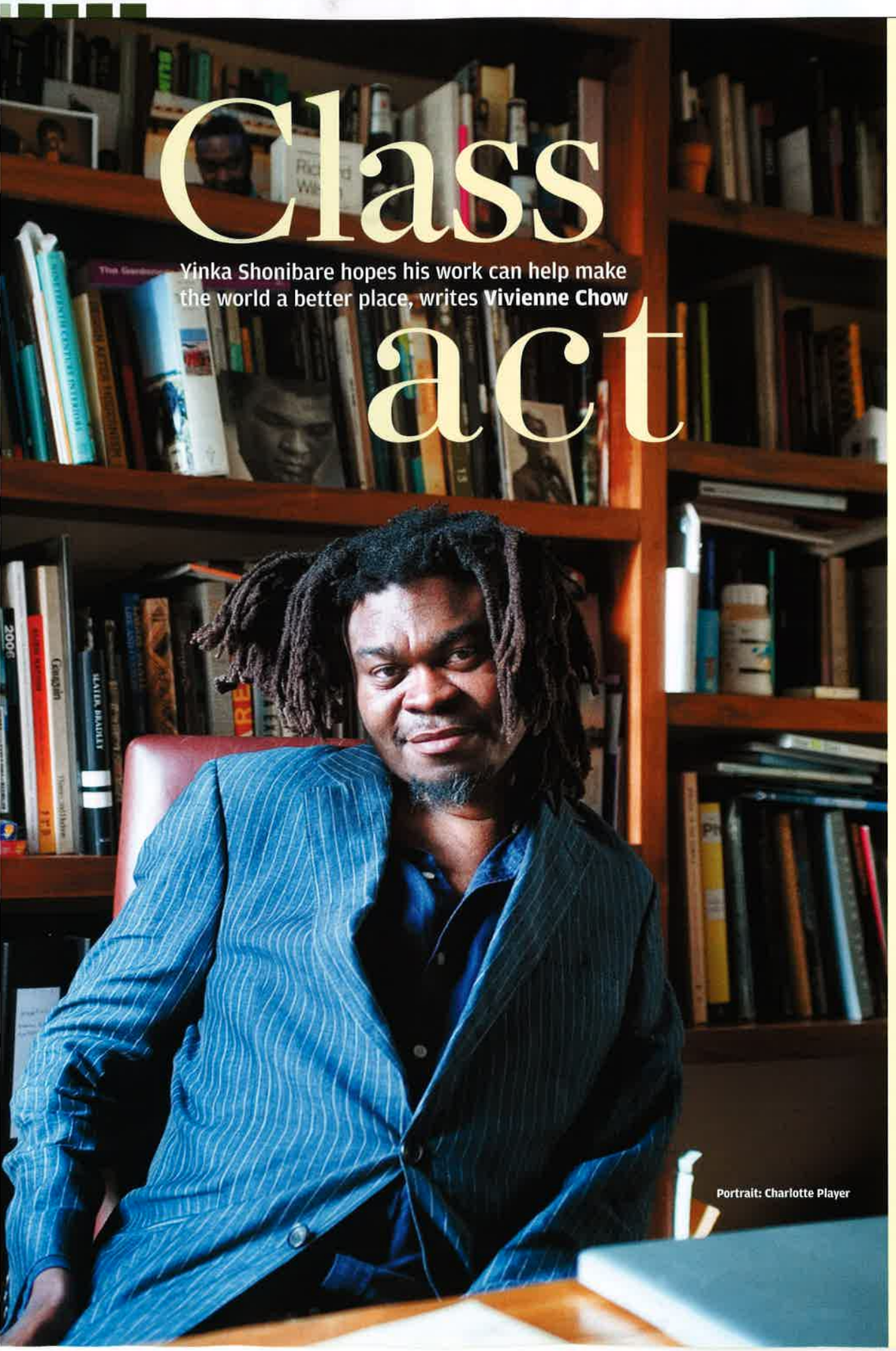

Class act

Yinka Shonibare hopes his work can help make the world a better place, writes **Vivienne Chow**

Portrait: Charlotte Player

UNLIKE POLITICS, ART does not change the world with immediate effect. But if you question society through art, it can make the world a better place. That is what keeps Yinka Shonibare making art.

"Art is my life. Art is about transforming the world, trying to make the world better," says the British-Nigerian artist, sitting at a long table in his studio in East London.

"The effect is not immediate. Politicians can make quick changes, but art is like philosophy. It takes many years, or even centuries."

In "Dreaming Rich", Shonibare's solo debut in Hong Kong, he addresses wealth, poverty and greed, and how these evils have become intertwined with a new era of post-colonial class struggle.

Shonibare wants people to think about these eternal social problems through the series of colourful and amusing works he has created for the exhibition.

> **The colonial issue is similar to the poverty issue, because it's about the upper class trying to control the lower class**
> **Yinka Shonibare (left)**

"In Hong Kong, the gap between the rich and the poor is getting bigger. People can't afford properties. The colonial issue is similar to the poverty issue, because it's about the upper class trying to control the lower class."

Born in London in 1962, Shonibare moved to Nigeria at age three, returning to England at 17. A year later, he was diagnosed with transverse myelitis, a disease that left him partially paralysed. This did not stop him from pursuing an artistic career, and becoming part of the Young British Artists generation. He got his break when Charles Saatchi acquired two of his works in the mid-1990s.

His post-colonial pieces have also featured at the Venice Biennale, the Documenta exhibition in Germany, and many European museums. In 2004, he was shortlisted for the Turner Prize. His first video work, *A Masked Ball*, depicts the 1792 assassination of King Gustav III of Sweden.

It was produced with support from M+ executive director Lars Nittve, then the director of Stockholm's Moderna Museet. The following year Shonibare was awarded an MBE.

The centrepiece of the Hong Kong show is *Cakeman*, which is made from the artist's signature Dutch wax African batik fabric. It's a humorous take on the tragedy of the rich, and an example of "how rich people can be greedy because they want everything", according to Shonibare.

The life-sized sculpture dressed in Victorian aristocratic attire is seen carrying "a skyscraper of cakes", he says. The cakes also signify the greed of the rich. "There's too much cake, but the rich person still wants it all to himself. This greed is burdening him."

Another colourful sculpture, *Champagne Kid*, echoes the extravagance and excess portrayed in *Cakeman*. A drunken rich kid appears to be having a ball downing his champagne; but a full stomach and having their basic needs met won't satisfy the insatiable appetite of humans, says Shonibare.

In contrast, there are five collages inspired by words from homeless people in Hong Kong. Shonibare says gallery staff were sent out to ask local homeless people what they would do if they came into money.

One said he would buy a 700 sq ft flat, another said he wanted to find someone to marry. All hoped to make their way out of poverty one day.

"This kind of survival game ends up in greed," says the artist. "I'm not preaching. The show is about questioning our own greed."

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Dreaming Rich, Pearl Lam Galleries, 6/F Pedder Building, 12 Pedder Street, Central, 10am-7pm. Ends January 9, 2014. Inquiries: 2522 1428

From left: *Champagne Kid (Swinging)*; *Champagne Kid (Balancing)*; *Champagne Kid (Stepping)*. Photos courtesy of Pearl Lam Galleries