



CONVERSATION

Yinka Shonibare, MBE

ARTIST, LONDON

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The work of British-Nigerian artist, Yinka Shonibare MBE is instantly recognisable. A multi-disciplinary conceptual artist whose oeuvre encompasses installation, painting, video and sculpture, he is most well known for his use of headless mannequins who, dressed in sumptuous period costumes, strike theatrical poses within carefully constructed tableaux. Although Shonibare often references Western history, art and literature in his work, the artist uses vibrantly patterned fabric that is most often associated with Africa to

clothe his mannequins. Ironically the archetypal, 'authentic' African fabric he uses is based on Indonesian batik and was first mass-produced in Holland before being sold into West Africa in the 19th century. What appears a witty and colourful device in fact addresses the complexities of identity and culture, and in particular colonialism and post-colonialism.

Shonibare moved from London to Nigeria age three, but returned again to London to study fine art first at Byam Shaw College of Art and then at Goldsmiths College, where he received his MFA. In 2004, Shonibare was nominated for the Turner Prize and awarded the decoration of Member of the "Most Excellent Order of the British Empire". He has exhibited at the Venice Biennial and internationally at leading museums worldwide. In 2008, his major mid-career survey commenced at the MCA Sydney and then in 2009 it toured to the Brooklyn Museum, New York and the Museum of African Art at the Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC. In 2010, Nelson's Ship in a Bottle became his first public art commission on the Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square. In 2013 he was elected Royal Academician by the Royal Academy of Arts, and this year his work is featured in a major exhibition of over 30 works at Yorkshire Sculpture Park entitled *FABRIC-ATION*.

In November this year, Shonibare will have his first solo exhibition in Hong Kong. The exhibition will take place at Pearl Lam Galleries' Pedder Street space. Entitled, *Dreaming Rich* the exhibition will continue Shonibare's exploration of colonialism and post-colonialism, but will focus specifically on Hong Kong's modern day relationship with labour, power and wealth. Anna Dickie took the opportunity to ask Shonibare about his inspirations and his latest work and its relationship to Hong Kong.

Anna Dickie | Hong Kong

You acknowledge one of your art tutors as instigating your exploration of the batik fabric by his challenge to you to create "Authentic African work". However, how did you finally arrive at the use of mannequins in your work – was there a period of trial and mistake, an epiphany moment?

I started using mannequins as a result of a visit to the Victoria & Albert costume department and I was inspired by seeing the colonial dresses.

You accepted an MBE in 2004, adopting the title into your working name, but saying, "it was the last thing you would have expected of me". Why did you say that?

Because my work is about challenging the establishment so accepting an honour given by the establishment would have been expected to be declined.

Your upcoming exhibition at Pearl Lam will be your first solo show here. I understand the works were made specifically with Hong Kong in mind. In what way can they be viewed as a critique/ response to the city?

The gap between the rich and the poor - whilst going on in HK - is not particularly unique to the city; it's a shared universal problem.

I understand the Pearl Lam space will be split into two narrow corridors and works will literally climb the walls evoking a sense of constriction, and possibly struggle? Tell me about the decision to change the gallery space, and why that was important to you?

The configuration of the space is more appropriate to the kinds of works I am going to show in the gallery.

There will be a work in the exhibition entitled *The Champagne Kids* which will feature three individual Victorian children dressed in the batik fabric, playing on chairs with champagne bottles in hand. Please can you tell me more about these particular works?

Champagne Kids are intoxicated kids balanced precariously on chairs. Their behavior is a metaphor for the irresponsibility of the markets during the global financial crisis.

A number of your recent works reference “kids” – *Champagne Kids* and *Revolution Kids* for example. Why a focus on this stage of life?

Children are miniature versions of adults and all manifestation of adult behavior can be seen in children. Children are on the receiving end of bad adult behavior and they copy that behavior.

The centerpiece of the Hong Kong exhibition will be a work entitled *Cakeman*, a life-sized sculpture of an aristocrat dressed in elaborate Victorian dress made out of your trademark batik fabric. My understanding of the work is that it will depict a man bent double carrying a precariously balanced tower of colourful cakes on his back. The press release for the exhibition states that you are interested in the “point at which survival turns into greed and excess”. Please can you expand on this having regard to the work *Cakeman*?

Cakeman is about the way that wealthy people can never have enough. It seems that the more money you have the more you want and people are not tired of constantly acquiring more, even when they are aware that there is a lot of poverty around. It is an expression of the gluttonous nature of human beings.

Is there an irony in critiquing wealth in a gallery space that possibly epitomizes wealth in a city characterized by the pursuit of wealth and where art is arguably viewed as a luxury good?

Yes you are right; it can be critiqued and enjoyed at the same time.