

Prints charming

Yinka Shonibare confronts colonialism and its aftermath using irony rather than vitriol, challenging stereotypes through works in which colourful African fabrics set a playful tone. Michael Watts visits him at his studio

Photographs by Nick Ballon



Yinka Shonibare in his studio. Opposite, some of the textiles he uses in his work

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Like the Queen of Hearts in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, the British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare has a thing about heads. Many, if not most, of his figurative sculptures have misplaced them. In *Mr and Mrs Andrews Without Their Heads* (1998), his remaking of Gainsborough's famous 18th-century painting, he has tremendous fun posing the decorous couple, minus heads, in imitation of the original – itself a subversion, whose pastoral airs blurred their actual marriage of convenience. For Shonibare, people without heads began as a play on how elites were guillotined during the French Revolution. Since they have no heads, they cannot be identified, and become ambiguous, intriguing. Sometimes he replaces

heads with globes to signify Everyman or -woman. 'Metaphors for humanity', he calls them. The loss of heads can also suggest, quite literally, brainlessness. In his splendid installation *Scramble for Africa* (2003), he indicts 19th-century European imperialism by placing headless mannequins at a conference table; these 'heads' of state are squabbling like rats over a map of Africa, whose territories they are carving up.

The brilliant African patterns with which he clothes or paints his sculptures are Shonibare's other personal signifier. Jeff Koons has his balloon dogs, Damien Hirst his pickled wildlife. Chris Ofili, another British-Nigerian, six years younger than Shonibare, made elephant dung his calling card. Shonibare's brand, if you like, is the exotic »

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Ankara prints – colloquially known as ‘Dutch wax fabrics’ – he found in the African and Caribbean shops of Brixton, south London. They are Africa’s national costume. But Shonibare uses them to subvert history and context. He puts them on implausible subjects, from 18th-century landed gentry to astronauts. At first sight, they look merely cheerful and amusing; a slow burn later, they make you think and wonder. His weightier purpose, as with *Scramble for Africa*, is to critique Europe’s abusive relationship with Africa and the legacies of colonialism. He says that if it’s all right for Picasso to steal influences from Africa, why is an African not permitted to pilfer from the Western canon? ‘We should all have the freedom to plagiarise as much as we like,’ he says gently. ‘All artists are thieves. If you don’t steal, then you’ll never make a good artist.’

Identity and authenticity have preoccupied him ever since, as a young man at Goldsmiths college, he designed an artwork about the Cold War. A tutor urged him to focus instead on ‘authentic African art’. But, he thought, what does ‘authentic African art’ mean to a post-colonial hybrid like himself, brought up on the cultures of both Nigeria and England? His symbolic wax fabrics are far from ‘authentically African’: they are a product of globalisation, derived from methods of batik in Indonesia, once a Dutch colony, and manufactured in Holland and Lancashire for sale in West Africa. They never quite lose their ‘African-ness’, however. Seeing his sculptures of aliens or astronauts dressed in African prints (in *Dysfunctional Family*, 1999, and in *Vacation*, 2000), you might say: Wow! Africans in space! Perhaps you smile, and then: but *why not* African astronauts?

His 1994 painting *Double Dutch* was an early investigation into the semiotics of textiles. It shows small, deep squares of overpainted fabric placed on a hot-pink wall. Crucially, Charles Saatchi saw it, and in 1997 put Shonibare in his *Sensation* exhibition at the Royal Academy. He was more of a bit player then on the British art scene: the shock tactics of YBAs such as Hirst and Tracey Emin were what commanded public attention, whereas Shonibare’s art is more playful and theatrical, rich in jokes and erudition but with a dark undertow – Dadaist rather than confrontational. As Stephen Deuchar, the former director of Tate Britain,

put it, ‘He explores serious issues in a way that is always humorous.’

Shonibare’s art is now in the collections of the Tate, the Smithsonian and the Museum of Modern Art, and there’s a lot of it. A river of painting, sculpture, photography, installation, film and performance art flows from his studio in London’s traditionally working-class East End. Proofs of his acceptance by the establishment include an MBE, which he always appends to his name, a Turner Prize nomination, membership of the Royal Academy and that great middlebrow distinction, an appearance on the BBC’s *Desert Island Discs*, where James Brown and King Sunny Adé were among his record choices. But Shonibare has sometimes asked himself: what would he have been, would he have had the same focus and achievements, had he not become paralysed as a young man?

When he was 18, and not long returned from Lagos to the London of his birth, he suddenly became dizzy and fell on the stairs at his art college in Wimbledon. After two weeks in hospital, he woke from a coma, paralysed. ‘I nearly died,’ he said later. He had contracted a permanent neurological disorder, transverse myelitis, from a virus that disrupts messages from the spinal cord to the body. The next three years were spent in therapy. He had to learn how to feed and dress himself and adapt his life. Photographs taken before his illness show a slim, cool teenager, smiling with optimism. His parents back in Nigeria – cultured, well-to-do, royalist – were expecting so much of him. Now at times he felt suicidal. He dropped all his friends. He could think only of resuming his studies and becoming the artist he had dreamed of being when he exchanged Lagos for a chilly Catholic boarding school in Hampshire.

Art is what saved him, he has said: ‘You can fix the world through art. You can make it better or more bearable. It’s the thing you do to get away from the horrible things in the world.’ Despite partial paralysis, he was eventually able to draw and drive a car, to attend Byam Shaw art college (now part of Central Saint Martins) and get a Master of Fine Arts degree at Goldsmiths. He had no lack of ideas, both visual and intellectual: abstraction and surrealism jostled with the deconstructionist philosophies of »

Opposite, clockwise from top left: *Discus Thrower (after Myron)*, 2016; *Clementia*, 2018; *The Furietti Old Centaur*, 2018; *Venice de’ Medici*, 2017



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Yinka Shonibare MBE, *Dorian Gray*, 2011 (detail). 11 black-and-white photographs, 1 chromogenic photograph. From the Collection Glenn and Amanda Fuhrman NY, Courtesy FLAG Art Foundation. Image © Yinka Shonibare MBE, courtesy James Cohan, New York. Following pages: Yinka Shonibare MBE, *Double Dutch*, 1994. Emulsion and acrylic on fifty Dutch wax printed cotton canvases, acrylic on wall. 332 x 588 x 4.5 cm. Private Collection, USA. © Yinka Shonibare MBE. All Rights Reserved. DACS/Artimage 2019. Photo: Jean Vong

Opposite, images from *Dorian Gray*, 2011. Following pages, *Double Dutch*, 1994

Derrida and Baudrillard, the post-colonialist studies of Frantz Fanon. Fearing that he might become the cliché of a 'struggling artist' in a garret, he took a job at Shape Arts, the charity for disabled artists. Then, in spring 1992, 11 years after the virus struck, he was a finalist in the Barclays Young Artist award. He didn't win, but the art world took note.

He did win the Paul Hamlyn Foundation prize in 1998, and receiving £10,000 a year for three years helped him think bigger. That year, he collaborated with white actors and a director of BBC costume dramas to create five photographic pastiches of the English country-house tradition, in which he, a man of Muslim Yoruba ancestry, appears as the only black person, all dandified in a Victorian frock coat. In *Diary of a Victorian Dandy*, he was challenging stereotypes of race and class, and at that time this was arguably how he really felt, as the outsider who wants to be on the inside. His tableaux, since acquired by the V&A, were first displayed as posters on the London Underground. What better way to announce yourself.

By 2010, the British public certainly knew all about him. *Nelson's Ship in a Bottle*, his big, bold sculpture of *HMS Victory*, with its 37 sails all made of African cloth, was chosen to occupy the prestigious Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square, near Nelson's Column, where Yinka fed the pigeons as a small boy. He was the first black artist to be honoured, and he saw the success of his foray into public art as a triumph of London multiculturalism, and evidence that art didn't have to be elitist. His series *Wind Sculptures* has since won him international acclaim on three continents. These giant, brightly patterned structures are made of fibreglass and steel, yet appear to flap and wave like a flag of all Africa.

Gradually, he has made disability part of his creative process. He draws and designs, and then a team incorporating costumiers, film-makers and 'fabricators' of mannequins make it real. It's not much different from how many able-bodied artists work, he says briskly; it certainly boosts his productivity. As confidence in his powers grew, he began stuffing his work with literary allusions and references to Western art and history. *Diary* was loosely based on Hogarth's *A Rake's Progress*. Even more ambitious was *Un Ballo in Maschera* (2004), a short, nouvelle vague video that draws on the Verdi opera about Sweden's King Gustav III and his assassination at a masked ball; in it, the dancers wear period wigs and costumes of African cloth, they speak no words, there is no music, and the murder is repeated several times with small variations (the historical murderer supposedly approached the king and murmured, '*Bonjour, beau masque*', before shooting him). The late

Brian Sewell, rebarbative critic at the *London Evening Standard*, former Christie's specialist and no admirer of contemporary art, called it 'shallow'. Shonibare smiled when I reminded him of this. 'You know,' he said laconically, 'many artists didn't like getting good reviews from Brian Sewell.'

The day I visited his canalside studio, he was supervising a new venture at the invitation of Hereford Cathedral, which holds one of the most precious of medieval treasures, the Mappa Mundi. His idea is to make quilts in his signature fabrics, embroidered with the map's descriptions of biblical and classical mythology. Quilt-making, of course, was brought to America by early colonialists, and America has been much on his mind. *The American Library*, the latest in his *Library* series, consists of 6,000 'books', bound in African prints and embossed on their spines with the names of first- or second-generation immigrants who have made cultural contributions to American life. This will be the centrepiece of a new Shonibare retrospective in Chicago, at the Driehaus Museum, which has never previously shown contemporary art.

Now aged 56, Shonibare can no longer walk freely. Upstairs in his studio, he meets visitors in an electric wheelchair, his head twisted slightly to the right, as if in interrogation, his hair in short dreadlocks, his dark, natty jackets buttoned tight (there is never any personal hint of African dress). He is unfailingly polite, but you feel the scrutiny of his steady gaze. Everything he says is measured. He comes here three days a week, but also works at his house close by, where he has a cook and carers. On the ground floor is a large studio reserved for the benefit of young artists he considers promising. Once a year, a panel chooses five from 60 or 70 applicants, whose proposals are collected in a postbox marked 'Guest Projects'. Larry Achiampong, whose work has been described as 'exploring the black diaspora', and the mixed-media artist Ed Fornieles, are among the better known. Shonibare, who is expanding his activities in Africa, is now opening a building for resident artists in Lagos, where a new international fair, Art X Lagos, has been founded by the young lawyer Tokini Peterside.

We discussed colonialism in Nigeria, a British protectorate until independence in 1960. 'I'm a residue of empire, what's left over,' he told me in his unhurried way. Caught up in the euphoria of nation-building, his father, a corporate lawyer, took the family back home when Yinka was three. Then came military dictatorships, and everything went sour. Was that, I taunted, an argument for the continued presence of the British? He twinkled. 'There are British people who would say they prefer independence from Europe,' he said. 'It's very hard to accept rule from elsewhere. That's »

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just human nature. People who take that attitude about Brexit should understand African views of colonialism. But there's no point getting angry about it [colonialism]. You have to transform that into something productive. You can't hold onto it, otherwise you'd be seething, and rancour creates more rancour. But we're not talking about politics or journalism here, we're talking about art – which is a form of poetry. I make work that can be poetic.'

He certainly does – putting his clever spin on big themes like climate change, for example, without being explicit. 'I'm very suspicious of taking sides,' he explained. 'History has shown that you can easily take the wrong one, like the way the Communists found a few useful idiots [in the West]. I've always done things my own way, and no one has tried to persuade me otherwise.' Even in his youth, he was not like Donald Rodney and the BLK movement, those angry young black men of the 1980s who harangued British art institutions about racism.

He knew Rodney, the child of poor Jamaican immigrants. Rodney wanted to recreate the Tate out of sugar cubes, to attack a totemic museum built from sweated labour in the cane fields of the West Indies, but he died young of sickle-cell anaemia. Shonibare, himself struck by a virus that no amount of privilege could prevent, went a different way. He has become, in his own phrase, the Trojan horse of the art world, smuggling his weapons of irony and satire past defences. There's no anger, at least publicly. I asked him if he ever lost his temper. 'I guess the screaming is best done through my work,' he said softly. ♦

'A Tale of Today: Yinka Shonibare MBE' is at the Driehaus Museum in Chicago, 2 March–29 September. www.driehausmuseum.org

Yinka Shonibare MBE, *Girl Balancing Knowledge III*, 2017. Fibreglass mannequin, Dutch wax printed cotton textile, books, globe and steel baseplate, 163 x 119 x 140cm. © Yinka Shonibare MBE. All Rights Reserved, DACS/Artimage 2019. Image courtesy James Cohan Gallery. Photo: Stephen White

Above, *Girl Balancing Knowledge III*, 2017. Right, artworks in Shonibare's studio. Opposite, *Refugee Astronaut II*, 2016

