Jardine, *Aberfoyle*,
unsigned, 1915-1920

6
Josie KO, *Mekle Lippis*, 2024
© Collective Gallery

THE GLASGOW SCHOOL OF ART

THE DELIGHT OF WALKING ALONE
ANYA PAINTSIL

5-21 JUNE 2026
GLASGOW INTERNATIONAL 2026

BURNS STREET STUDIOS, 1ST FLOOR, 15 BURNS ST, GLASGOW G4 9SA
OPENING TIMES: 5-7 JUNE 10AM-6PM / 8-21 JUNE MON - FRI 12PM - 6PM, SAT - SUN 10AM - 6PM

SUPPORTED BY THE GLASGOW SCHOOL OF ART; ADDITIONALLY SUPPORTED BY GLASGOW INTERNATIONAL WITH FUNDS FROM THE SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT'S FESTIVAL EXPO FUND.

GLASGOW INTERNATIONAL Festival of Contemporary Art