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Yinka Shonibare: Dreaming Rich

Yinka Shonibare's first foray into the identity of Hong Kong.

Following the trend of so many famous artists doing their 'first solo in Asia', Yinka Shonibare opens *Dreaming Rich* tomorrow at [Pearl Lam](#). The exhibition by the London-born Nigeria-raised artist includes works created specifically for – and about – Hong Kong.



Entering Pearl Lam, the exhibition is somewhat divided, into three parts. On the right, a slightly enclosed glass cube and on the left, the long room, divided in half by a long wall. Why divide the space like this? I wonder.



Curator, David Chan, was trying to create an HK-like space and I suppose that an awkward division in a room, combined with the strange, long space is very Hong Kong. It also allowed for the hanging of a very long painting.



Shonibare views his own works

An icon of Shonibare's work is the use of African textiles, those batik fabrics which seem to echo tribal art. As it turns out, this Indonesian

process of dying was mimicked by the Dutch, with the aim of selling them back to Indonesia. But they weren't popular and so they sold them to West Africa. Now, they're so common that we call them African textiles.

In this, there's a notion of imposing culture onto a people – especially one that is likely poorer than you. But there's another link: Trade routes, something that Shonibare is interested in, along with history. We already know he relies on history for story-telling. Look at the amazing [Victorian Dandy](#) series.

The fabrics have become a motif in his work now, so in terms of semiology it means 'Shonibare' too. His work is so popular (he's an MBE after all; something he finds ironic) that he inspires contemporary fashion designers.

He questions what is truly African – this story of the fabrics and their origins proves that the diaspora as well as the modern world make it hard to find things that are singly and truly African. "We eat sushi then we go to school and speak English," he says.



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Champagne Kid (Swinging)

And he realises something about the modern mind. We're all influenced by where we've lived, not just where we're 'from' – 'from' being a notion that in itself is hard to perceive in Hong Kong sometimes. "At school, I was asked why I wasn't producing purely African art, but why would I?" He questions.

In [Dreaming Rich](#), it's the figures that are seen sporting these fabrics the most, although they are used in some paintings too.

Cake Man is the biggest and most impressive of the globe heads, with the weight of ~~the world~~ cake on his shoulders. "All humans are greedy and we all like cake," Shonibare says. "'08 was a pure expression of greed and the rise of other economies in the world makes high-end brands more desirable." He has a point, China want it and little chavs in the UK want it too, as we saw during the UK [riots](#).



"The gap between rich and poor is getting bigger and the rich want more. Cake Man symbolises this," Shonibare explains. The globe head shows the rise and fall of the stock market, on a graph. "He looks delicious and absolutely disgusting at the same time, he's burdened by too much cake." Shonibare reflects that anything you do too much, creates a burden. "It becomes a form of labour. See the contradictions?"

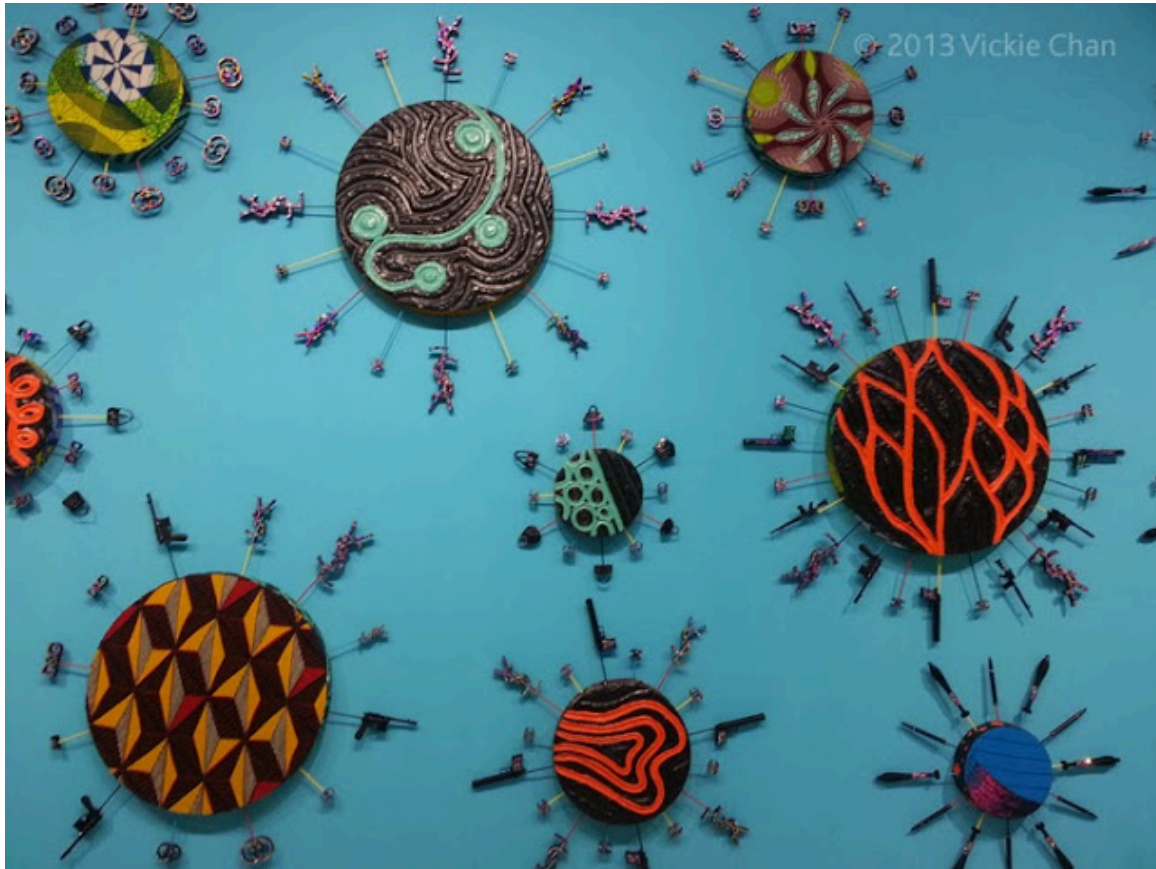
Penny for your thoughts

In another series of works (Dreaming Rich drawings), Shonibare reflects on the truth about Hong Kong. Not only does he call out IFC as an erection (he's not the first person to complain about the phallic skyline) but he paid homeless people to tell him what they would do if they had loads of money. "They're real thoughts. I traded with them, I paid them for their thoughts, as homeless people here," he explains.



Something to play with

Hong Kong Toy Painting is another, created just for the show. They're playful but Shonibare says they are serious, too.



Not only are toys and their industry iconic for Hong Kong, but Shonibare used only those made in Hong Kong that would be more reminiscent for local audiences.



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"We have enough not to want for homes and toys but not everyone is like that," he says, adding that he knows about the [cage dwellings](#) here. Will there be an uprising again? He asks.



Shonibare's first solo in Hong Kong is showing at Pearl Lam (Pedder Building) until January 9th, 2014.

Posted by Chantown at 8:57 PM No comments: