

*Shawon Kinew*

*The Rape of Europa*

*The Rape of Europa* is the most important European painting to find its home in Boston. For me, it's really a meditation on the continent of Europe and its place in America. I often wonder: what does it mean for this painting to be here?

Since 1896, Europa has called this place, the fens of Boston, her home: where the Atlantic Ocean crashes into the continent of North America. This marshy, sacred land of the indigenous Massachusett people.

This painting moves me because Titian paints this mythic story as a private cataclysm with tremendous consequences. It is a trembling earthquake of a picture.

In the painting we see Europa is carried away, stolen by the king of the gods, Jupiter, a journey that sees her moving across the Mediterranean Sea. The woman Titian paints is scared as she looks back towards her friends, towards the shore, to the site of the encounter, where she was tricked by a friendly bull, one who coaxed her into taking a ride, one she even crowned with flowers before she realized who he was.

Europa, in white, quivers like a mayflower on the hawthorn branch. Titian rhymes the figure of this terrified woman, waving a red sail in the wind, with a sailing ship in the far distance directly behind her. She is a type of vessel too, Titian seems to say, and this is the story of a voyage, a maritime crossing, just as much as it is an origin myth, one of transformations.

Philip II, ruler of a global empire, saw himself reflected in Jupiter's conquests. Seizing women is like seizing land and people, and the children born of these encounters extend the might of the ruler, or they bear the consequences.

So I often wonder: what does it mean for this picture, for Europa, to be in America? This painting of empire is at home here. It's about the terrifying idea of being carried away, of being stolen, and of a life spent looking back to the shore.

It's a painting of life or death, of holding on to the bull's horn because the only other option is slipping beneath the waves and succumbing to the monster lurking beneath.