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History re-dressed by Africa

Kwanele Sosibo (<https://mg.co.za/author/kwanele-sosibo>) 07 Sep 2018 00:00

Colourful past: Yinka Shonibare's Fake Death Picture (The Suicide — Manet). (Photo: shoot Art Mobile)

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There is an optimism, albeit darkly edged, that lies at the heart of British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare's practice.

As he has stated in public, most recently to William Kentridge in a talk at The Centre For The Less Good Idea, art for him is a means of survival. But, in living out this survivalist instinct, Shonibare throws dreariness and expectations out the window, an approach that opens multiple entry ways into his artworks.

A question Shonibare is sometimes asked is how different his work might be had he not suffered an ailment in the early 1980s that took away the function of his legs.

What's clear, at least on the surface, is that it has influenced him towards a grand, collaborative practice in which no mode of expression is out of bounds.

In his world, Shonibare marries photography, film, sculpture and the operatic to create a uniquely self-contained language in which history is in conversation with itself but also the contemporary world.

For Shonibare, art is best enjoyed publicly, as part of “normal life” as opposed to being shrouded in elitist trappings. His seminal first series of public art, titled *Diary of a Victorian Dandy*, featured a series of theatrically staged photographs riffing on William Hogarth’s *The Rake’s Progress*, about the heir of a rich merchant who squanders his fortune in London.

In the series, shown publicly on London’s subway system in 1998, Shonibare appears in the centre of the mayhem, toying with the idea of representation and visibility as a black artist at the turn of the century.

In another public artwork, *Nelson’s Ship in a Bottle*, displayed at London’s Trafalgar Square in 2010, Shonibare displayed a giant glass bottle containing a model of a wartime ship with wax print as its sails, so juxtaposing Britain’s war history with its complicated multiculturalism and diversity.

In interviews about the work, Shonibare has drawn attention to Trafalgar Square as a source of important family memories (they used to feed pigeons there on summer holiday trips to Britain) and an important site of public exhibition for the work. With typical playfulness, he has also mused about the mystery of how the ship actually got inside the bottle, a secret he swears to stay mum about. The work now resides at the National Maritime Museum in London.

Conscious of his remarkable shift in status since the turn of the century, and the considerable growth of the art market, Shonibare has similarly sought to tackle more universal themes, fine-tuning a practice bent on upending expectations of how African artists are meant to enter conversations on post-colonialism and hybridity.

With his current exhibition at the Goodman Gallery, *Ruins Decorated*, Shonibare continues in his mould of interrogating the symbols of “empire” by confronting the history of both the Roman and British empires.

Clementia, General of Tivoli and Julio Claudian are all statues on plinths. But, instead of pale marble, the fibreglass figures are “draped” in colourful wax print finishes and have globes for heads, playing with ideas of nationality and race. In the globe-headed statues, Africa stands in for the faces, if you will.

For Shonibare, there is a definite significance in the beheading, as it eliminates the easy tropes of race. One can’t but help, especially in the figure of Clementia, seeing an insistence on meaningful post-colonial redress.

“Clementia is about reconciliation, which to me is about empowerment and not creating civil war that will make people’s lives even more difficult,” says Shonibare. “You have to be careful what you wish for, if you know what I mean, [you] can’t make life for the deprived even more difficult.”

For a moment, our discussion delves even further into how the idea has been contested in South Africa, with it seeming like the burden of the twice disenfranchised.

“We have to find ways of empowering ourselves,” continues Shonibare. “In South Africa there is a lot of hope here, and reconciliation is not about being powerless, it’s about being assertive and telling the truth. I’m not a pacifist; there are times you still have to fight wars, but history has taught us that usually there are no winners.”

For Shonibare, the prevalence in his works of a “dead” Admiral Horatio Lord Nelson, who was key in granting the British open access to the seas, can be seen as a possibility for rebirth at this precipice in history. “Death is not always a bad thing,” says Shonibare.

I wonder, to myself, whether the figure of Nelson, with his death reimagined in the five *Fake Death Pictures*, may not suggest the precariousness of post-coloniality, echoed by the figure of the *Post-Colonial Globe Man* — a globe-headed figure dressed in a patterned batik suit with colonial instruments, such as binoculars, dangling from his chest. Could it, perhaps, be buying into notions of a new scramble for Africa?

Not so, says Shonibare. It is a figure couched more in optimism than in paranoia.

“The globe he is standing on is a colonial globe,” he says. “The figure, is he African? Is he European? Who is this figure? Who is going to take control? The possibility remains that this guy could take control of his own destiny.”

Shonibare, with his career on a secure footing, has lived his gospel by creating project spaces to enable other artists to control their destiny. The concept is to give artists access to studio and exhibition space as well as advice.

This is especially important in London under the difficult climate of gentrification in many parts of the city. Another project space, in Lagos, has just had its foundations laid.


The way he sees it, the time for excuses ends when we take steps to not only harness our individual power but also to build with those we form communities with.



Kwanele Sosibo

Kwanele Sosibo studied journalism at Durban's ML Sultan Technikon before working at Independent Newspapers from 2000 to 2003. In 2005, he joined the Mail & Guardian's internship programme and later worked as a reporter at the paper between 2006 and 2008, before working as a researcher. He was the inaugural Eugene Saldanha Fellow in 2011.

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